

# The Oneida Lake Bulletin

Summer 2007

## OLA Names Congressman James Walsh “Conservationist of the Year”

The Oneida Lake Association honored Congressman James “Jim” Walsh as “Conservationist of the Year” at the annual meeting in late April.

Jim Walsh has been a tremendous friend of Oneida Lake and the Association throughout his congressional career. He was instrumental in securing federal funding for the successful Oneida Lake cormorant reduction program, which helped produce the excellent angling that characterizes the lake today. In addition, the congressman’s efforts brought \$33 million in federal funding to Central New York for watershed protection efforts on Oneida and other lakes in the region.

Congressman Walsh’s work has produced over \$150 million for revitalizing Onondaga Lake. This project, which includes lake restoration by the Army Corps of Engineers, has reduced ammonia, phosphorus, bacteria, and salinity in the lake, while increasing life-giving dissolved oxygen. Onondaga’s water quality has improved to the point where the lake now hosts fishing tournaments.

The Congressman has also secured federal funding for expansion of the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge and for using willow biomass as an alternative energy source. His environmental protection efforts have been recognized by the Audubon Society and by SUNY-ESF.

The OLA salutes Congressman Walsh for his effective environmental representation.



Congressman James Walsh and OLA Director Robert Ripberger proudly display their awards.

Summer 2007

Dear OLA Members,

I wanted to take a moment to thank all of you for presenting me with the Oneida Lake Association’s Conservationist of the Year Award. I am very proud to have received this honor.

As an avid fisherman and outdoorsman, protecting and enhancing our environment is one of my top priorities. I am glad to have been able to provide federal support to address important issues surrounding the lake such as cormorant control, pollution prevention, and the development of a management strategy for Oneida Lake and its watershed. Know that I will continue to support efforts to preserve this precious natural resource in any way that I can.

Thank you again for this distinguished award, and for all of your efforts on behalf of Oneida Lake.

Sincerely,  
Jim Walsh

## OLA Director Ripberger Receives Environmental Quality Award from the EPA

Congressman Jim Walsh presented Robert “Bob” Ripberger of Syracuse with the 2007 Environmental Quality Award, sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Region 2. The ceremony took place on May 31, at Webster Pond.

Nominated by Congressman Walsh, Mr. Ripberger received the award in the EPA’s “individual citizen” category. Each year, the EPA honors individuals and groups that have demonstrated an outstanding commitment to protecting and enhancing environmental quality in our region.

“Mr. Ripberger embodies a long and distinguished tradition of working on behalf of outdoor sportsmanship and environmental stewardship and appreciation,” said Congressman Walsh. “This award is a much deserved national recognition.”

For over half a century, Bob Ripberger has educated outdoorsmen and women on safe and ethical practices, and has worked with elected officials to advance conservation and environmental protection initiatives. He has been actively involved in a variety of local environmental organizations, including the State Conservation Council, the Onondaga County Federation of Sportsmen’s Clubs, and the Oneida Lake Association. He also helped establish the Central New York Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America. A full front-page article in the Syracuse Post-Standard last spring highlighted Bob’s distinguished career.

# President's Message

I have been a lifelong resident of the Oneida Lake region and am looking forward to being your next president. Our organization can take pride in the lake's wondrous fishery and in an active membership dedicated to preserving that invaluable resource.

This year, your OLA board will be diligently keeping abreast of the issues pertaining to Oneida Lake. Some of these include water levels, invasive species, lake access, and effective cormorant control. We are also discussing ideas and procedures for checking the excessive weed growth often produced by summer's warmth. The OLA has been at the forefront of these issues because of its strong and active membership. You should all be proud!

This year, your board would like to grow our membership and keep it more informed. Two projects currently address these points. The first is a membership drive concentrating on people who live on or near the lakeshore and are not OLA members. In July, these persons received a letter telling them about the OLA and asking them to join. If you live within this target area, talk to your neighbors, take time to tell them about all we accomplish, and ask them to join. The OLA gains strength with every member enrolled.

Our second goal is upgrading the OLA's website. We hope to make our site more interactive and user friendly. Improvements will occur over the next few months. Check out our website - <http://www.oneidalakeassociation.org> - and enjoy its evolution!

The future will undoubtedly bring new challenges and opportunities, but the OLA is prepared to confront them. Increased participation by the lake area's residents will strengthen our ability to protect, preserve and enhance Oneida Lake.

Let me reemphasize one crucial point – sign up as many new members as you can. It's a sound investment in the lake's future.

I am honored to represent you. Have a safe and wonderful summer.



