

# Town of Washington

Door County

www.washingtonisland-wi.gov

(920) 847-2522  
Fax (920) 847-2303

P.O. Box 220  
Washington Island, WI 54246

July 17, 2019

Ms. Cathy Nigg  
United States Fish & Wildlife Service  
5600 American Blvd.  
Bloomington, MN 55437-1458

Dear Ms. Nigg:

The Town of Washington sees tremendous value in the partnership of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) with the Friends of Plum and Pilot Islands (FOPPI). It has been very productive for Plum Island. Both organizations are to be congratulated for their joint efforts. Protecting wildlife and their habitats, hosting public events, and preserving and restoring the historic structures on Plum Island are positive steps that provide visitor enjoyment, education and economic value to the Township. We also appreciate the partnerships work with our school system and support for our local events. Opening Plum Island to the public has been very beneficial for visitors to our area.

Our citizens are concerned about your treatment of Pilot Island. Many had family members who lived and served on Pilot Island where the lighthouse, now abandoned, stood as a reminder of days gone by when ships and lives might be lost sailing through Death's Door. In years past, residents had social gatherings on Pilot Island. It was lush and green then with a wonderful ecosystem that included prolific fisheries and clear waters just off the island's beaches. The situation with Pilot Island is much different today. The island is radically changed as a result of the population explosion of double-crested cormorants who nest and roost there. The purpose of this letter is to make USFWS aware of our serious concerns over the current use of Pilot Island as migratory bird breeding ground. A few of the key concerns follow. (References, Support Materials, and Photographs appear in the attachments)

- It looks like a bomb hit Pilot Island. The cormorant guano has become so toxic and extreme that Pilot Island's once beautiful flora and fauna along with the lush vegetation for herons, egrets, colonial water birds, and migrating song birds has been totally destroyed. The only thing left on Pilot Island are stumps, barren trees, weedy invasive plants, 587 herring gull nests, and 3,767 cormorant nests.
- Depending on wind direction and speed, the putrid stench from the cormorant's guano may travel to Plum Island, Detroit Island, Washington Island, Northport, and Northern Door County. USDA states that on a local scale, decreasing property values and reduced tourism and recreation may cause economic losses for area residents and businesses that rely on tourism.
- The Town is concerned that the contaminated soil and attendant surrounding waters is a risk to health and safety as well as to poultry on the Island. In 2016, USFWS reported between 100-500 cormorants died on Pilot Island from Newcastle disease. USFWS has stated that the possible transmission of Newcastle virus from free ranging birds to domestic poultry is a concern. In addition, U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) states people can contract Newcastle disease. Symptoms, including conjunctivitis, fever, headache, and malaise, are usually mild and last 3-4 days. Further residents are concerned that E-Coli may be a problem.
- Both sport and commercial fisherman complain about decreased catches. Cormorants eat about one pound of fish a day. Based on these numbers, they consume between 3.8 to 11.3 tons of fish each day

feeding on what used to be one of the best spawning grounds in the Great Lakes. The effect has been a decline in the fishing industry and its attendant tourism boost for Washington Island.

- Cormorants are now seen daily in all harbors on Washington Island. Detroit, Rock, and St. Martins islands are not immune to the cormorant either. This spring season alone, approximately 500 cormorant nests have been destroyed by Fish and Wildlife personnel on Hog Island which lies beside Washington Island. Clearly these birds are undesirable and beginning to spread all over the township. Without very early and aggressive prevention measures they will be difficult to contain. Visitors to Rock Island have to literally walk around the cormorants in order to leave the dock. A sign the cormorant is losing its fear of humans or is sick creating an open door to undesirable roosting in the future.

The Town of Washington includes Washington Island, Rock Island, Detroit Island, Plum Island and Pilot Island. As the Town Board we represent them all. It seems that your department clearly understands the issue with Pilot Island and chooses to study it and report it without taking serious action to resolve it. The Town Board requests that you take immediate action to return Pilot Island to its original state. Eradicating the cormorants from the Island will prevent their accelerated population growth and reduce the current and potential impact on fishing, tourism and the Town's economy. We believe this ounce of prevention, will be well worth the pound of cure required in the future.

Pilot Island should have a much more meaningful and beneficial use for the public. It could provide historical maritime and environmental education as a museum that would quickly communicate the isolated life style Keepers and their families experienced while attending the light during their service.

The Town Board believes this is a reasonable and prudent request, USFWS should take seriously, and act in the Town's best interest. We look forward to your feedback.

