A Brief History of the Wigwam Bay State Wildlife Area

Chippewa Indians historically summered in large numbers along the Saginaw Bay shore near the mouths of the Pine, Rifle, and Au Gres Rivers, hence the name Wigwam Bay which describes the area along the Saginaw Bay from the Pine River north to the old Rifle River. There was a portion of a Chippewa Indian reservation located on State land at the mouth of the Pine River from 1819-1837. From the late 1800's until the early 1900's, the Wigwam Bay area became the focal point of a prosperous lumber industry. The original Rifle River channel which meandered through what is now the Wigwam Bay W.A., provided access from far inland to Saginaw Bay for those involved in the timber industry. A large sawmill and loading dock owned by the Rifle River and Wigwam Bay Boom Co. existed at the mouth of the Rifle River – east of the current dike system. Due to competition and financial rivalry between major timber groups, the Rifle River was rerouted to its current position in the late 1800's. The rerouting severely restricted the amount of water flowing down the river channel, and the Rifle River Boom Co. sold the land in 1902. In 1933 Jay Smith diked, ditched, built pumping stations, and developed 906 acres (5 mile dike perimeter) near the old river mouth delta into the Smith – Dunning Fur Farm. Reportedly, 7,000 – 9,000 muskrats (@ $7 each) were annually harvested during the Great Depression years. When fur prices crashed in the late 1950's maintenance activities for the fur farm ended and waterfowl hunting became the main activity until the Wildlife Division acquired the property in 1989.

During the early 1900's, the Smith Marsh area was a wet prairie/grassland cover type that was dependant on Saginaw Bay lake levels. This area was utilized and managed for pasture crops. Hay was cut, dried, and stacked on site and then hauled out by sleigh during the winter. When the dike system was developed, emergent marsh replaced the prairie cover type, both inside the diked area and out.

A great deal has changed on the Smith Marsh property since Wildlife Div. purchased the property in 1989. The current pole barn was built, the entrance bridge removed and replaced by large culverts, and miles of 5' tall mesh fence and posts from the days of the fur farm were removed. There were 9 buildings on site all in various states of disrepair: a caretakers house, pheasant rearing building, brooder house, dog kennels, a lodge, garage, boat house, cooler building, and the "trappers shack". The perimeter dike system was in total disrepair due to a lack of maintenance and the record high water floods of 1986. The buildings were removed and the entire dike system rebuilt from 1990-94.

The next big project is the Old Rifle River Channel Restoration. With the current low water levels on Saginaw Bay there is no way to add water to the diked impoundment with either portable pumps or gravity flow which has resulted in poor water quality and an unhealthy marsh. Beginning in 2000 when the Saginaw Bay water levels began dropping, we began documenting the rise in water levels down the old river channel during the spring snow melt. After a few years we realized that during these periods of low water levels, the spring runoff down the old river channel is substantial for a week to 10 days. We determined

we could block the flow where the river was diverted around the dike to the west and force the water through the dike as it traditionally did. The plan is for two 30" culverts with gates will be installed where the old river channel meets the dike system at the north dike and again where the river once spilled into the Bay on the east dike. During the spring run off period the water flow will be blocked, the gates will be opened and the old channel will flow through the marsh and into the Bay. We will also open the gates during periods of high water levels on Saginaw Bay to allow a more natural ebb and flow of water into and through the diked area.

A history of the previous owners of the 1279 acre Smith tract which has remained virtually intact since the original patent.