Lance Vella  
President - OLA

## Ripples

Oneida Lake's anglers possess a rich, proud angling tradition, but that legacy might wane if it isn't passed to the next generation. This summer, do your part to preserve our lake's angling heritage – take children fishing. Let kids experience the joys that accompany Oneida Lake fishing.

### Sign up a new member today!

Successful walleye charter Captain Ray Brown advises summer anglers to work black and purple jigs, equipped with a "stinger hook" and tipped with a piece of night crawler, slowly along the bottom to catch the lake's walleyes. As summer

progresses, more and more walleyes will visit weed beds. Work jigs along weed edges, but don't be afraid to cast directly into the weeds. You'll probably snag vegetation after a couple jigs, but big fish often lurk in the weediest places.

### Keep white perch!

In our spring Bulletin, Dr. Paul Bowser reported on the potential danger that viral hemorrhagic septicemia (VHS) poses for Oneida Lake's fish. Since Bowser's article appeared, the disease has been discovered in nearby Skaneateles Lake. This fact underscores the point that everyone must observe DEC regulations and NEVER

## The Oneida Lake Association Inc.

Founded in 1945

*The Bulletin* is published by the Oneida Lake Association, Inc., so that its members may be informed regarding the activities of the Association. The Oneida Lake Association, Inc., was organized in 1945 to restore and preserve the natural resources of Oneida Lake and its environs.

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move or use uncertified baitfish. Only vigilant individual and collective efforts can keep VHS from Oneida Lake.

### Practice safe boating – obey the "rules of the road!"

As this *Bulletin* goes to press, a major bill affecting Oneida Lake rests on Governor Elliott Spitzer's desk. Passed by the Senate and Assembly, the bill creates an "Oswego River Basin Watershed Commission." As the bill states, the commission will be "made up of representatives of state and local governments and private citizens" and will be charged with

(continued on page 5)

# Oneida Lake's Cormorant Harassment Program

## Frequently Asked Questions

by Dr. Travis DeVault

*Editor's Note – Oneida Lake's cormorant harassment program, which began in 1998, is an outstanding example of an effective government response to environmental problems. This program, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services Division, has contributed mightily to a major resurgence in the lake's game fish populations during the past three years.*

*In the following article, USDA biologist Travis DeVault answers questions that often arise about the harassment program.*



### What kind of birds are cormorants?

Although cormorants resemble ducks, they are more closely related to pelicans and several other types of fish-eating birds that live in coastal areas across the world. The double-crested cormorant, which inhabits Oneida Lake, is the most widespread and abundant of six North American species of cormorants. Cormorants eat fish almost exclusively, which they capture during underwater pursuit. Research by a Cornell University biologist has demonstrated that double-crested cormorants are capable of diving to depths over 75 feet. Thus, all of Oneida Lake is accessible to them.

### Where did all these birds come from? Have they always been so numerous?

Double-crested cormorants are native to the United States and Canada. Their population has undergone dramatic fluctuations over the past century. It is not completely certain, however, whether cormorants originally nested in the Great Lakes ecosystem, including Oneida Lake. The first documented nesting record for double-crested cormorants in the Great Lakes was in 1913 on the western end of Lake Superior; from there, they spread eastward to colonize the other Great Lakes.

Many wildlife biologists now believe

that double-crested cormorants did not nest in the Great Lakes historically, but rather expanded their range east from the Great Plains into the Great Lakes from the 1910s through the late 1930s. By the early 1950s, cormorants were common throughout much of the Great Lakes, although their numbers declined tremendously from the 1950s through the mid-1970s due to contamination from agricultural pesticides (DDT) that damaged their eggs. By 1973, breeding cormorants had disappeared completely from Lakes Michigan and Superior, and were scarce elsewhere in the Great Lakes.

Nineteenth century surveys indicate that cormorants were seldom seen on Oneida Lake. Indeed, the *Roosevelt Wildlife Annals*' bird census for the lake, published in 1927, makes no mention of double-crested cormorants.

### Why are cormorants so abundant now?

In the mid 1970s, cormorants began a dramatic recovery throughout the Great Lakes ecosystem, doubling their population size every three years from 1973 through 1991. Cormorants are now many times more numerous than they were during their previous peak in the Great Lakes around 1950. Estimates of the total Great Lakes population presently range from 350,000 to 475,000.

Undoubtedly, government regulations that reduced, and then completely eliminated, use of DDT contributed to this population explosion. Some wildlife biologists also believe that changes in Great Lakes fish communities, including the proliferation of exotic species like alewives, benefited cormorants. The growth of catfish farming in the southeastern United States also has provided abundant food for cormorants during winter months.

