

# HERON TRACKS



The Official Newsletter of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy  
Volume 30 Number 2 Spring 2023



Vernal Pool Monitoring at  
Hall's Lake Natural Area



## Executive Director's Corner

[S]ome folks say to stake your claim  
And fence it in, but I see it different  
Come on out to the big backyard  
It ain't mine, it ain't yours, it's all of ours  
-Molly Tuttle, "Big Backyard"

Many nations, particularly those in northern and eastern Europe enshrine the "right to roam" in their codes of law. Depending on the country, these rights might include the right to enter private land to hike, run, cycle, or ski; to camp overnight; to swim, boat, or fish; and to gather mushrooms, berries, medicinal plants, or other forest products. These rights do not come without limitation and responsibilities including the responsibility to protect sensitive areas; to refrain from damaging trees or other vegetation; limits to traveling on cultivated lands; using motorized vehicles; making loud noises; and often on the building of fires.

With few exceptions that mostly relate to coastal areas, North Americans as a rule do not have a right to roam on private property. Property law in the United States is generally written in a way that is exclusionary, prohibiting even such actions as walking or wading in rivers. When I was young, this did not seem to be a problem. Most landowners were happy to allow their neighbors the right to roam, to fish and even to hunt on their properties because they knew that their neighbors would be respectful and would reciprocate in kind.

But too often, abuses of those privileges occur and landowners revoke access for everyone. Other properties change hand and sprout "No Trespassing" signs overnight, cutting off decades of access. More and more, often out of financial necessity, landowners grant exclusive rights through the sale of hunting or fishing leases. The overall impact is that most Americans lack access to private land for recreation. This puts an enormous strain on available public lands.

This was especially noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic as hordes of new users flocked to national, state, and local parks and forests, campgrounds, beaches, and preserves. This increased pressure on limited recreational resources has not abated over the past three years and in many locations it has even gotten worse as people realized how much they craved a connection to the natural world. While there are millions of acres of public land available for our use, much of it is located beyond easy access for most Americans. As with so many things, the supply and the demand are not in balance.

That's why it's so refreshing to see land that was privately held become available to the public for the first time. In this issue of Heron Tracks we celebrate both the restoration efforts on our Mill Pond Natural Area (acquired in 2022) and the acquisition of our brand new Starks Preserve. It's important that we as a society add to our protected natural spaces, both those that are set aside for nature and those that are available for recreation. Wildlife needs wild spaces and so do people. That wild space can be ten-thousand acres of boreal forest, 160 acres of floodplain, or even 10 acres of old fields reverting back to nature. All serve their purpose and all can provide us with the space we need to roam. I'll look for you in our Big Backyard!

Stay Well and Happy Trails!



## CWC Chair Notes

CWC posts many wonderful pictures of our activities on Facebook. A couple recent posts were especially interesting and reminded all of us of our goal of protecting land and providing opportunities for exploration for people of all ages and interests. The posts I am referring to were of small children hiking, playing, getting dirty, running free, and getting wet by splashing in puddles. They were in an environment that is becoming rare. Just open space, free access, lots of area to run and explore. CWC preserves try to provide an opportunity to experience this freedom. **Join us.**

## Vernal Pools: A Special Type of Wetland

CWC volunteer Autumn Baker started monitoring vernal pools at Hall's Lake Natural Area in 2022 as part of the Michigan Vernal Pools Partnership's Vernal Pool Patrol. To identify a body of water as a vernal pool, Autumn looks for certain characteristics.

First, is the pool isolated from any permanent water bodies? Vernal pools, also known as vernal ponds, are small seasonal bodies of water that lack continuous inflowing or outflowing streams. Many are surrounded by uplands that isolate them from any connection with other wetlands. Vernal pools are typically found in woodlands but may also occur in grasslands and other habitat types.

