

HERON TRACKS

CWC | CHIPPEWA
WATERSHED
CONSERVANCY



The Official Newsletter of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy
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Floodplain at Stearns Preserve

Executive Director's Corner

I recently read *The Common Uncommon: A Forest Journey*, the latest book by Bernd Heinrich. Heinrich is a Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of Vermont and is widely considered one of the greatest naturalist writers of the last half century. Most of his writing is centered on a property that he owns in the north woods of Maine. He combines keen powers of observation and a never-ending curiosity with the ability to share scientific concepts with the average reader. Heinrich is deeply embedded in a single place and his observations and writings often follow the seasons.

Following seasonal changes is something that we all do. This seems to be especially true of the changes that come about as winter creeps into spring and then seemingly sprints into summer. The study of these recurring seasonal changes is known as phenology, especially the focus on "firsts" of the year. I personally mark the end of winter and the arrival of spring with two specific events: the arrival of the first red-winged blackbirds and when the first blooms of skunk cabbage – my favorite wildflower – appear in the swamps. I also eagerly await the first calling frogs and the first sandhill cranes.

As the season progresses, I mark the appearance of the first turtles and snakes; the first butterflies; the first bees (especially bumblebees); and a whole progression of wildflowers including hepatica, violets, spring beauties, marsh marigolds, trillium, and dozens more. I am very disappointed when I miss the blooming of bloodroot, as I did this year. Warm temperatures caused the bloodroot to emerge early, bloom swiftly, and drop their flowers just as fast. But that is the nature of our spring ephemerals and I know that there will be more next year. Following and noting these seasonal comings-and-goings enriches my outdoor experience and better connects me with the natural world.

What seasonal changes do you observe and celebrate?

Stay Well and Happy Trails!



CWC Chair Notes

Life has a way of speeding us up, our to-do lists always growing, one completed task only leads to two more, the pace ever increasing as technology makes us more efficient, more connected; changes our expectations. We hear the voices of reason saying "the answer is subtraction, not addition", but keep on pushing forward, not knowing how to slow down. In a climate like this, it is hard to think about giving more of our time. And yet, there are many now who have done just that - given of their time, their energy, to support the CWC in furthering the goal of protecting our beautiful, natural areas. How/why do they do it? I would suggest that perhaps there is a both/and, an odd math, a type of 'addition' that feels like a 'subtraction' in this type of work. It's a call to *do* that brings peace, quietness, and the satisfaction of just enough physical labor, a connection with the ground, the forest, nature. Volunteering to plant trees, create a walking trail, pull invasive plants - it's good for the soul. The right balance of community with like-minded others, breathing in the tranquility of the forest, wielding a simple tool - a shovel or a rake, perhaps even breaking a sweat - just enough to let your body know the contribution you are making. Thank you to all of our volunteers, for helping make our properties the places we want to be.

Habitat Highlight: Floodplain Forest

To venture into a floodplain forest feels much like stepping back in time to an era of complete wilderness. Your feet sink into a saturated ground. A canopy of green dapples the sunlight hitting an amalgamation of ferns and wildflowers among the squishy forest bottom. Logs are covered in tiny worlds of intricate moss with seedlings patiently waiting for their turn in the light. These dynamic, river-influenced ecosystems play a vital role in Michigan's natural landscape and are a conservation priority for the CWC.

Natural Communities

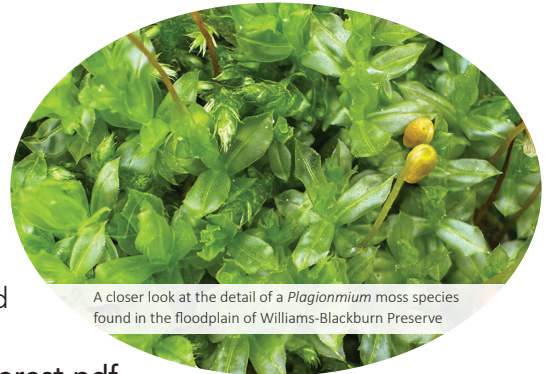
To better understand the diversity of Michigan's ecology, scientists group describable components of a landscape into what are called "natural communities." These are defined as assemblages of interactive plants, animals, and other organisms that repeatedly occur under similar environmental conditions structured primarily by natural means rather than anthropogenic disturbances. Most of Michigan's natural communities fall within the Terrestrial (upland) or Palustrine (wetland) Class. Floodplain forests are a specific part of the latter. These bottomland habitats are found adjacent to third order, or greater,



river systems. "Third order" refers to the lower reaches of rivers where they become larger. In our region, floodplain forests are often dominated by species such as Silver Maple, Sycamore, White-cedar, Hemlock, and historically Green Ash and American Elm. In Michigan these natural communities most commonly occur in the broad, flat lake and outwash plains left behind in the wake of glaciers. The plants within the floodplain vary greatly with natural processes influencing what grows and where. Seasonal flooding, soil processes, and disturbance regimes all shape this composition.

