



Cormorants flock to Frog Island in the Niagara River Monday, Sept. 11, 2017. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

## Niagara River's islands are teeming with life again

By [T.J. Pignataro](#) | Published September 13, 2017



Not long ago, bald eagles in Buffalo only appeared on postage stamps, and the blue heron was just a popular music festival.

Then came restoration work along the Niagara River.

Now, eagles and herons are commonly seen in a short stretch of the river from Strawberry Island to Grand Island.

So, too, are egrets, osprey, cormorants, kingfishers, terns, turtles, mink, river otters, lake sturgeon and muskellunge.

What's disappeared from the landscape? Bulldozers and sheet piling.

Work is wrapping up on \$13 million worth of [habitat improvement projects](#) – the ecological portion of the New York Power Project's 2007 re-licensing agreement.



A great blue heron flies past Strawberry Island in the Niagara River Monday, Sept. 11, 2017. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Their work isn't the only reason the birds, bees and fish are returning to the river, but it sure helped, biologists and environmental advocates said.

"The restoration efforts ... will have long-lasting and significant positive impact on the health of the entire upper Niagara River," said Jill Jedlicka, executive director of Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper.

The habitat improvement projects started in 2013 to restore an ecosystem lost over the decades to pollution, degradation and time.

The shallow shoal-like area of the Niagara River between Strawberry and Motor islands, once known as Frog Island, became a symbol of the recovery.

#### [Photo Gallery: Wildlife preserve on Niagara River](#)

Over the years, high water levels, ice floes and erosion washed away all eight acres of Frog Island. It slipped just under the surface of the river.

Power Authority funds brought Frog Island back to the map with a yet-unnamed U-shaped archipelago consisting of two dozen mini islands.

They're teeming with life.

It's hard to see from the mainland, but the white hibiscus grows here now. So, too, does the native boneset plant, warm-season grass species and other pollinator-friendly plants.

"It was a blank slate," said Tim DePriest, a state Department of Environmental Conservation biologist. "We wanted to see if we could make something better happen here."

Scores of cormorants now occupy the archipelago. Herons, egrets and terns use it as a stop over. Turtles bask on stone berms. Biologists expect muskellunge and small mouth bass will also find a newly-created in-water habitat of logs and native plants there a suitable place to breed and raise more young fish.

“It’s worked,” said Assemblyman Sean Ryan, who sits on the Assembly’s Committee on Environmental Conservation. “The impact has been tremendous.”

## **Strawberry Island**

Nature has already begun its work on another of the project’s newly-created islands – a half-peanut-shaped island on the north side of Strawberry Island designed to reduce wakes and erosion in its lagoon.

Native shrubs, flowers and sedges were put there as part of the restoration. Even more grow there now.

The island captured airborne cottonwood trees and smartwood seedlings, and the plants regenerated themselves.

“That’s a blessing we weren’t expecting,” said Stephen M. Schoenwiesner, a re-licensing manager for the Power Authority.

Besides helping to anchor the rocks and soil on the new island, the native plants attract pollinators.

There’s been another benefit: the new island’s quick settlement by the threatened common tern.

“The terns just took to it,” Schoenwiesner said.

The spot is one of six habitat improvement areas completed at Strawberry Island.

Nearby, on the western tip of the horseshoe-shaped island, tree-logs with masses of roots are chained down to heavy concrete.

They provide habitat for turtles and other aquatic wildlife.

On the other side of the lagoon, a hundred or so yards away from the nesting spot of the island’s bald eagles, another habitat improvement project was built in a nook using logs and various native plants to stabilize sediment, reduce waves and erosion and provide cover and food for fish and wildlife.

It’s where you hear the call of the kingfisher and can watch great blue herons, egrets, terns and ducks.

And, it’s helping provide a bountiful harvest of frogs, small fish and other food for the nearby bald eagles.

“If there wasn’t vegetation there, they wouldn’t be frogs or small fish,” DePriest said.

Outside of the lagoon, on the western corner of Strawberry Island, water-cleansing bulrush and bur-reed improve upon some of the DEC’s erosion-prevention work done there about 20 years ago to create a wetland habitat suitable for a nursery and spawning area for fish.

“Our own early observations indicate fish and wildlife populations are already benefiting from the major ecosystem improvements,” said Waterkeeper’s Jedlicka.

## **Motor Island**



The DEC estimates about 75 great egret pairs now nest on Motor Island.

“The great egret was pretty close to extinction about 100 years ago,” DePriest said.

Egret feathers were so sought after, they were “literally worth more than their weight in gold,” DePriest said.



A Great Egret takes to flight near area F on Strawberry Island in the Niagara River. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

The population of the great egrets, the impetus for the Audubon Society’s founding, is growing in the Niagara River corridor – one of just a few places statewide where the protected bird is known to nest.

In some ways, the restoration almost works too well.

Another protected species, the cormorant, is proliferating on Motor Island’s six acres too – and making a bit of a mess of things.

Highly-acidic cormorant feces is defoliating the trees on the island.

It’s one of a few challenges facing the DEC and Power Authority on Motor Island.

The other is the unanticipated sudden rise in water levels. Those swamped some of the sculpted shoreline habitats created as part of the improvement project.

“Unfortunately, a lot of energy reached the shoreline that we were trying to prevent from reaching the shoreline,” Schoenwiesner said.

Schoenwiesner said that means crews will need to redo some work there.

Motor Island, home to a recreational clubhouse, tennis courts and even a speak-easy in the last century, is now an official DEC Wildlife Management Area.

The wildlife is more diverse than it used to be.

Besides the resident protected bird populations, river otter, beaver, mink, frogs and turtles now have access to the island.

“Sculpted shorelines serve as gentler, easier access for amphibians, so not only the birds could use it,” Schoenwiesner said.

### **Little Beaver Island**

Little Beaver Island is eight acres smaller than it used to be. That’s a good thing.

What used to be a large swath of grass across from a golf course is now part of Beaver Creek.

“It wasn’t serving as a productive habitat area,” Schoenwiesner said.

Excavators and dump trucks removed fill from the area and carted it away. It went to expanding Beaver Island State Park’s sledding hill and “greening over” an existing asphalt parking lot in the park.

What was left behind nearly doubled the channel of Beaver Creek.

The creek now meanders slowly through a marshland around the island.

Results came quickly:

- Osprey built a home on a nesting pole placed there.
- Turtles often visit another constructed habitat area on a creek bank.
- There’s another spawning and nursing area for fish.

That’s significant, biologists said.

“If you want to have a sustainable fishery, you need to have places where fish can spend their first year,” DePriest said.

Schoenwiesner said it wasn’t complex work that was done -- just earth moving.

“This was an area where habitat has been lost,” he said. “There was a feeling it could be restored.”