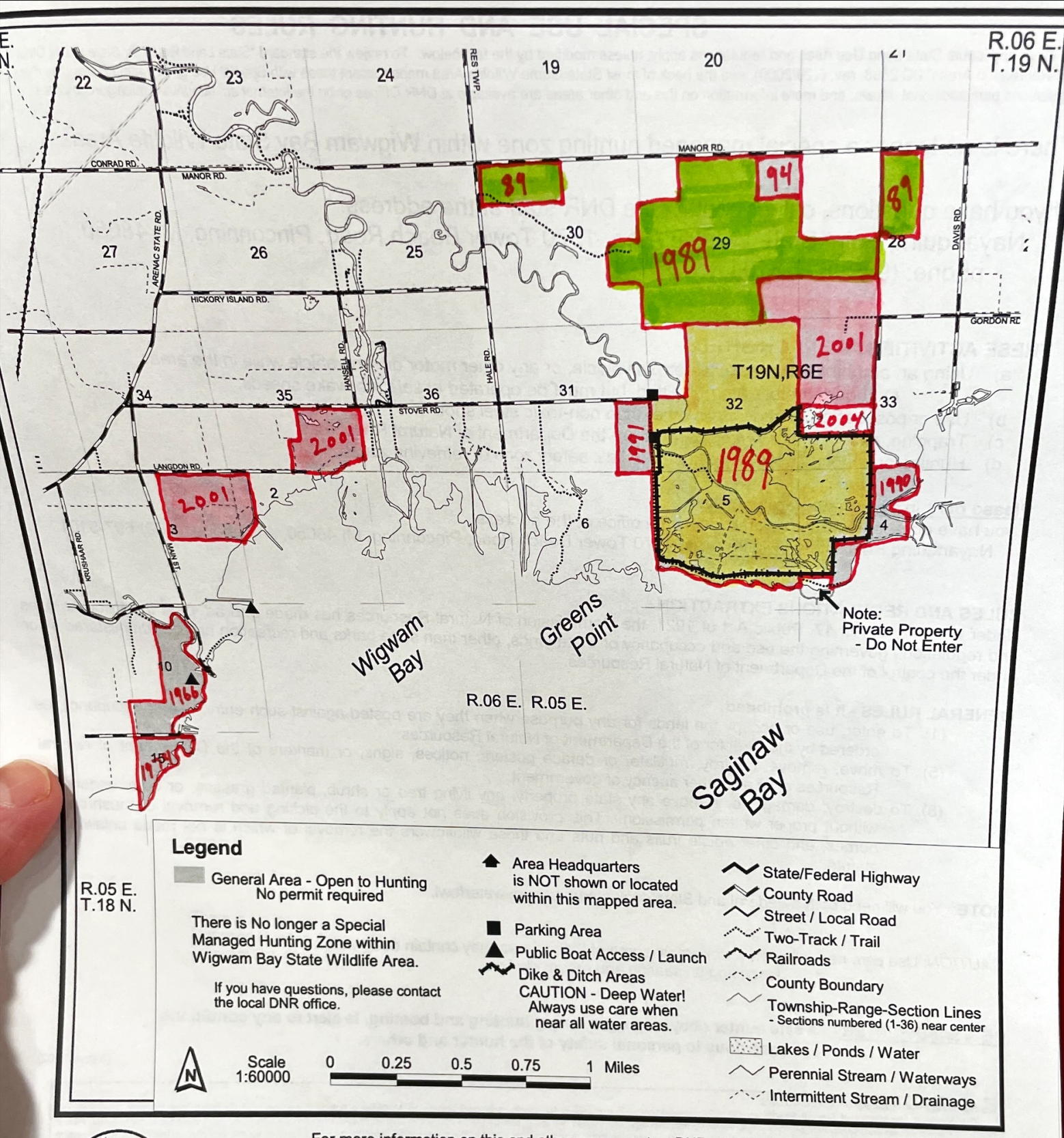
1. United States Government to Thomas Snell – 1873
2. Thomas Snell to Rifle River and Wigwam Bay Boom Co. – 1868
3. R.R. & W.B. Boom Co. to Rifle River Boom Co. - 1870
4. Rifle River Boom Co. to Andrew Kent – 1902
5. A. Kent to A.W. McDonnell – 1904
6. A.W. McDonnell to Samuel E. Symons – 1913*
7. S. Symons to Jay Smith – 1928
8. Jay Smith to Harsen Smith – 1971
9. Harsen Smith to M. D.N.R. – Wildlife Div. – 1989

*S. Symons also purchased an additional 80 acres in Section 32 in 1912

Wigwam Bay Wildlife Area Land Acquisitions

1. 1966 – 140 acres (west unit)
2. 1974 – 59.3 acres (west unit)
3. 1989 – Smith tract – 1,279 acres (906 acres diked)
4. 1989 – State Forest land transfer – 803.46
5. 1990 – Harwick tract – 137.62 acres
6. 1991 – Payne tract – 80 acres
7. 1994 – Prince tract – 40 acres
8. 2001 – Robinson tract – 203.87 acres (GM settlement)
9. 2001 – Sieja tract – 280 acres (GM settlement)
10. 2001 – KBC Tool tract – 58 acres (GM settlement)
11. 2001 – Eastman tract – 60 acres (GM settlement)
12. 2004 – Davis tract – 80 acres

Total: 3,221.25 acres



For more information on this and other areas, contact DNR offices or visit on the internet at: http://www.michigan.gov/dnr

Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund

WILDLIFE RESTORATION

Hunter Monies Made This Area Possible

DNR-Wildlife Map 0704 (Rev. 8/2002 -MLS)