



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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Improved water environment leads to thriving ecosystem and increased (hoof) traffic

Although many Chicagoans will remember 2019 for the “Gator Watch” spectacle in the Humboldt Park Lagoon, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) routinely encounters its share of wildlife. MWRD staff went beyond the call of duty in 2019 to rescue many furry and non-furry friends caught in precarious conditions.

At the MWRD’s water reclamation plants (WRPs), it is not unusual to find and remove snapping turtles, snakes, opossums, and other wildlife among the MWRD’s screens that begin the process of transforming wastewater into clean water. Meanwhile, MWRD scientists and engineers typically encounter fish and other aquatic life when monitoring the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS), and it is that thriving ecosystem that has attracted an increasing diversity of fish, birds of prey, ducks, turtles and other species.

“A healthy water environment means habitat that supports many species of wildlife, which depend on and interact with our region’s water,” said MWRD Commissioner Debra Shore. “MWRD’s role in improving water quality puts it at the center of a delicate web of interconnected relationships with fish, birds, reptiles, and other plant and animal life.”

Protecting the region’s water environment requires facilities strategically located alongside these waterways, and this land can be home to roaming deer, coyotes, rare birds and beavers that sometimes come dangerously close to the wastewater treatment process. On several occasions, MWRD staff performed thrilling rescues.

Last January, a group of compassionate, quick-thinking pipe coverers rescued a red-tailed hawk after the bird became tangled in a tank at the Stickney WRP. They were able to collect the wet and ruffled hawk and transfer it to the capable hands of Stickney Township Animal Care and Control. In July, a deer was caught running through a settling tank at Stickney WRP. MWRD staff helped escort their guest to the nearby woods unharmed. Then the day after Christmas, a group of resourceful MWRD employees sprang into action to rescue another deer, spotting the animal struggling in a tank. They coaxed the deer away from a drain and hoisted the animal out



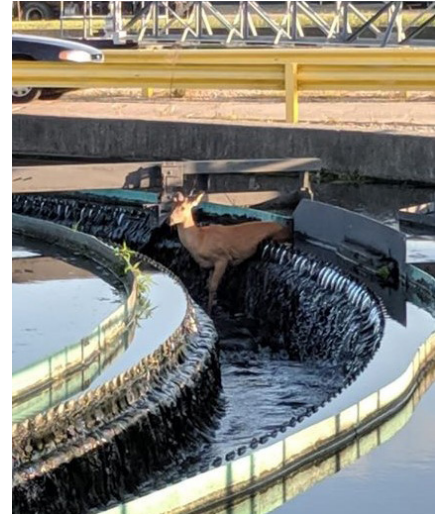
MWRD employees, including Carpenter Leadman David Garza (from left), Carpenter Pat Richardson and Ironworker Leadman John Murray rescue a deer after the animal fell into a tank at Stickney Water Reclamation Plant on Dec. 26, 2019.

by hand until Stickney Township Animal Care and Control arrived. Together, they safely released the deer back to the wild unharmed.

At the MWRD’s Lawndale Avenue Solids Management Area (LASMA) in Willow Springs, between the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal and Des Plaines River, it is not unusual to see snapping turtles or painted turtles crossing the road to return to the water after laying eggs. Hatchling turtles, the size of a quarter, have also been spotted near the water as well as spiny softshell turtles. There are so many turtles crossing the road that at times, truck traffic stops to avoid hitting them. In August, engineers at LASMA rescued a bald eagle that was hunting for food when it was injured near MWRD lagoons. Thanks to Chicago Bird Collision Monitors and Willowbrook Wildlife Center, the eagle recovered from its injuries and was returned to the wild a few weeks later.

Staff at the O’Brien WRP were surprised in October when they found a beaver swimming in a disinfection channel. Fast-acting staff were able to lure the animal out of the tank by building a ramp leading up to a trap filled with twigs, leaves, bark and other bait. Eventually plant workers were able to trap the beaver, net it, and drive it over to the North Shore Channel where it could be released safely. *(continued)*

Improved water environment leads to thriving ecosystem, *cont.*



There is no telling what animals MWRD staff may come across when managing water resources. This year, staff rescued (L- R): a red tailed hawk, eagle and deer.

But it is not simply a matter of fish, beavers and turtles that naturally take to the water. In November, engineers inspecting a MWRD sidestream elevated pool aeration (SEPA) station in Blue Island spotted a dog in the water. When they went into the shallow pool to retrieve it, the dog jumped into the Cal Sag Channel and swam 150 yards upstream to the SEPA pump station. The dachshund crawled onto a tree branch, from which staff rescued him. They took the dog to a vet for a checkup and called the police to see if there had been any reports of a missing pet. When they could not find its owner, a friend in search of a rescue dog came forward and invited the dog into a stable home.

Rare birds are also drawn to MWRD facilities and waterways. In addition to eagles and hawks, monk parakeets have been known to feast on apples from the trees along the main SWRP parking lot. The Calumet Solids Management Area (CAL SMA) next to Calumet WRP on the far South Side is also a popular destination for migratory shorebirds. Of the 46 species of migratory shorebirds, such as plovers and sandpipers, currently included in the official Illinois Ornithological Society state bird list, there have been at least 36 species spotted at CAL SMA, according to Chicago ornithologist Walter Marcisz. Marcisz has led migratory shorebird field trips for various bird clubs at the Calumet WRP every year since 2006. In those 13 years, bird watchers have recorded approximately 105 different bird species.

Marcisz points to recent studies that document the loss of 2.9 billion breeding birds, a 30 percent loss, in the U.S. and Canada since 1970. More concerning, migratory shorebirds have declined even more severely at 37 percent, according to the journal, *Science*.

“The reasons for this steep decline are fairly clear – migratory shorebirds require protected breeding grounds, wintering

grounds, and migratory stopover sites, all of which are currently under threat. A break in any one of these three important survival links could easily spell doom for any given population of migratory shorebirds,” Marcisz said.

Marcisz said most shorebird species travel thousands of miles as far north as the Arctic during summer months and as far south as South America. But in between they seek stopover locations like CAL SMA, where the MWRD’s drying beds resemble mud flats that become excellent foraging habitat.

“Calumet has provided important foraging habitat for migratory shorebirds on a regular basis over the years,” Marcisz said.

At Calumet, rare shorebirds, such as the American Avocet, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Western Sandpiper have been spotted. A vagrant Siberian Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was also recorded in 1985.

“We are continuing to improve our region’s water environment so we remain vigilant with the increase in wildlife that is within our region,” said MWRD Commissioner Kimberly du Buclet. “Our continued efforts to protect animals within a healthy ecosystem will allow us to continue to anticipate more friendly visitors to our facilities.”



A lesser yellowlegs shorebird visits Calumet Water Reclamation Plant.

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

Established in 1889, the MWRD (www.mwrld.org) is an award winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.