Sincerely,



Richard E. Tobey  
Town Chairman

2 Attachments

## Attachment 1: References

**Reference 1:** Retired U. S. Coast Guard Officer, June 2019.

**Reference 2:** Washington Island Residents Feedback, June 2019.

**Reference 3:** *Habitat Management Plan*, Green Bay and Gravel Island National Wildlife Refuge USFWS, Pages 2-10 and 2-11, October 2017.

**Reference 4:** United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Last Modified: May 24, 2019.

**Reference 5:** Virulent Newcastle Disease (vND) Alert - Letter from the California Department of Food and Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture, May 21, 2019.

**Reference 6:** Washington Island Residents Feedback, On-Going.

**Reference 7:** U. S. Department of Interior, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Place Inventory – Nomination Form (approved), November 21, 1983.

**Reference 8:** *Flora and Vegetation of the Grand Traverse Islands (Lake Michigan), Wisconsin and Michigan, The Michigan Botanist* by Emmet J. Judziewicz, *Conservation Biologist*, Bureau of Endangered Resources Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Madison, WI 53707-7921, Pages 129-130 and Figures 23, 24, and 25. Fall 2001.

**Reference 9:** *Habitat Management Plan*, Green Bay and Gravel Island National Wildlife Refuge, Page 2-4, October 2017.

**Reference 10:** *Plan Your Visit*, U. S Fish and Wildlife Service, Green Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Wisconsin, Last Updated: Mar 21, 2019.

**Reference 11:** Washington Island Residents Feedback, June 2019.

**Reference 12:** *Field Notes Entry*, Green Bay National Wildlife Refuge Acquires Plum and Pilot Islands, Midwest Region, U.S Fish and Wildlife, October 17, 20017.

**Reference 13:** Washington Island Chamber of Commerce Member Comments, Washington Island, Wisconsin. June 2919

**Reference 14:** U. S. Department of Agriculture Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services Double - crested Cormorants, Issues and Management, Page 17 by Brian S. Dorr, Kristi L. Sullivan Paul D. Curtis, Richard B. Chipman, and Russell D. McCullough, Department of Natural Resources Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 2006

**Reference 15:** *Habitat Management Plan*, Green Bay and Gravel Island National Wildlife Refuge, Page 2-5, Figure 2.2, October 2017.

**Reference 16:** University of Nebraska - Lincoln Digital Commons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln Symposium on Double-Crested Cormorants: Population Status and Management Issues in the Midwest USDA National Wildlife Research Center Symposia. Symposium on Double-Crested Cormorants, Nesting Populations in the United States and Canada By Laura A. Tyson, Jerrold L. Belant, Francesca J. Cuthbert, and D. V. (Chip) Weseloh, Page 17.

**Reference 17:** Cormorant conundrum, Island habitats feel the pressure as populations of these once-endangered waterbirds grow, Wisconsin Natural Resource Magazine, February 2008.

**Reference 18:** *Habitat Management Plan*, Green Bay and Gravel Island National Wildlife Refuge, Figure 2-2, Number of nests for waterbird species observed at Pilot Island 2008-2016, October 2017.

**Reference 19:** Washington Island Residents Feedback, June 2019.

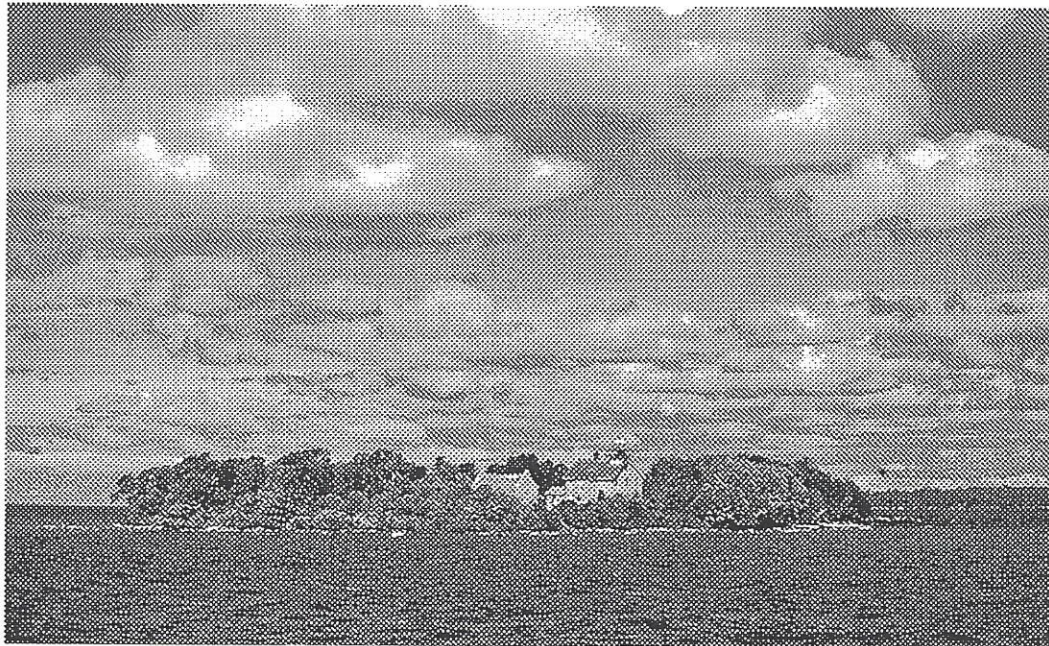
**Reference 20:** University of Nebraska - Lincoln Digital Commons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln Wildlife Damage Management Technical Series U.S. Department of Agriculture: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, by Dorr, Brian S.; Sullivan, Kristi L.; Curtis, Paul D.; Chipman, Richard; and McCullough, Russell D., "Double-crested Cormorants" (2016). Wildlife Damage Management Technical Series. 3. Pages 2 and 3, August 2016.