Fluvial Landforms

The regular processes of erosion and deposition within floodplain create what are known as "fluvial" landforms. For example, when a river floods its banks, much of the heavy coarse sediment is deposited on the bank near the river, building a natural levee. Beyond the levee is an area known as the first bottom, a low poorly drained area, where fine sediment settles out of the floodwaters. Within a floodplain these changes in topography and soil often support very different groups of plants.



A closer look at the detail of a *Plagionium* moss species found in the floodplain of Williams-Blackburn Preserve

To read more: mnfi.anr.msu.edu/abstracts/ecology/Floodplain_Forest.pdf

Supporting a resilient landscape

Wetlands are transitional areas, where aquatic and terrestrial habitats converge. These systems are a prime example of habitats providing ecological benefits to human infrastructure. The hydric soils act as sponges while the plants are adapted to repeated flooding events, enabling these forested wetlands to help protect cities and homes during catastrophic rain events.



A population of State-Threatened Forked Aster (*Eurybia furcata*) protected at a CWC Nature Preserve in Isabella County

Featured Volunteer: Dave DeGraaf

While the majority of the annual monitoring of our preserves and conservation easements is completed by CWC staff, we can also count on the support of a small group of dedicated volunteer monitors to assist with this task. Dave DeGraaf is the long-time monitor of the Stearns and Lake Steven Preserves as well as the Owen and Litwiller Conservation Easements. We recently asked Dave to explain what the CWC means to him. This is what he had to say:



Having hiked most of the CWC preserves over the years, I have watched the organization grow and prosper under a variety of skilled leaders, including the present ones. To me, each preserve provides a safe refuge where humans and wildlife can interact.

As a long-time volunteer for CWC, I've had the responsibility and privilege to annually monitor some of these preserves as well as some conservation easements. Fortunately, I've found the owners and neighbors to be friendly and supportive of CWC's involvement. In addition to walking the properties and submitting standardized reports, I've incorporated some of these monitoring experiences into my weekly nature blog.

While we can always count on Dave to provide full and accurate reports, it is the inclusion of the narrative from his blog that sets his monitoring reports apart from others. Our favorite part of every narrative is the inclusion of a poem written by Dave. With his permission, we've decided to share a few of his poems here.

For more of Dave's poetry and other writing visit <https://naturewanderings.blogspot.com>. Dave suggested the July 14, 2025, entry for those that wish to read about one of his most recent easement monitoring experiences.

*Lake Steven Preserve
August 19, 2024*

Midst of August
Living things abound
Fledglings from trees
Blossoms from ground
Nature fills the senses
Smell of decay
Taste of ripe fruit
Sound of a noisy jay
Warm season grasses
Grow dense and tall
Some crimson leaves
Harbingers of fall



Owen Easement July 24, 2023



Nature in rhythm
July moves ahead
Summer sky of blue
Raspberries of red
Creatures are born
Consume and grow
Vultures fly high
Snakes lie low
Wetlands are full
Up to the brim
Beneath the surface
Mud minnows swim



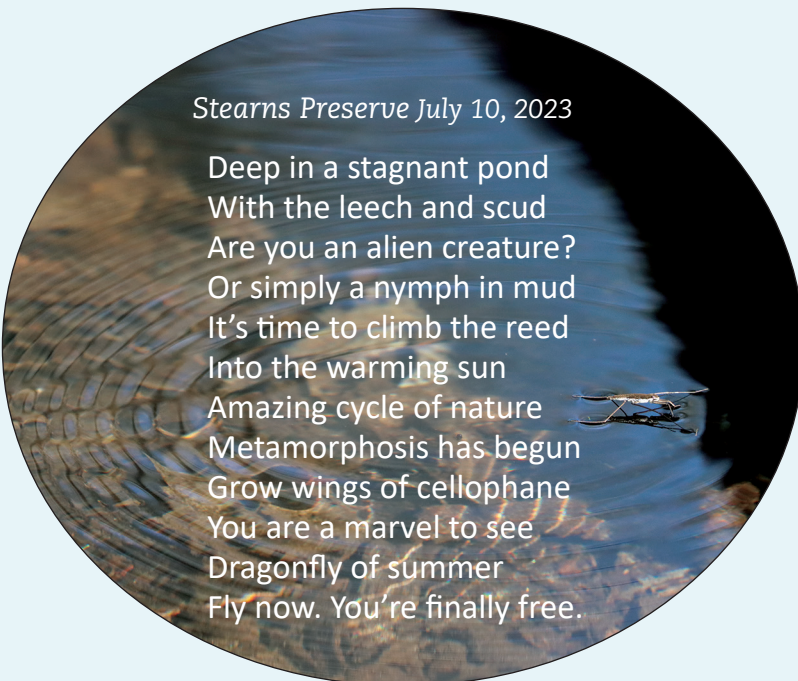
Summer commences
Out in the wild
Wetlands awake for
A wide-eyed child
Duck weedy shore
A Leopard frog
A Basking turtle
Lies on a log
Above the bank
A Dragonfly
Swooping swallows
Fill the sky

