HERON **TRACKS**

The Official Newsletter of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy
Volume 33 Number 3 Summer 2026

CWC CHIPPEWA WATERSHED CONSERVANCY



Tall Bellflower at Mill Pond Natural Area

Executive Director's Corner



Do you remember when…?

Memory can be a powerful thing. It can easily lead us to despair. It can also give us hope.

I remember gravel roads that used to run through nothing but farmland. Now those same roads are paved and lined with homes on one to two acre lots owned by people who commute into cities for work. I remember places where woodlots once stood. They've been cleared to make room for homes, for businesses, for farming, and sometimes for no obvious reason.

Those gravel roads, farm fields, and woodlots of my youth are gone and they are not coming back. But for the youth of today, what looks like a degraded landscape appears normal. My grandparents would have looked at the same landscape of my youth, and remembered how much had changed since they were themselves young.

A number of years ago, I wrote in this column about the concept of *Shifting Baseline Syndrome*. Shifting Baseline Syndrome (SBS) is defined as a gradual change in what is considered the normal condition of the natural environment. SBS is most often used in the context of describing a biome diminished by human-caused degradation, but the reality is more complex. It is important to remember that we have the ability, through our actions, to shift the baseline in either direction.

Wildlife conservation shows us what can be done if we have the will. Do you remember when seeing a bald eagle was a rare event? I certainly do! Now, with little effort, I could see one or more every single day. Do you remember when wild turkey releases in southern Michigan were newsworthy events, attended by hundreds of members of the public? Today, turkey populations have recovered to the point where in some areas they are almost a nuisance.

The existence of organizations like the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is itself an example of the shifting of baselines. Yes, land across central Michigan continues to be lost to development, but more than 5,500 acres of land has been permanently protected by the CWC since 1995! There are adults today whose childhood included spaces like Sylvan Solace or Audubon Woods or Hall's Lake Natural Area because people chose protection and restoration over progress. There are children today who will only ever remember Bundy Hill or Starks Preserve or Peterson Natural Area as protected natural spaces because people like you have committed to shifting the baseline in a positive direction.

We should remember what has been lost.

We should also remember the successes.

CWC Chair Notes

Recently, I went on a run down Old State Road, heading east from Costabella and Deerfield. If you have not been on that stretch of road, it is a bit magical, cutting diagonally through the countryside, not following the rules of our perfectly laid out quadrants. As you turn onto the road, there is a small sign noting that this oddity is "part of the original State road authorized by the Michigan Legislature February 12, 1859, from Ionia to the Straits of Mackinaw via Houghton Lake." Running along, there was time to think about what that road may have looked like long ago, and what types of vehicles had traversed it. This was certainly facilitated by the signage placed every 1/4-mile or so along the road denoting unique features along the roadway, or former features that once stood. These signs were placed along the road in 2009 by the Broomfield Township History Group:
https://www.themorningsun.com/2009/09/14/forest-pathway-brought-settlers-prosperity.

Although a beautiful run through the country, it was clear that the landscape has changed over the years, there are likely a few more houses present, and a few more clearings where forests once stood. However, just as I was trying to picture what the landscape once was, the forest began to fill in, and the welcome shade covered the road. I had run upon the CWC's Hall's Lake Preserve, a true treasure of Isabella County. Though I did not take to the trails that day, I was reminded once again of the many ways our preserves (and easements) bring value to our community. Even the small bench at the Hall's Lake parking lot was a welcome sight for this weary runner.

Introducing Cotton Family Preserve

Donated to the CWC in July 2026, the Cotton Family Preserve is located in Deerfield Township, Isabella County. The preserve was donated by the family of Peter and Sue Ann Cotton, becoming the 29th Conservancy-owned property. Sue Ann was the daughter of Winifred Sponseller, the previous owner and namesake of our nearby Winifred Sponseller Preserve.



This 3.5 acre preserve is located along the north side of Wing Road, approximately one-third mile east of Vandecar Road. Access to the property and roadside parking are available along Wing Road.

The south half of the property consists of a closed canopy forest of mostly sugar maple, with scattered cherry, birch, pine, and other species. Much of the north half of property consists of a wetlands, including a half-acre pond in the northwest quarter of the property. The pond provides breeding habitat for frogs and toads as well as a variety of invertebrate species. The property also serves as habitat for a variety of reptiles, mammals, and resident and migratory birds. This preserve will be managed as wildlife habitat with no plans to develop the property for recreation.

The property has a connection to the early days of the CWC. According to the Cotton family, Bob Ball, one of the three founding members of the organization, used to keep some of his bee hives on the property.









Remembering Don & Nancy Nagler

30 years ago, Don and Nancy Nagler donated 78 acres along the Chippewa River to the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy. We were a young organization and their gift gave us standing in the community. It said that we were o.k. – that people could trust us with land that was important to their family. Their gift triggered new memberships and relationships with other landowners. In short, it was a defining moment for the CWC. It literally put us on the map.