Second, does it dry out during the drier summer months? Vernal pools are ephemeral. They typically fill with snowmelt and spring rains but dry out completely (or nearly completely) during the drier summer months. Some vernal pools will fill in the fall and remain flooded through the winter and following spring before drying up during the summer months. Because of the seasonal nature of these wetlands, fish are unable to survive in them permanently.

Finally, does the pool host animals that are indicators species for vernal pools? Because of the lack of a permanent fish population, vernal pools are the preferred breeding habitat for a number of amphibian species such as spotted salamanders, blue-spotted salamanders, and wood frogs. Often, vernal pools are the only breeding habitat available for populations of these three species. A number of invertebrate species also depend on vernal pools for all or part of their life cycle, including the fairy shrimp, a freshwater crustacean that is only found in vernal pools.

Life in a vernal pool can be challenging for the species that are dependent on them. Vernal pools are popular foraging sites for animals that feed on tadpoles and salamander larvae including birds, mammals such as raccoons, turtles, snakes, and even aquatic beetles and other insects. Even larger salamander larvae will feed on their smaller relatives. More troubling, a dry spring or hot summer could mean that a pool does not fill up or dries out too early, potentially resulting in the loss of an entire year-class of young. Because of their ephemeral nature, vernal pools are often not identified as wetlands and are not sometimes poorly protected by current wetland laws and regulations. That's why the efforts of Autumn Baker and other volunteers to identify and catalogue vernal pools is so critical to our understanding of this unique seasonal habitat. Of the more than 5,000 potential vernal pools that have been mapped in Michigan, less 900 have been verified by volunteers. To date, Autumn has verified seven vernal pools at Hall's Lake Natural Area and one at Sylvan Solace Preserve.

To learn more about Michigan's vernal pools visit [vppartnership.iescentral.com](http://vppartnership.iescentral.com)

*Photos accompanying this article were taken during a vernal pool exploration at Hall's Lake NA on May 6th, 2023. Participants explored three verified vernal pools and identified the obligate vernal pool species wood frogs (adults and tadpoles), spotted salamander (egg masses), and fairy shrimp.*





