

HERON TRACKS

The Official Newsletter of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy
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Trillium at Stearns Easement

Executive Director's Corner

Earlier this year, we received some important news. On March 14th, the Land Trust Accreditation Commission announced that our accreditation had been renewed for a five-year term. The entire review process took about 18 months to complete and included multiple rounds of data submissions. (The CWC received our initial accreditation in 2011; this is our second reaccreditation.)

Accreditation by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission means that the CWC has proven that we have sound finances, practice ethical conduct and responsible governance, and can ensure lasting stewardship of the places we protect. To achieve this milestone, we underwent a lengthy in-depth review that included our policies, financial records, property acquisitions, and stewardship of easements and nature preserves. The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is one of more than 470 accredited organizations across the country. Together, these accredited land trusts own or hold easements on 84% of all lands protected by land trusts. This amounts to more than 51 million acres across the country!

We're proud to be part of the land trust community and proud to be accredited. Achieving this status is only possible because of the hard work of our staff, board, and volunteers, and the support of our community. Thank you to everyone whose efforts made this distinction possible!



Stay Well and Happy Trails!

CWC Chair Notes

Recently, I and others from the CWC board were privileged to share a meal with a group of long-time donors, easement holders, and supporters of the CWC. During this evening, we sat at tables together and heard stories from those who have been involved in conservation in Central Michigan and elsewhere for multiple decades. I found myself at a table with one of the first families to donate a parcel to the CWC, a preserve that is still being actively managed, maintained and enjoyed by many after 15 years, just as it was from the start. During the evening, we also heard news of new preserves and easements that had been added in 2023. The mission continues.

Our time together was very enjoyable and provided an important opportunity to remember the past while looking to the future. In doing so, I was reminded that we are at a unique point in the CWC's history. Many of those who founded the CWC and were involved early on are still active and enthusiastic members, while there is also a visible influx of new faces, those eager to carry on the mission of the CWC in Central Michigan. In my opinion it is the perfect time to get involved, to hear the stories and gain the wisdom of those who have forged a path from the beginning, while joining with the next generation of conservationists in looking to the future.

If you have been considering getting more involved, now is the time! And, hopefully in another few decades, we can all sit down to a meal with the next generation and share our conservation stories.

-Keith Tollenaere, Board President

Mill Pond Restoration Updates

This spring marks the start of the third year of restoration work at Mill Pond Natural Area. Thanks to a grant from the Consumers Energy Foundation, the CWC purchased this property in 2022. In addition to the purchase price, the grant included funding for five years of restoration and development work at the preserve.

On this property, we are taking a two-pronged approach toward restoration with one focus on the removal of invasive species such as common buckthorn, Japanese barberry, honeysuckle, and privet. CWC staff and volunteers are using a cut-stump herbicide application to permanently remove thousands of individual invasive trees and shrubs. Brush from these trees and shrubs has been piled to create temporary wildlife habitat that begin to decompose over the next several years.

Our second approach to restoration involves the addition or restoration of native trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants to improve habitat on the property. In many locations, the invasive species were so thick that there was bare soil beneath them. While many native species will return on their own, we're jumpstarting the process by planting desirable species throughout the property. Each of the past three springs, we've planted native trees and shrubs throughout the property with special emphasis on areas where invasive species had been removed. This April alone, volunteers planted more than 500 individual trees or shrubs of a dozen different species. Last fall, we conducted our first planting of grasses, sedges, and herbaceous plants. Staff and volunteers broadcast seeds from twenty species across approximately one acre of newly cleared ground. As of the time of writing, these species have just begun to sprout.

In addition to habitat restoration, we're taking direct action to attract specific wildlife species to the property. A portion of the property is flooded nearly year-round and it's not uncommon to see waterfowl, including wood ducks, gathered in this wetland. Earlier this spring, we installed several nesting boxes around this wetland in the hopes that one or more pairs of wood ducks will discover them.

Much of this restoration work would not be possible without the support of volunteers. To learn about upcoming volunteer opportunities, visit www.cwc-mi.org/events or check out our "Events" on Facebook @ ChippewaWatershedConservancy.



Spring Ephemerals

The word “ephemeral” is an adjective describing how something lasts or is used for a very short time. Alternately, the word can be used as a noun meaning “something that lasts for a very short time”. The word comes from to us from the ancient Greek ephēmeros, meaning “lasting a day”. Something that is ephemeral may last longer than a day but its existence is fleeting or transitory.

