

WATCH OUT FOR SWIMMER'S ITCH THIS SUMMER!

by *Mary Ellen Sheridan*

Late in January 2023, the Michigan DNR (Department of Natural Resources) announced the cancellation of its Common Merganser capture and relocation program. In 2022 this program was canceled because of the detection of High Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 in wild birds in the state. With HPAI still present in the state this year, it presents a clear and important threat to wildlife and domestic poultry such as chickens, turkeys, quail, and geese. With continuing disease concerns, the DNR has indicated that it is considering permanent changes to programs that involve the capture and relocation of wild birds.

Common Mergansers host the parasite *Trichobilharzia stagnicolae*, the main cause of swimmer's itch in many northern Michigan lakes. Many DLIA folks will recall that the summer of 2020 was a particularly bad year for cases of swimmer's itch. The DLIA formed a Swimmer's Itch Task Force, led by Kim and Ed Grant. The Task Force collected reports of swimmer's itch throughout the summer and recommended that the DLIA Executive Committee support a proposal from Swimmer's Itch Solutions (a private firm with regional experience in the trap and release program, and familiarity with water bird populations/swimmer's itch on Douglas Lake), to participate in the DNR's permitted program to trap and release Common Merganser broods in 2021 on Douglas Lake. At the time the Executive Board considered this request, it was anticipated that a trial trap and release program would be carried out over two years (summers of 2021 and 2022). Both the DLIA and Swimmer's Itch Solutions obtained the required permits from the DNR to participate in the trap and release program. In the summer of 2021, Swimmer's Itch Solutions trapped 5 broods of Common Merganser chicks and hens. The broods were all removed to DNR-approved relocation sites (Cheboygan State Park or Wilderness State Park). Bird surveys of the entire shoreline of Douglas Lake identified three broods of Hooded Mergansers and five broods of Common Mergansers among the various waterfowl species on the Lake. Based on testing of some Hooded Merganser chicks, evidence suggests that Hooded Mergansers play a much less significant role relative to Common Mergansers in causing and spreading swimmers' itch on Douglas Lake.

Because of the Avian Flu threat last year, the DNR canceled the trap and release program for Common Merganser broods for summer 2022. Fortunately, there were very few reported cases of swimmers' itch. Again, this summer, no Common Merganser broods can be trapped and released. No one can know for certain what the incidence of swimmer's itch will be this summer. We can expect that Common Mergansers will be living and raising young chicks on Douglas Lake. Please advise family and friends to be aware of the risks of swimmer's itch.

There are proactive steps that can be taken before going into the lake that can reduce the potential to get swimmer's itch, and there are also some recommended steps that could reduce the severity of swimmer's itch. Here are some recommendations:



Before going into Douglas Lake:

- Apply a barrier cream or gel to the skin to reduce the potential for the parasites to enter child or adult skin. Some folks use Vaseline; others use anti-swimmer's itch products such as Swimmer's Itch Guard which are available online or in local stores. Some recommend generously applying and often re-applying a "waterproof sunscreen" before going into the water.
- Do not encourage ducks/geese to stay in your area by feeding them.
- Avoid placing rip-rap on your shore as this is an excellent surface for certain species of snails to attach their eggs. The higher the number of snails, the greater the chance of swimmer's itch.

Be careful of when/where you swim:

- Avoid swimming in areas where lots of ducks/geese congregate.
- Avoid swimming in the morning when snail populations are greater nearer the shoreline.
- Avoid shallow waters.
- Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem.
- Avoid swimming in shallow waters where there is an on-shore wind.
- Avoid marshy areas that may have lots of snails.

After swimming:

- Towel off immediately after leaving the water to reduce the opportunity for parasites to enter the skin as the water dries on the skin.
- Take a warm/hot soapy shower to reduce the potential for the parasites to remain on the skin.

What to do with a bad case of swimmer's itch?

- Apply available anti-itch or swelling-reducing topical creams, sprays, etc.
- See a dermatologist/Urgent Care for prescription relief.

Is There a Safe Place to Swim?

Swimmer's itch can't be completely eradicated from our lake as there are always going to be migratory birds flying and (even temporarily) stopping on Douglas Lake. To avoid any chance of exposing children and adults to swimmer's itch, head for the beaches on Lake Michigan or Lake Huron. There are lovely areas to swim and picnic locally in Wilderness State Park, and Petoskey State Park on Lake Michigan, and Cheboygan State Park on Lake Huron. The snails that host the swimmer's itch parasite are not found on these Great Lakes.