Nippersink Creek Aquatic Restoration

Goal: To restore the ecosystem’s structure, function and dynamic processes to create a less degraded, more natural condition, to allow for diverse plant and animal communities.

This summer the US Army Corps of Engineers will begin restoration of 3.5 miles of Nippersink Creek from the Section 29 snowmobile bridge on the west, to the confluence of the North Branch and the main stem. The project is being funded by a $4.9 million US Army Corps of Engineers Section 206 grant, with the match, required from the District, being covered by the value of past land purchases acquired within Glacial Park that lie within the project area. The footprint of the project area covers 507 acres. Once completed, 25% of this 27 mile long creek will have undergone restoration, thereby improving the ecological integrity of the entire watershed.

Nippersink Creek is the largest tributary to the Fox River, draining 137 square miles in Illinois and about 50 square miles in Wisconsin. While some sections of the stream are ranked among the highest quality in Illinois, supporting at least 21 animals and 30 plants listed as Illinois endangered or threatened species, other sections have been severely impacted by the effects of stream channelization, overgrazing by livestock, and the draining of stream side wetlands. Subsequently, there was a significant loss of biodiversity with such side effects as increased flooding and a decrease in water quality. Ecologically altered hydrology, invasive species and decades of fire suppression have degraded many of the rich wetlands, savannas, and prairies that still survive in close association with the stream. The current condition of the creek due to these changes has resulted in sections of the stream experiencing massive erosion and channel incision. This has created high undercut stream banks dominated by canary grass, common reed, cattails and European buckthorn.

In 2000, the District completed the monumental task of re-meandering three and a half miles of Nippersink Creek. Immediately upon completion of that section, additional funding was sought to continue restoration work further downstream. However, it wasn’t until 2011 that the 206 grant program funding once again became available. This funding allowed the US Army Corps of Engineers and District staff to move forward with a feasibility study, then into the engineering phase and finally, approval to move into implementation this summer.

Regional Benefits to Migrating Song Birds

Nippersink Creek lies within a regional band of protected open space that is a crucial part of the Fox River flyway, an important migration route for many songbirds. During March to May and September to October more than five million song birds’ transverse the Fox River and Nippersink Creek lies within a regional band of protected open space that is a crucial part of the Fox River flyway, an important migration route for many songbirds. During March to May and September to October more than five million song birds’ transverse the Fox River and Nippersink Creek joins the Chain O’Lakes near US Route 12, where Nippersink Lake connects with Pistakee Lake. The North Branch of Nippersink Creek drains areas of Walworth County and Kenosha County in Wisconsin before joining the main channel between Richmond and Glacial Park.

What can paddlers expect?

As acres of invasive brush are removed, streamside wetlands and prairies will take their place, causing the most dramatic changes to the stream environment. Paddlers will experience a more open stretch of stream, free of overhanging branches and snags. Progressing down creek, into more wooded sections of Glacial Park, older oak groves will be freed of exotic brush and opened up. Young oaks will be replanted to expand the existing tree cover into areas cleared of oaks decades ago. As the project begins, check the front page of the District’s website for updates on how work is progressing, any scheduled work closures, or to see photos of the positive changes to one of the most popular and well traveled canoe streams in northeastern Illinois.