**Reference 21:** *Habitat Management Plan*, Green Bay and Gravel Island National Wildlife Refuge, Page 2-11, October 2017.

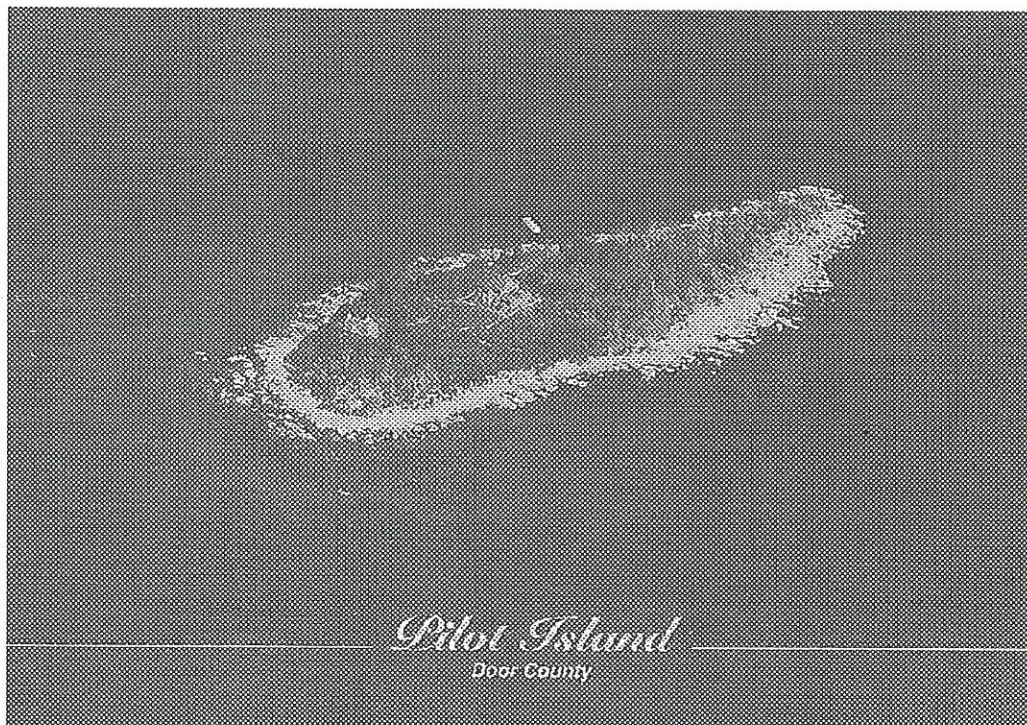
**Reference 22:** *Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources*, Cormorant conundrum by Jeff Pritzl and Paul Peeters, February 2008

