Swimmer’s Itch
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The Michigan Swimmer’s Itch Partnership finished its second year of funding late in 2018. The Partnership provides technical and financial assistance to lakes looking to reduce their swimmer’s itch. The process begins with a swimmer’s itch assessment, permits for the cercarie-carrying common merganser removal and finally, merganser removal and relocation.

Last year, big strides were made in swimmer’s itch control and research. One method of swimmer’s itch control, which involves removing common merganser broods to new lakes that can’t be infected with swimmer’s itch, have been proven successful and has seen reduced costs due to training local individuals in brood removal. The control also has been advanced using geo-locators on birds to more easily find their nests. In total, 35 common merganser broods were removed from Michigan lakes in 2018. Additional relocation sites were analyzed and are awaiting approval by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources at press time.

Incredible research took place during 2018. In particular, researchers were able to identify other life cycles likely responsible for the nuisance itch. Identifying specific life cycles required researchers to isolate DNA from organisms with roles in the swimmer’s itch life cycle. Two new state of the art techniques known as Quantitative Polymerase Chain Reaction (qPCR) and Loop Mediated Isothermal Amplification (LAMP) were utilized. Both techniques were used to test for the presence of specific parasites in water samples from numerous lakes in 2018. The “quantitative” in qPCR provides a relative count of the number of parasites for certain species in a water sample. The LAMP technique offers a rapid presence and absence test of parasites in as little as ten minutes using one temperature. Through both techniques, mallard ducks and Canada geese were identified to harbor swimmer’s itch related parasites. The parasites identified are different species but are closely related to parasites found in the common merganser. How common the parasites from mallards and geese are in the swimmer’s itch cycle has yet to be determined. For now, the common merganser life cycle is still the most well-understood and researched life cycle.

Visit misip.org for more information on recent and planned work.

The Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council is currently coordinating the Partnership. The Watershed Council speaks for Northern Michigan’s waters. We are dedicated to protecting our lakes, streams, wetlands, and groundwater through respected advocacy, innovative education, technically sound water quality monitoring, thorough research, and restoration actions. We achieve our mission by empowering others and we believe in the capacity to make a positive difference. We work locally, regionally and throughout the Great Lakes Basin to achieve our goals.