Spring ephemeral wildflowers, or spring ephemerals, are woodland wildflower species that complete their entire annual cycle in the short period between when the snows melt at the end of winter and when the trees have fully leafed out. Mostly perennial, they emerge from the soil, grow quickly, taking advantage of the abundant sunshine and spring rains, are pollinated, grow fruit or seeds, and die back to their roots, all within a few short weeks. Overall, the season for spotting spring ephemerals is short, with beginnings in mid- to late-March (or earlier for skunk cabbage) and ending in late-May or early-June.

Some hardy species such as trilliums and marsh marigolds have blooms that may persist for several weeks. Other species such as bloodroot and anemones may flower for a little as a single day. The temporary nature of these plants is part of what makes them so special – miss a single day in the woods and you may have to wait a full year to see them again.

Devotees of spring ephemerals quickly learn the best places to seek favorites: perhaps a north facing slope where the flowers bloom a bit later and hold on longer than their south-facing relatives; maybe perched a mossy log a few inches above water in the middle of a swamp; or gathered in the crook of a tree, several feet above the forest floor. These minor differences in sunlight, moisture, and topography can be the difference between the presence of absence of a species.

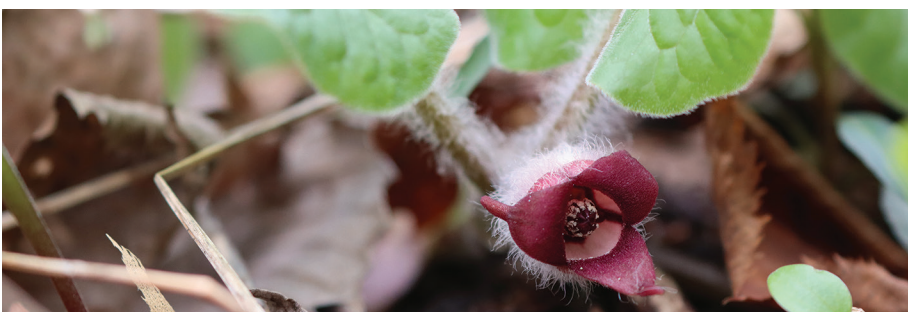
Fortunately, for us, Chippewa Watershed Conservancy preserves have thousands of these microhabitats and play host to dozens of spring ephemeral species. Good places to look include Audubon Woods, Sylvan Solace, Hall’s Lake, and Williams-Blackburn in Isabella County. In Mecosta County, Quigley Creek has some our best wildflower habitat. In Gratiot County, the portion of Stearns Preserve on the east side of the Pine River offers some great opportunities for the adventurous. Get out there and explore. And if you miss the spring ephemerals, don’t worry. They’re followed closely by as dozens of summer and fall-blooming plants. There’s always something to see if you’re willing to look.



Wood Anemone, *Anemone quinquefolia*



Mitrewort, *Mitella diphylla*



Wild Ginger, *Asarum canadense*



Sharp-lobed Hepatica, *Hepatica acutiloba*



Wild Geranium, *Geranium maculatum*



Marsh Marigold, *Caltha palustris*

CWC Salamanders

Although locally abundant, most salamanders are rarely seen. To date, we have found three different species of salamanders on CWC preserves. The Eastern Red-backed Salamander, a lungless salamander, is the most abundant in our region and is easily found by flipping decaying logs on the forest floor. You may see them exhibiting the classic coloration with the indicative red line down their back, hence their name. They can also be found sans the red line and are referred to as “lead phase.”

We recently discovered another lungless salamander species at Hall’s Lake Natural Area, the Four-toed Salamander. This species has a historic range throughout Michigan but has been increasingly rare in recent years. This is most likely due to their specialized habitat needs. Four-toed Salamanders inhabit moist deciduous, coniferous, or mixed woodlands within the vicinity of spring-fed creeks, sphagnum seepages, bogs, or boggy ponds.

There is a healthy population of Spotted Salamanders at Hall’s Lake Natural Area. Every vernal pool, and even some permanent wetlands are being utilized as breeding grounds for this salamander species. Commonly referred to as “mole” salamanders, they spend most of their time burrowed underground, only coming to the surface every spring for breeding season. This species shows high site fidelity, meaning they return to the same pool year after year, often from which they hatched. In March, we took a small group out to witness this migration and plan to make this an annual event.



Eastern Red-backed Salamander, *Plethodon cinereus*



Spotted Salamander, *Ambystoma maculatum*



Four-toed Salamander, *Hemidactylum scutatum*

CWC Summer Membership Appeal

Keep an eye out for our annual membership appeal hitting your mailbox in early June. We are very excited to highlight some wonderful testimonials from YOU! It was a blast putting this appeal together and reading everyone’s stories of how the CWC has impacted them. It is because of our amazing members and supporters we are able to accomplish all that we do!



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