Double-crested cormorants are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and thus the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regulates the taking of birds, eggs, and nests.

### Do the cormorants we see on Oneida Lake breed here?

Cormorants move around a lot. Nesting cormorants, captured and fitted with satellite tracking devices at Oneida Lake, have been located during the breeding season on Lake Ontario, Lake Champlain, the St. Lawrence River, and other locations. The majority of cormorants that are seen on Oneida Lake in the spring after ice-out are only passing by (and "refueling" by eating the lake's fish) during their migration from the southern United States to breeding grounds elsewhere in the Great Lakes ecosystem. Many of the same birds also stop over on Oneida Lake during their fall migration.

Management efforts have reduced the number of cormorant nesting attempts on Oneida Lake from over 300 in the late 1990s to only about 20 nests presently. This represents tremendous progress.

### How does the USDA cormorant program work on Oneida Lake?

Cormorant management at Oneida Lake is primarily a non-lethal program. From ice-out until migration winds down in late September, Wildlife Services' employees use boat chases, pyrotechnics, nest control, and limited lethal removal to reduce cormorant numbers on the lake. In 2006 at Oneida Lake, 8,461 pyrotechnics (fireworks and other noise makers) were

(continued on page 4)

## FAQs

(continued from page 3)

used to harass 49,464 cormorants (many individuals were harassed multiple times), and forty-eight cormorants were lethally removed.

The program has been extremely effective. In 2006, Wildlife Services biologists counted an average of 108 cormorants on Oneida Lake from April through September, and, during much of the summer, fewer than 100 birds were found on the lake. In the mid 1990s, before cormorant management began, surveys by Cornell University biologists indicated that several hundred cormorants used the lake throughout the summer months, and counts of 2,000 or more were common during the fall.

### Aren't you just moving the cormorant problem somewhere else?

Cormorants dispersed from Oneida Lake certainly have to go somewhere. Non-lethal management programs such as ours are intended to disperse birds to multiple areas, so no individual location is affected adversely to a significant degree.

During the first few years of the management program at Oneida Lake, many cormorants relocated to nearby Onondaga Lake. Since 2004, however, USDA biologists have harassed cormorants at Onondaga Lake as well, and cormorant use of that lake has been reduced substantially.

Recent research has demonstrated that many birds harassed at Oneida and Onondaga Lakes have dispersed widely to various locations in Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River, and elsewhere. Some harassed birds have migrated south earlier in the year than expected.

### Why can't we use cormorant management money for other things, such as building new boat ramps?

The USDA Wildlife Services' program in New York is charged by Congress to conduct management, monitoring, and research to ensure that cormorants do not adversely affect fish populations in Oneida

Lake. Money appropriated by Congress for the Oneida Lake cormorant program must be used towards this goal and within the parameters set by Congress.

In addition to the Oneida Lake management activities and research, Wildlife Services is conducting other innovative activities. For example, research is currently underway to evaluate the benefits of the USDA Wildlife Services' cormorant program on the Central New York economy.

### Are there any other management options? Why don't you just shoot them all? What about starting a hunting season on cormorants?

In 1996 and again in 2003, the New York State DEC convened a "Citizens Task Force" meeting to involve the public in the decision-making process concerning cormorant management. The resulting management plan is being implemented currently by USDA Wildlife Services at Oneida Lake.

Management programs consisting

*Dr. Travis DeVault is a Research Wildlife Biologist with USDA Wildlife Services, National Wildlife Research Center. He is stationed at Brewerton and can be reached via e-mail at [Travis.L.DeVault@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:Travis.L.DeVault@aphis.usda.gov)*

primarily of lethal removal have been used in other areas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considered a hunting season, but rejected the idea because of concerns about the ethics of hunting a non-edible species, and administrative/legal issues. In addition, cormorants can be difficult to hunt; harassment/removal by trained professionals has proven to be the most effective method.

### What will occur if we stop managing cormorants at Oneida Lake?

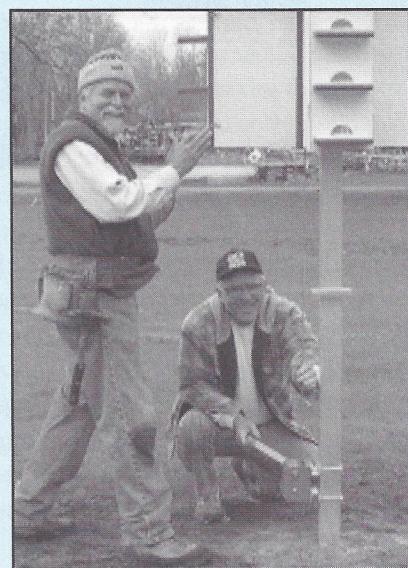
Because of its sizeable fish populations and location near other large bodies of water, Oneida Lake is prime habitat for fish-eating birds like cormorants. There are 350,000 to 475,000 cormorants on the Great Lakes. Given the birds' ability to move long distances, cormorant numbers at Oneida Lake likely would increase rapidly if management stopped. Judging from what happened during the 1990s and early 2000s, *severe* drops in fish populations would probably occur.

