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The Cherokee Marsh News

June / July 2019



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NEW EVENTS this summer include a **moth walk**, a **butterfly walk at Yahara Heights** and an opportunity to **help monitor plants in the conservation park**. See **Upcoming Events** below.



Shoreline preservation project challenged by high water and lack of maintenance

Jan Axelson

If you've recently walked along the riverside boardwalks at Cherokee Marsh's North Unit, you may have noticed something different.



A large stand of cattails and other wetland plants that used to border the south (downstream) boardwalk is missing. During last summer's high water levels, this piece of wetland broke off from the shoreline and floated off. The view from the boardwalk is improved, but at what cost?

High water, winds, and waves cause shoreline erosion

Since the construction of the Tenney Park dam in the 1800s, hundreds of acres of shoreline wetlands at Cherokee Marsh have been lost.

The dam, which raises the water level of Lake Mendota by about 5 feet, also extends its reach into Cherokee Marsh, widening and deepening the upper Yahara River for over 2 miles upstream from the HWY 113 bridge.



Before the dam, the sedges, cattails, and other plants of the shoreline were rooted in soil. After the dam was constructed and the water rose, the shoreline floated up with the river level, pulling the roots from the river bottom and leaving the near shoreline only loosely attached to adjacent vegetation, as if on a hinge.

Wind and wave action can stress this fragile connection to its breaking point, causing pieces of shoreline to break off and float away. Pieces may lodge against a different shoreline for a while, but in time the plants and soil detach and float downstream, lost to our watershed forever.

In recent years, big storm events have resulted in record high water, further stressing the connection to the shoreline and leading to increased wetland loss.

A project was proposed

Over the years, various approaches have been attempted to stem the loss of these wetlands. One project, begun in 2011 and expanded with much fanfare in 2012, is the “floating bog interceptor” (FBI) structures along the shore of Cherokee Lake, just north of Burning Wood Way in the Cherokee Park neighborhood.

Eight years on, the project has demonstrated once more the challenges of preserving these wetlands.



UW-Madison Civil and Environmental Engineering professor Chin Wu and his students proposed a barrier that could protect the shoreline from the wave action and maybe even allow the shoreline to grow out and create new wetlands.

Madison Parks Conservation Resource Supervisor Russ Hefty suggested the location on Cherokee Lake because that shoreline is subject to harsh wave action from the long fetch of water facing the prevailing winds.

The students designed a series of wooden rafts to be installed near the shoreline. Each raft was anchored to the bottom and held beds for growing wetland plants. The hope was that the rafts would protect the shoreline and the plants would eventually root in the river bed and provide further protection. Dane County provided funding for the project.

The rafts were installed, and lessons were learned.

What went wrong

The underwater anchors didn't hold the rafts in place so the students surrounded each raft with a stockade of poles pounded into the river bottom.



Few of the plantings in the rafts survived from year to year. Invasive plants such as reed canary grass took hold in some of the beds.

The project saw some success as native plants such as coontail and American lotus took hold between the structures and the shoreline. There was evidence that sediments were collecting along the shoreline behind the structures. Students visited the structures weekly to perform maintenance and refine the design.

In recent years, however, the project has had no attention from the university. Some of the planting beds became waterlogged and began to sink. A promised informational sign explaining the project was designed but never installed.

Then came the summer of 2018. High water levels overtopped the poles and allowed most of the planting beds to float away. Some of the poles also worked their way loose and floated off, while others are tipping and on their way to floating free.

Dane County staff visited the site to retrieve the no-longer-active webcam that was threatening to fall into the water.



In the planning stages and early years of the project, the Friends of Cherokee Marsh directors had many discussions about the project with Professor Wu and among ourselves. Despite reservations, we gave our support in part because we were glad to see new interest in shoreline restoration, and we thought perhaps the project would yield some new knowledge.

Our main concern was exactly what happened, that the soft river bottom coupled with wind, freezing, thawing, and varying water levels would take a toll on the structures and that the project would be abandoned and the structures would fall apart. We are thankful that the project used natural, biodegradable materials rather than wire or other metal.

If we continue to have large storm events, which looks likely, in time little evidence of this project may remain. It will become another in the list of failed attempts to preserve these wetlands that are so important for water quality, wildlife, and human enjoyment.

How to reduce shoreline erosion?

Managing the Tenney dam to maintain Lake Mendota at a lower level would likely help reduce the wetland losses. Following last year's storms, the County Board mandated attempting to manage Lake Mendota at its target minimum, 3 inches below the previous policy of managing at the target midpoint.

But the likelihood of continued large storm events and the lack of political will for larger changes in lake management policy mean we are likely to see

continued high water and losses of these shoreline wetlands.



On a more hopeful note, a project that has seen success was the introduction of American lotus initiated by Russ Hefty.

The lotus forms huge beds in the river, and these masses of rooted plants reduce wave action and have allowed the growth of submergent (underwater) plants such as coontail and elodea. All of these plants provide wildlife habitat and help stabilize the river bottom.



And gulls, terns, tree swallows, and other birds have been enjoying using the remaining poles as perches.



Northside's Great Wisconsin Birdathon team finds 122 species

Paul Noeldner and Jan Axelson

Each year, the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin sponsors the Great Wisconsin Birdathon, which unites thousands of birders, conservationists, and people across Wisconsin who cherish our state's wildlife and natural wonders. In spring, individuals and organizations create teams to find as many bird species as possible in a single day while raising funds to support priority bird conservation projects.