## Announcing the new Starks Preserve

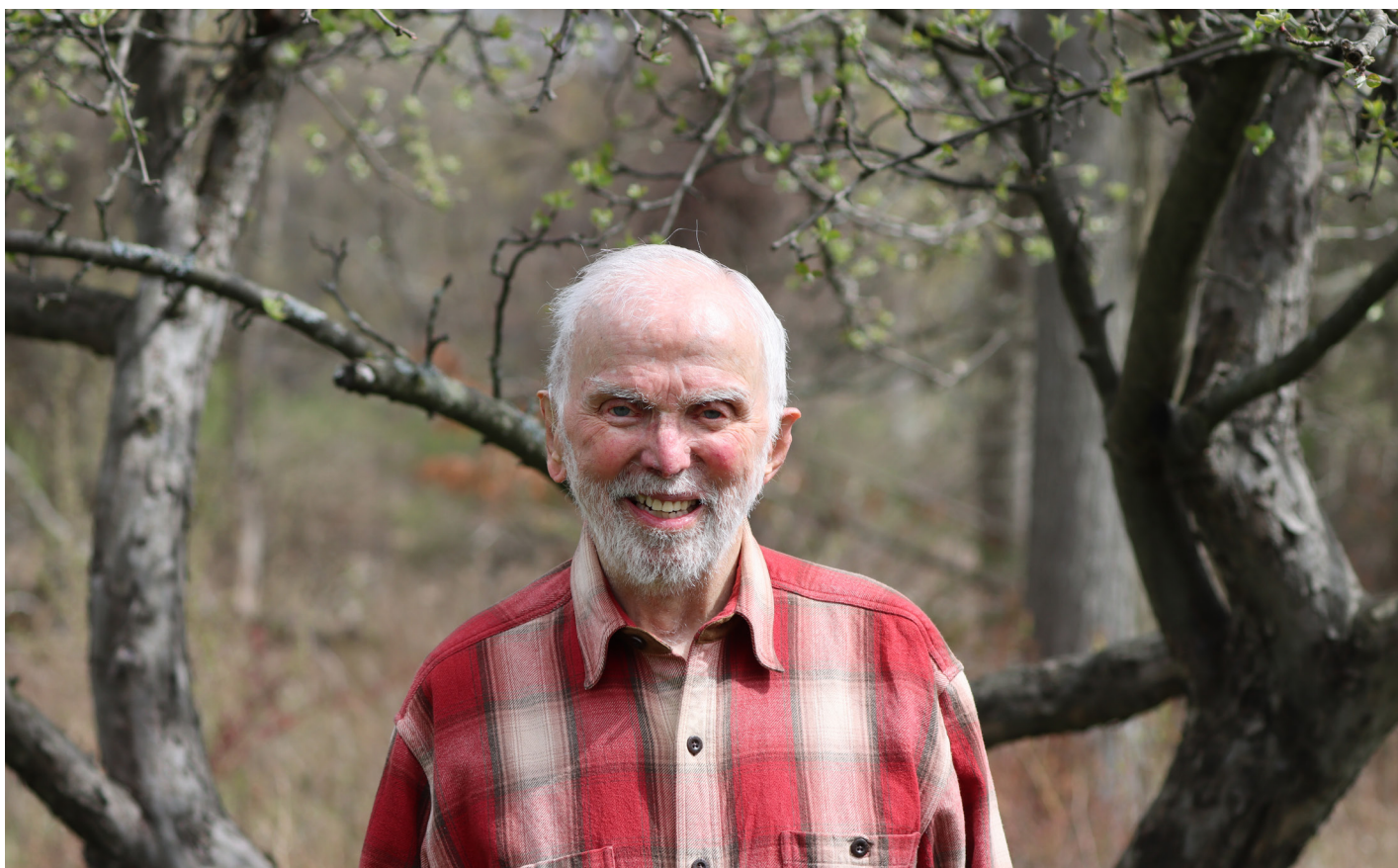
We're excited to announce the acquisition of Starks Preserve, the CWC's newest nature preserve. Donated by the Gilbert and Kay Starks Family Trust, this property is located on Bruder Drive in Isabella County's Deerfield Township. Starks Preserve is covered with a wet meadow with grasses, wildflowers and scattered groupings of trees and shrubs providing habitat for numerous species of birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and especially butterflies, bees, and other pollinator species. A group of old apple trees marks the location of an abandoned orchard and attract deer and other wildlife when in season. With several mowed trails running through the approximately eight acre parcel, it offers a small oasis of nature to local residents and visitors alike.

When we interviewed Gil Starks to ask why he is donating the property, he responded by saying "I'm old enough to remember a song out of World War Two. It said: Don't forget, turn out the light, last year's dress still looks alright, you can save while others fight: It's the little things that count... You don't have to have that water on full blast while you're brushing your teeth, or the radio, you don't have to have it if you're not in the room, and it goes on and on. So I don't know if what I'm doing in giving the land, eight acres, to [CWC] is the best thing I can do for the environment... Maybe I could do something better... I see here is this property and I guess it's my little way of helping the environment."