## Purple Martins Renew Historic Nest at Constantia

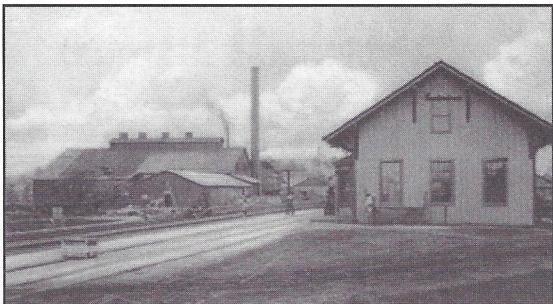
by Bob Gang

Purple martins are beautiful birds that prefer to nest in houses constructed by people. Bucky Darrh, former owner of the Vanderbilt Hotel in Constantia, built several intricate martin houses and installed them on the hotel's lakeside lot during the 1930s and 1940s. The "Vanderbilt martin colony" became regionally famous among New York birders.

Darrh's legacy lives on in Constantia. Last spring, Bucky's grandson Walter Darrh (kneeling), aided by Tom Schluder, added a personally crafted martin house to the older structures along the village's lakefront. Birds thrive in the houses and an Oneida Lake ornithological tradition endures. The martin colony can be viewed on the lot between the Constantia library and the lake. Hats off to Walt and Tom for their contribution to enhancing Oneida Lake's environment!



## Oneida Lake Photo History Quiz



What Oneida Lake village was home to the Getman Glass Company?

This photo shows one of Brewerton's famous boat builders, pictured in his boatyard. What was his name?

### Answers

- 1. Cleveland
- 2. Thomas Milton



## Ripples

*(continued from page 2)*

“managing the water levels of the Basin in accord with the optimum interests of all the state’s citizens.” Our lake is an important part of the Oswego Basin.

Your OLA board of directors actively lobbied legislators to include language in the bill that protects Oneida Lake’s environment. Our representatives responded positively. A specific management objective for our lake in the bill states that this proposed law will “ensure that no change occurs to the natural and man-made inflow and outflow structures that could allow a lake level reduction below the lowest levels recorded on the lake in the immediately preceding ten years, and a continuation of an operating policy that relates to long established target levels and their timing during the year.” This language protects Oneida Lake against unsound water level reductions that could dramatically damage the lake’s lush inshore aquatic habitats.

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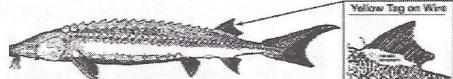
Sturgeon in Oneida Lake and nearby waters may be tagged. Biologists at Cornell University and NYSDEC need your help to track these fish. Yellow tags may be attached at the base of the dorsal fin. If you catch a tagged sturgeon, please write down the number on the tag and length of fish, release the fish immediately, and call Cornell University at (315) 633-9243 or contact NYSDEC at (315) 785-2262 as soon as possible.



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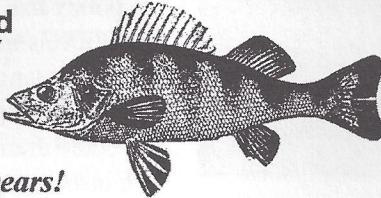
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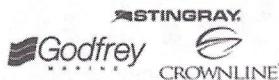
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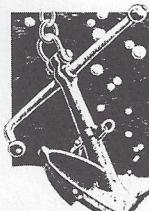
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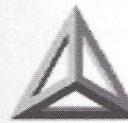
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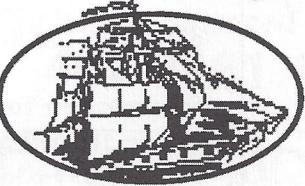
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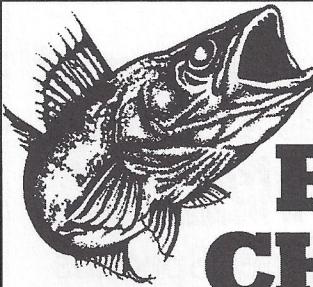
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