



## **SICON's Comprehensive Swimmer's Itch Control Program**

### **Year 2, Update 1: May 15, 2016**

#### **Year 2 of our Swimmer's Itch Control Program is underway**

It's been a very unusual spring. Ice-out was much earlier this year compared to the last few years, but that was followed with a very wintery month of April. We finished our winter-long preparations for Year 2 of our Comprehensive Swimmer's Itch Control Program and moved operations to Higgins Lake the week of April 11. SICON is stationed once again at the Dragonfly House on the southwest shore where we will be holding weekly educational open houses. Our first open house of the season will be on Memorial Day (Monday, May 30) from 6-8pm. Be sure to attend one of our events.

#### **Duck, duck, duck, duck, duck....LOON!!**

We've been busy looking for common merganser nests and conducting frequent full-lake bird surveys. Those surveys have yielded large counts of bufflehead, common mergansers, and loons, and have also shown some interesting trends. Common mergansers appear to move around considerably on a day-by-day basis, probably due to the regular harassment activities being conducted in Gerrish Township. One might expect most of the birds to be in Lyon Township which is exempt from harassment activities, but that has not proven to be the case. The common mergansers are approximately evenly split between the two townships. In addition, Marl Lake appears to be acting as a sanctuary or safe haven for the birds on certain days. One survey revealed 40 common mergansers on nearby Marl Lake. Surveys often show more ducks on this small body of water than on Higgins Lake! We will report our detailed survey findings in our next report.

#### **Post-mortem findings**

SICON has been busy doing necropsies of mergansers shot and killed by Northpointe Fisheries, which is required under our federal and state permits. Initial results (as of May 6 we have performed 17 necropsies) are very similar to last year, with 42% of birds not infected with the parasites causing swimmer's itch. In addition, all but two of the infected birds had only very light infection levels. These results, along with the extremely cold lake temperatures this time of year, demonstrate that April-May are not as critical a time as June-August for protecting the lake from common mergansers. As for the sex of the 17 birds, 9 were males and 8 females. Since male common mergansers don't show breeding plumage until year 3, some of the males killed by Northpoint likely were incorrectly assumed to be females based on their outward appearance.

**Questions we hope to answer in 2016**

Like you, we have lots of questions we hope are answered this summer. These include:

Q: How difficult is it to find common merganser nests?

A: Nest locating activities by SICON has, once again, been very challenging due to the mergansers continually being harassed in Gerrish Township. Nonetheless, we have located two nests in Lyon Township and have surveillance camera footage of a female repeatedly visiting the nest. If you know of a potential nesting site please notify us via our webpage ([www.swimmersitch.org](http://www.swimmersitch.org))

Q: Will any of the common mergansers which were trapped and relocated last year return to Higgins Lake this summer?

A: Yes. The mothers probably will, but the chicks most likely won't. We banded all the hens that we captured last year, and expect that most of them will either be shot, or will be captured again this year. However, we fully expect that the captured chicks from last year will return to the place where they were released and subsequently raised by their mother (Tawas City area). The reduced numbers of common mergansers seen so far this year in our bird surveys supports this view.

Q: Does that mean that we can expect fewer broods of common mergansers on Higgins Lake this spring?

A: We expect that will be the case. However, we did express concern that the common merganser artificial nest boxes erected on Higgins Lake last year will attract new brooding hens this year. We understand that common mergansers are using the nest boxes this year, which supports our concern. We believe that last year's successful breeders will choose to lay eggs in a natural, previously-successful nesting location rather than nest boxes. Due to our successful trap and removal efforts last summer we expect to find that the total number of common mergansers visiting Higgins Lake this spring and summer will be reduced even if the nest boxes are attracting new breeders. Based on our experience, we believe last year's chicks will imprint on the area where they first begin to fly, which was in Tawas City. When spring activities are completed a comparison with last year's data will provide a more definitive answer to these issues.

**The proverbial proof is in the data**

The wisdom from an old sage may be worth repeating here: "Believe nothing you hear, and half of what you see." It appears there are many differing opinions when it comes to common merganser issues on Higgins Lake. Some of what is being stated is inaccurate and misleading. As spring moves into summer, we will be accurately reporting results that will give all interested parties definitive answers on how to best move forward in the ongoing battle with swimmer's itch. We are confident that our hard work from last summer removing broods that would have spent the summer on the lake will begin to reduce swimmer's itch this summer.

**The bigger picture**

SICON believes good science, accurate collection and interpretation of data and collaboration are the keys to success. SICON is working with the top experts in swimmer's itch from all over North America (University of Alberta, the University of New Mexico, and Oakland University). Those experts will be coming to Higgins Lake and meeting us here at the Dragonfly House in June!