

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

Game Division

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Reconnaissance of High Island, 1951

High Island was visited November 8, 1951, by five Game Division men, B. C. Jenkins, S. C. Whitlock, R. A. MacMullan, Walter Palmer, and D. W. Douglass. Five hours were spent in traversing the island, from the old House of David settlement westward, through old fields and orchards, to the wooden tripod on top of the highest dune, thence southward along the dunes and western shore, returning through heavy cover at about the level of the north line of Sections 4 and 5 (T 38 N, R 11 W). This brief survey provided a good overall view of the island, particularly since we had with us the detailed cover maps prepared by Jenkins and Wanser, who spent several days on the island during the summer of 1945 (Game Division Report #911).

Object of the visit to High Island was to appraise it as a site for a ruffed grouse research project. It is proposed to stock a suitable island with ruffed grouse, allow the species to become established, and then subject the birds to especially heavy hunting pressure to determine how much hunting they can tolerate. It has been suggested that sufficient gun pressure might result in a leveling-off of the population curve, eliminating much of the cyclic effect usually shown by ruffed grouse. High Island was considered as a possibility because it is sufficiently remote, has a counterpart in Garden and Hog Islands, and includes a fair percentage of state ownership.

We found that the island would qualify as generally good grouse cover. The major cover type is a mixture of hardwoods and coniferous species. Small areas of cuttings, plus improvement of trails, would improve the habitat for grouse. A lack of deer has allowed a good growth of undercover.

After traversing the island, however, we felt that it was not especially suitable for the projected study. It is so large (3,510 acres) and so inaccessible from the mainland that it would be difficult to arrange for the hunting pressure necessary to manage the grouse population as planned. We judge that at least 600 gun-days annually would be required (and possibly a good many more). This would entail 60 men hunting 5 hours a day for 10 days each, or an equivalent combination of men and time. Since hunters grow weary of unproductive shooting, it is very doubtful that sufficient hunting effort could be maintained as the population of grouse was reduced. While High Island should not be entirely ruled out for the proposed experiment, a search should be made for a smaller island more readily accessible to the mainland.

We concluded that High Island would be very suitable for an extensive experiment with deer. There appears to be no established herd on the island, though one or more individuals may be present. We suggest that after a careful check to determine that no deer are on the island, four does and two bucks be liberated there (as was done on the George Reserve in Washtenaw County). Follow-up during the first years should be as detailed as possible, probably as a graduate thesis study. Effects of coyote predation could be evaluated, since the island is well-populated with coyotes, as well as red foxes.

As soon as deer were definitely established on the island, harvesting should be started. Our aim would be to maintain a healthy herd with as little as possible detriment to the present abundant winter food supply of ground hemlock, cedar, and hardwoods. Future studies would consist mainly of a detailed check of the controlled harvest, with periodic evaluation of food conditions.

Establishment of a deer herd on High Island would benefit Beaver Island economy. We anticipate that much of the hunting would be done from a Beaver Island base, perhaps with temporary camps on High Island (less than four miles from Beaver).

An alternative extensive study would be to stock ruffed grouse and keep deer off the island. Object of this would be to determine whether consistently higher grouse population could be maintained where deer browsing is not a factor. This study could be intensified as desired to determine grouse-predator relationships. Keeping deer off the island would permit it to remain as a demonstration area and living botanical museum.

Present state ownership includes most of the shoreline along the best harbor on the island, at the northeast side. This harbor gives protection against all but easterly winds, and has sufficient depth that large boats can make use of it. The beach here is comparatively wide and attractive. The state-owned land here includes most of the buildings of the old House of David settlement, some of which could be converted into camps. One fractional ten-acre strip is still claimed, however, by the House of David.

Across the island, at the northwest, state ownership includes some of the best dune and beach areas, although the presumably highest point is just off state land.

It appeared to our party that because of the scenic, historical, and recreational qualities of these two areas of state ownership, the State should retain control, regardless of game stocking and research considerations. Loss of the harbor facilities, in particular, might greatly restrict future public use of the island, and could prevent the carrying out of any of the experimental projects outlined above. In our opinion, public interest would best be served by state acquisition of the entire island, for which we can visualize no profitable private use.

One complicating factor should be mentioned. Four wild or semi-wild horses were living on the island in 1945. They have evidently survived, and this number was increased by the release of several more in the summer of 1951. This release was engineered by some Beaver Islanders, of whom Archie LaFroniere was one. I believe some outsiders helped out financially. Among the horses released was a stallion. We saw no horses, but encountered abundant signs, some quite fresh. Salt blocks had been placed in several of the old buildings of the settlement, which show evidence of use by horses. Irwin Belfy, mate of Patrol Boat #1, informed us that cattle on Hog Island browse ground hemlock. Horses on High Island might prove detrimental to this and other browse species if they increased in number. Some regulation of grazing on the state lands should be undertaken.

SUMMARY

High Island offers a variety of possibilities for public use. The Game Division recommends that the state acquire as much of the private land as can be purchased reasonably, and that under no circumstances should the state exchange any of its present lake frontage there for other lands on the island. Alternative recommendations for extensive deer and grouse experiments are outlined. The location and size of the island make it of doubtful value for an intensive study of effects of hunting on a grouse population.

D. W. Douglass

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