We know that land today as Sylvan Solace, a name derived from land that Don's father owned. Sylvan Solace is a special place; where you can watch a bird, walk along the river, and watch the sky. 30 years on, Sylvan Solace remains one of our most visited preserves and, along with Bundy Hill, one of the places people most think of when they think of the CWC.

Don served 12 years on our Board of Directors. His wisdom and integrity were instrumental in helping form this organization. We are honored to include Don Nagler in our inaugural group of Emeriti Board of Directors members to be announced later this fall.

Sylvan Solace will be forever protected because of the generosity of Don and Nancy. Its woods will grow old listening to the gurgling waters of the Chippewa River and the happy voices of the creatures that call it home. Please think of Don and Nancy when next you walk its leafy trails. - John Mitchell, CWC Founder



Thanks to the Naglers' generosity, Sylvan Solace Preserve is one of our most-visited property and the site where we host many community events, such as...



Mother's Day Wildflower Hike



Alma College First Year Student Program

Intern Insights: Shane Stedman

This May, I joined the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy as a stewardship intern, where I assisted in protecting and restoring Central Michigan's land, water, and wildlife resources. Throughout the summer, I have been able to assist in this goal through a variety of unique experiences across the numerous properties and easements managed by the CWC throughout Central Michigan.

Chances are, if you've used the trails at the Sylvan Solace or Bundy Hill Preserves this summer, you've seen heaps of scattered dead shrubs off the trail, or maybe even me trudging through the forest with branch cutters and spray bottles. One of the primary responsibilities I had as an intern was invasive species removal, where I primarily focused on the removal of Autumn Olive and Honeysuckle bush along with the prevention of their regrowth to allow for natural species to flourish. However I was not limited to just these species or plants. I also spent time removing species such as invasive Garlic Mustard, Dames Rocket, and Japanese Barberry at various properties throughout Central Michigan, highlighting the vast scale of invasive species issue that plagues both this area and the globe alike. Removing this invasive flora proved to be incredibly rewarding work, as getting to see the visible and immediate results of my work is better payment than any paycheck can offer.

My role at the CWC was not limited to just invasive removal. I was able to visit dozens of properties and easements to conduct monitoring reports and identify hundreds of unique plant species to ensure these areas are properly managed and preserved. I also assisted in the maintenance of properties in various ways: from picking up trash and clearing branches from the trails of Audubon Woods, to repairing a bridge at Halls Lake Natural Area, to helping build a native garden at Sylvan Solace, and more.

Perhaps my favorite experience at the CWC was participating in research projects with Autumn that span beyond the scope of just Central Michigan. I was given the opportunity to assist in the collection of data for projects such as the SPARCnet Salamander Surveys, where we collected data on salamanders along with the conditions of their environment in a set area. Another project I was able to participate in was the Michigan Vernal Pool Partnership, where I helped record the pools measurements, species within the pools, and their surrounding habitat. The data and observations found in these projects will be used to help improve our scientific understanding of the biological and ecological health of our ever-changing landscape in order to ensure proper conservation and management in the future.

My time interning at the CWC has been an amazing experience. Reaching out to Mike to apply for this position has proved to be a tremendous decision. While it is sad to see it coming to an end; I am excited to apply the abundance of skills, knowledge, and experience Mike and Autumn helped me gain this summer throughout my future education and career alike. The work done by conservancies such as the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is vital to ensure our land, water, and wildlife resources are protected; and I am grateful to have been a part of it this summer.





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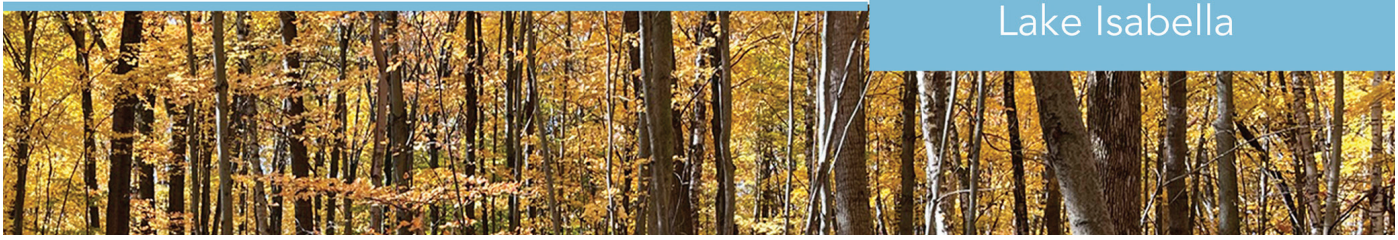
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Carls Foundation Grant

The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is pleased to announce the recent receipt of a $47,000 grant from the Carls Foundation. This grant will be used to support our ongoing efforts in three key areas: 1) cataloging species on our preserves with a special focus on identifying threatened and endangered species, 2) updating preserve management plans, and 3) implementing management activities including continued surveys, invasive species control/removal, and planting of site-appropriate native species. Among other expenses, money from this grant will be used to hire a second stewardship intern for each of the next two summers.





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