Lake Steven Preserve June 2025



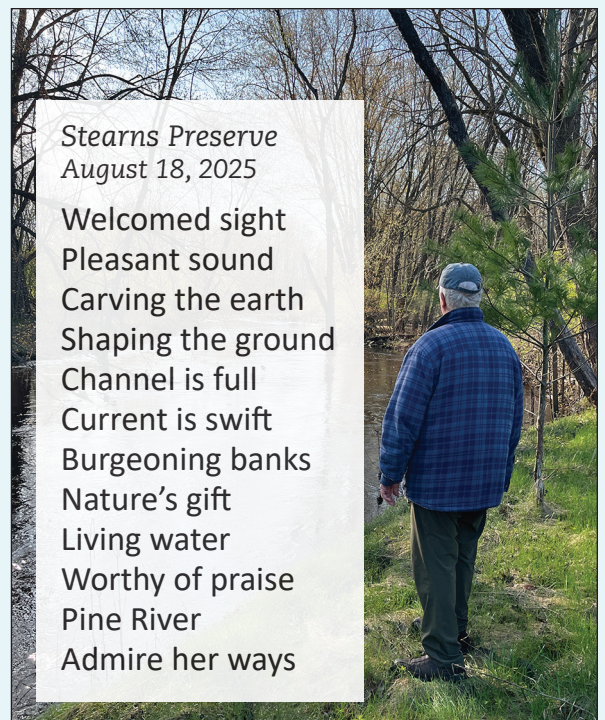
Litwiller Easement July 31, 2023

Serenade in the canopy
Red-eyed Vireo sings
From crowded nests
Fledglings test their wings
Salamanders hide under
Logs on the muddy floor
Trail in nature's realm
Longing to explore
Favorite forest sanctuary
Shrouded by morning fog
Meandering among maples
A man and his dog



Stearns Preserve July 10, 2023

Deep in a stagnant pond
With the leech and scud
Are you an alien creature?
Or simply a nymph in mud
It's time to climb the reed
Into the warming sun
Amazing cycle of nature
Metamorphosis has begun
Grow wings of cellophane
You are a marvel to see
Dragonfly of summer
Fly now. You're finally free.



Stearns Preserve
August 18, 2025

Welcomed sight
Pleasant sound
Carving the earth
Shaping the ground
Channel is full
Current is swift
Burgeoning banks
Nature's gift
Living water
Worthy of praise
Pine River
Admire her ways

Adopt a Wood Turtle

Speaking of rare species that rely on floodplain forest habitats... It's time for our annual Adopt A Wood Turtle program! This State-Threatened species is primarily found in river systems and our service area happens to be in the southern edge of this turtle's distribution in Michigan. The CWC is proud to protect riparian habitat in much of our preserves, and it's always a delight to encounter a Wood Turtle at one of our properties. By symbolically adopting a turtle, your donation will help fund these activities:

- Protecting and maintaining Wood Turtle habitats on CWC Nature Preserves
- Monitoring and safeguarding CWC Nature Preserves containing riparian areas, floodplain forests, and suitable nesting habitat
- Support stewardship efforts to manage invasive species that degrade these habitats

Find out more here: <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/adoptawoodturtle>



Inspiring Youth with Salamanders

As the second year of our Adopt a Salamander program closes, we are thrilled with the continued enthusiastic response! It is a joy to introduce people to such a charismatic creature living in their local forests. We're also excited to see this program engaging the next generation of nature-lovers.

Recently, longtime CWC supporters Leonora Forist & Karen Green symbolically adopted a salamander in their great-nephew Wesley Green's honor. Not only does Wesley hold the claim to fame of independently discovering a salamander in the process of regenerating a tail during a 2024 CWC herp hike, but he also routinely finds snakes and salamanders in his family's woods. The CWC is dedicated to fostering curiosity and love of nature through a variety of initiatives, like our adoption campaigns and environmental education programs on our preserves. Today's youth will be tomorrow's voice for our most beloved wild spaces, and the future looks bright!

Give Local Isabella

We are humbled and grateful for the generosity and support from the community during Give Local Isabella on May 5th. Everyone rallied behind their favorite non-profit organization for this day of giving and raised nearly \$4000 for the endowment funds of the Conservancy!

Also, thanks to you, we secured two contest prizes for a total amount of \$1000 dollars! The CWC was the recipient of the Early Bird Award and the Most Creative Award (for social media). And to top it off, all of your donations will be matched dollar for dollar. Between donations from the community, contest prizes, and awarded matching funds, the CWC is adding more than \$8,500 to our endowment fund which helps sustain our organization for the long term.

A huge thanks to the Mt. Pleasant Area Community Foundation for hosting this fun and engaging event. Each year we see excitement grow and more organizations participating because of the amazing job they do facilitating this day of fundraising.

The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is lucky to exist in and serve such a passionate community who continues to give locally. Thank you for contributing to the future success of our organization and protecting our region's wild spaces for future generations!

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