

DNR fisheries boat rescues migratory warblers lost in a fog

PORT WASHINGTON, Wis. – For a few short hours, a state fish research boat became a port in the storm for a flock of exhausted migratory warblers.

Tim Kroeff, a fisheries technician for the Department of Natural Resources, shares the story of what happened when the [Research Vessel Coregonus](#), was 16 miles off the Lake Michigan coast near Port Washington in a dense fog, its crew hauling in nets set the day before to assess lake trout and burbot populations.

Kim Grveles, a DNR avian ecologist who leads Wisconsin's efforts to protect and expand stopover habitat for migratory birds, has no doubt that the research boat saved the birds' lives.

"This is the classic example of what we call a "fire escape," she says.

Migratory birds require an array of sites between wintering and breeding areas to survive, including sites not often thought of as having conservation value. Grveles and other ornithologists recognize these different types of sites and creatively categorize them as "fire escapes," "convenience stores" and "full-service hotels."

Fire escapes are sites that may receive less use because they are resource-poor, yet they are vital during times of stress as places for migrants to seek shelter from predators or storms, Grveles says.

"Birds are landing there because they need some place to land," she says.

Grveles notes that in the 1960s, a fishing boat captain who fished Lake Michigan and Lake Superior documented many instances of migratory birds finding refuge on his boat. "It happened so frequently he started putting in potted plants and trees to provide habitat for the birds," she says.

Every spring and fall, tens of millions of migrating birds sweep through the Great Lakes region and stop at a variety of sites on their way to breeding grounds as far north as Greenland and the Arctic Ocean and wintering grounds as far south as Argentina's

Tierra del Fuego.

Wisconsin sits astride one such major migratory pathway, and more than 400 bird species have been recorded in the state. Yet many species face declining populations due to habitat loss, pollution, outdoor cats, window strikes and invasive plants, Grveles says.

The Wisconsin Stopover Initiative

www.wisconsinbirds.org/migratory (exit DNR) was launched in 2005 to put protection of migratory stopover sites, particularly along the Great Lakes, in the forefront of conservation. Founded by DNR and The Nature Conservancy with funding from the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin and State Wildlife Grants, initiative goals are to protect 30,000 acres (about 25 percent of total coastal zone acreage) of critical stopover habitat in the Lake Michigan basin and 6,000 acres (about 5 percent of total coastal zone acreage) in the Lake Superior basin over the next decade.

Learn more about the Wisconsin Stopover Initiative in "[Respites for migratory birds](#)," in the June 2011 issue of *Wisconsin Natural Resources* and enjoy a video about the initiative.