



SDCF Vice Chair bonny Wynnobel and Adams checking recording devices on Netley-Libau Marsh.

RRBC Netley restoration project – ‘build it and they will come’, is working

Netley-Libau Marsh has been transforming in recent years, thanks to the efforts of the Red River Basin Commission and a renewal project that in part is proving to be for the birds.

The Selkirk & District Community Foundation has provided several grants to the Commission over the years, with the most recent going towards acoustic devices that capture the sounds of birds visiting.

Chris Adams, project manager of the renewal project with RRBC, says the devices were set up in July and since then have 181,000 detections, representing well over 100 different bird species.

The birds are stopping at RRBC's restoration site, an area of new habitat formed thanks to various techniques used to reduce the marsh's depth and contribute to the growth of taller and more dense plant life.

In 2024, a Foundation grant allowed the Commission to build biodegradable baffles in the marsh to encourage plant growth and ultimately revitalize lost habitat that birds, fish and other mammals use.

"We've been monitoring the restoration site for a couple years now and seeing how the plant life is coming back to the area, and we're pretty happy with what we're seeing there," Adams said.

"We're seeing taller, denser and more diverse plant life in that area and that's good and we've been operating under the assumption that, we're building this new habitat and if you build it they will come. This year, with the latest grant for these bird devices we can actually monitor birds using the area."

Six acoustic devices have been set up in the marsh and two more on the east and west sides.

Adams says they're early in the monitoring stage – the devices went live on July 21 – but the numbers and diversity they're seeing are encouraging, and now with the season changing to fall, they're hearing new sounds.

"We're still in the process of recording new data and we're still in the first season of using these things," Adams said.

"Everytime we bring back a new load of SD cards to see what's there, it's always interesting and especially at this time of year, there's all these birds migrating and we're seeing different birds than we were seeing the previous week."

Adams said time and further number crunching will reveal more information and he's excited to be working with Ducks Unlimited Canada, whose staff are lending their expertise to help with confirming birds on the recordings. DUC also assisted with determining best placements for the devices.

The public can get in on the bird listening too. The devices' findings are uploaded to Birdweather, a website that tracks birds around the globe, predominantly in Canada, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The default on the site is to show birds recorded in the last 24 hours – for the Netley-Libau monitoring sites, you need to adjust the date, located in the top right corner. Input July 21 to the current date, and the sites will appear. The project stations are labelled “NLM”.

Besides a total count, the app breaks down the detections into types of birds. The most common recorded at the marsh is the Marsh Wren, followed by Forster’s Tern.

“We have a late comer that has surged to third spot, it’s the Canada Goose now that they are migrating through,” Adams said.

“Earlier in the season you see them in the marsh during summer but you run into more of them in the city than in the marsh. But now that they’re migrating, we’re seeing thousands of them.”

Greater Yellowlegs are the fourth most recorded, with the Ring-billed gull in fifth.

The six devices in the marsh are paired, with one located in dense vegetation and the other in a newer shoal that is either bare or has minimal new growth. Again, Adams says it’s early in the monitoring process, but they’re seeing differences in birds at the stations.

“Right now, looking at things broadly, we do see differences in the species that are using the dense vegetated area of the same island, and then the newer shoal that’s just starting to become vegetated,” Adams said.

“The Marsh Wrens really like to hang out in the more dense established cattails and bull rushes, the multi-year vegetation that’s quite dense and then we’re seeing a lot more terns and gulls really dominate the other side of each pair on the newer, relatively bare shoal.”

The data collection only began in July, but it’s a fact that the vegetated islands and peninsulas didn’t exist 10 years ago, so it’s clear birds weren’t present in this part of the marsh.

“All of this was just bare open water that wasn’t being used as bird habitat. And now look at all these birds that are using this area. So in really broad strokes...the bigger picture is that we’ve got all these birds using this new habitat in different ways,” Adams said.

“Centuries into the future, we can predict that these channels are going to keep depositing sediment, building these islands, and building new levies of the channels that then separate things into smaller bodies of water, which is more similar to what was in place historically. There is a sort of slow recovery process going forward in the marsh, and we’re hoping we can maybe accelerate it with some of our restoration structures.”

The Selkirk & District Community Foundation is accepting grant applications until Oct. 1. For online applications and criteria guidelines visit sdcf.ca.