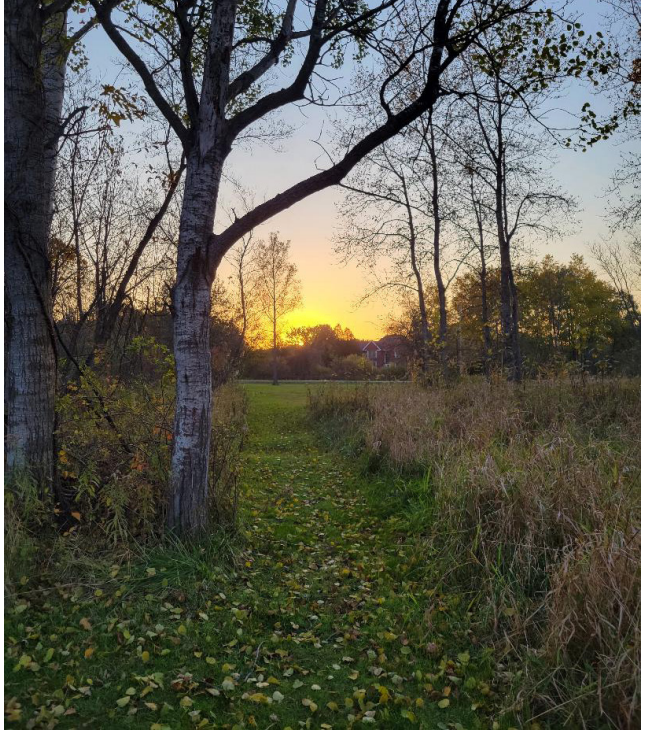
Gil went on to talk about how although the property isn't home to large charismatic wildlife, it's still important to preserve these smaller pieces of habitat "There's no eagles yet, no Kodiak bears, but it's still a habitat for hundreds, multi-thousands of organisms, and I feel good about that, even though I don't know their names."

It is indeed the little things that count. Thank you, Gil!

A public dedication and celebration of Starks Preserve is being scheduled for Friday, June 9th at 5:00PM.









## Restoration Continues at Millpond Natural Area

The CWC acquired Mill Pond Natural Area at the beginning of 2022 thanks to a grant from the Consumers Energy Foundation. In addition to the purchase, grant funds are being used to remove invasive trees and shrubs and to replace them with native plants. Approximately nine of the preserve's seventeen acres were covered with invasive common buckthorn, Japanese barberry, honeysuckle, and multiflora rose plants. Although motorists passing on High Street may not take notice, the restoration work continues right on schedule. We deliberately began our efforts in the center of the property and are working our way out to the edges over time. Over the past 18 months, volunteers and staff have used a cut stump herbicide treatment to permanently remove thousands of individual invasive trees and shrubs. Much of the debris has been piled up to create temporary wildlife habitat. Over the next several years, these brush piles will begin to decompose and return nutrients to the soil.

As invasive plants are removed, we're also improving the habitat by adding desirable native trees and shrubs to the property. This spring, volunteers planted more than 350 individual tree and shrub saplings across the property, adding to a similar number that were planted last spring. Newly added native species include swamp white oak, bitternut hickory, butternut, sycamore, red oak, basswood, buttonbush, and American hazelnut.

This restoration work would not be possible without volunteers. To learn more about upcoming volunteer opportunities at Mill Pond Natural Area and our other preserves, visit [www.cwc-mi.org/events](http://www.cwc-mi.org/events) or check out our "Events" on Facebook @ChippewaWatershedConservancy.



## 2023 Fall Fundraiser

Thursday, October 5th

Little Flower Barn

Mark your calendar for this fun filled evening including dinner and drinks, live music and great raffle packages, all in support of local conservation!

Raffle tickets are now available for our **50/50 cash drawing** AND our **Thunder Bay Resort Prize Package** (2 night stay w/ breakfast included, award-winning elk viewing ride, 5 course meal and wine tasting in a top-rated resort setting. Raffle tickets are \$10 each or 3 for \$20. Contact [alexis@cwc-mi.org](mailto:alexis@cwc-mi.org) or 989-772-5777 to purchase.

Need not be present to win. License #R69313. Drawing at Little Flower Barn on 10/05/2023.



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## Donations in Memory of:

Larry Johns

**Thank You to GMU  
Alternative Breaks Program  
Volunteers and to Isabella  
Conservation District for  
donating trees to CWC!  
These contributions  
supported recent habitat  
restoration at Millpond  
Natural Area.**

## Thank you to our 2023 Business Sponsors



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