**Reference 23:** *USFWS Employee Pocket Guide*. Mission Statement. Last updated Mar 27, 2019.

**Attachment 2: PILOT ISLAND (ORIGINAL STATE) – BEFORE USFWS OWNERSHIP:**

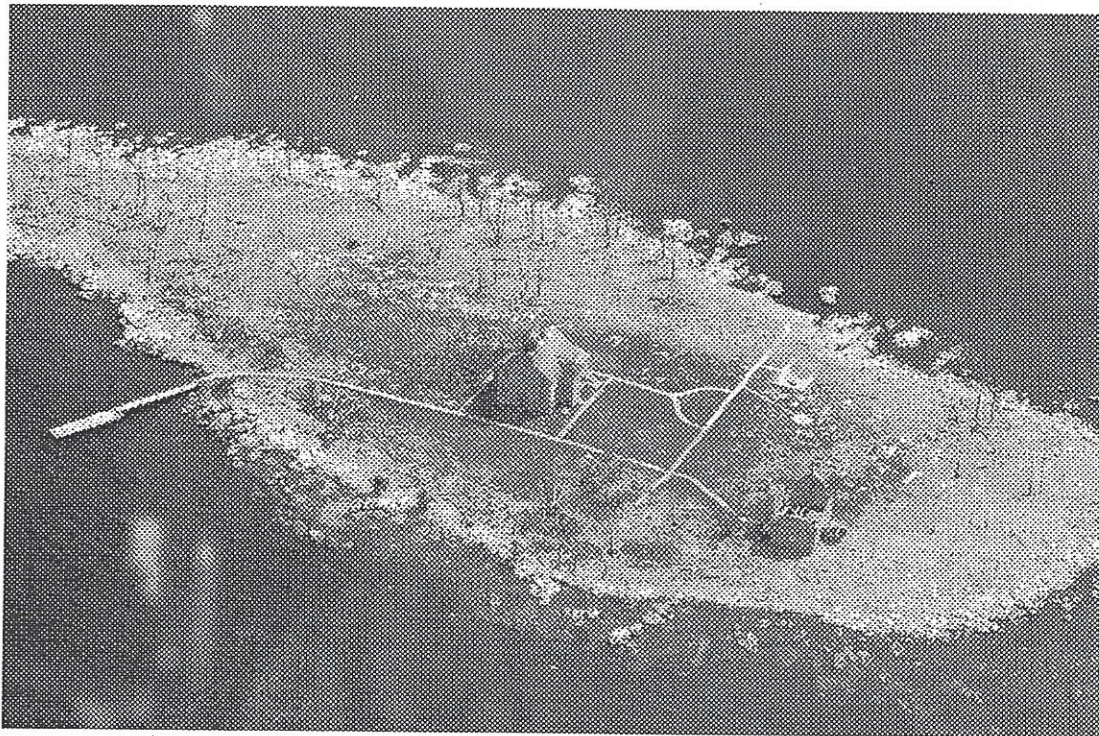


(Source: Washington Island History Page. Circa 1970s)

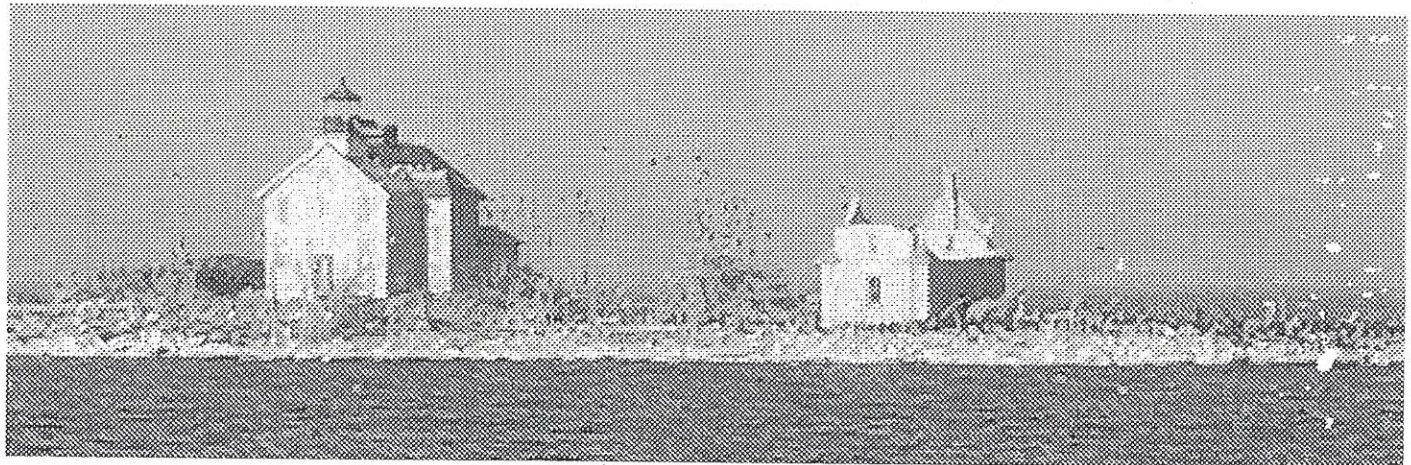


(Source: Post Card from DC Distributions. P.O. Box 290. Sister Bay, WI)

**PILOT ISLAND (CURRENT STATE) – AFTER USFWS OWNERSHIP:**



(Source: Rip Koken. July 2018)



(Source: Amy Watkins Collection – July 2018))

**Pilot Island lighthouse and Fog Signal Building with Cormorant Destruction)**