Our team, the Wisconsin.Peddling Paddling Prius Pewees-Madison FUN, does "green birding," staying as local as possible. We concentrate our efforts in Cherokee Marsh with side excursions to nearby destinations such as Lake View Hill Park, Governor's Island, Governor Nelson State Park, and the HWY V ponds.



In a marathon 16 hours of birding on May 11, our team ended up with a grand total of 122 bird species and over 1000 individual birds.

Some of the day's highlights included:

- A yellow-throated vireo that greeted us at dawn at the North Cherokee parking lot, and more seen all day
- An osprey perched at Hickory Island in North Cherokee
- Marcus Brown's photo confirming a pileated woodpecker near the parking lot at North Cherokee
- Barb Noeldner for finding purple martins and her cue to scope for rock pigeons on a silo almost 2 miles away from the North Cherokee pier
- Jan Axelson's northern flicker nesting in a snag at South Cherokee
- Tim Baker's hummingbird of the day at South Cherokee and sanderling at Governor Nelson State Park
- Kathy Kirshaw's magic finding common gallinules among the American coots in the HWY V ponds
- Kathy's hubby's sighting of 3 orchard orioles, the only ones seen all day
- Brian Schneider somehow spotting an almost invisible flock of double-crested cormorants high overhead
- Anke Keuser, Mike Rewey, Jeanne Mawbey, Tim Nelson and Janet Battista helping bird from home and adding cape may warbler, cooper's hawk and dark-eyed juncos

[Great Wisconsin Birdathon webpage](#)



Volunteers needed for Canada Goose management program

Madison Parks is seeking volunteers to assist with weekly counts of numbers of geese at specific parks, beaches, and golf courses in the City. Volunteers are also needed to help discourage geese from using certain locations, in order to reduce the number of geese using any one place regularly.

“Hazing” would occur for 15-30 minutes daily, as needed, until a given flock moves to another site. The goal is to have less goose waste accumulate in critical areas such as beaches, basketball courts, athletic fields, bike paths, and some lawns. This will result in less goose waste, which means better water quality and a better experience for park users.

This work would occur from June through Labor Day, at various sites including **Cherokee Park** (Burning Wood Way), Tenney Park and Beach, Vilas Park and Beach, Warner Park and Beach, as well as Odana Hills Golf Course and Yahara Hills Golf Course.

Volunteers would need to track their hours, and numbers of geese observed or hazed. Please contact Paul Quinlan, Conservation Resource Supervisor, at **pquinlan@cityofmadison.com** for more information and to register as a

volunteer.



Upcoming events

[See full calendar](#)

Bird and nature outings

Sun, June 2, 1:30 pm – 3 pm, "Full speed ahead" with naturalist guide Tom Murn

AND

Sun, July 7, 1:30 pm – 3 pm, look for frogs and other aquatic life with School Naturalist Guide Nelson Eisman

AND

first Sunday of EVERY month, year-round, ALWAYS 1:30 pm – 3 pm

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park, North Unit, 6098 N. Sherman Ave.

Follow N. Sherman Ave. north to the parking lot at the end of the gravel road.

([map](#))

Family-friendly bird and nature walks led by naturalist guides and other local experts.

Sponsored by Madison Parks and the Friends of Cherokee Marsh. Questions? Contact Paul Noeldner at (608)-698-0104 or paul_noeldner@hotmail.com

[Madison Parks Bird and Nature Outings page](#)

Members walk

Tues, June 11, 1 pm – 2:30 pm

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park, South Unit, 802 Wheeler Rd (corner of School Rd)

Tour the South Unit with Conservation Resources Supervisor Paul Quinlan, learn about recent management activities & get your questions answered.

Butterflies of Cherokee Marsh

Sat, June 22, 10 am – 12 noon

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park, North Unit, 6098 N. Sherman Ave. Follow N. Sherman Ave. north to the parking lot at the end of the gravel road. ([map](#))

Seek out and learn about butterflies, dragonflies, and other flying insects. Bring binoculars if you have them; we will have a few extras available. Long pants and a hat are recommended. This trip is sponsored by Madison Audubon, the Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association, and Friends of Cherokee Marsh. Led by Karl and Dorothy Legler, Peter Fissel, and Jan Axelson.

[Madison Audubon field trip information](#)

Invasive species citizen science workshop

Sat, June 22, 9 am – 2 pm

American Family Insurance Training Center

Celebrate Invasive Species Action Month by getting hands-on practice with identifying and mapping invasive plants. Sponsored by the Wisconsin First Detector Network (WIFDN) and the Invasive Plants Association of Wisconsin (IPAW). **Registration is required.** If you have questions, contact Anne (anne.pearce@wisc.edu, 608-262-9570).

[Get more information and register](#)

Vegetation Monitoring Training

Tues, June 25, 9 am – 12 noon

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park, South Unit, meet on Wheeler Rd between Delaware and Ilene Blvd.

Madison Parks is seeking volunteers to assist with an effort to monitor plant communities in the conservation parks. Participants will learn and practice our sampling protocol to collect data on plant species richness and cover. While in-depth knowledge of several species is not required, basic plant identification skills are necessary. **This training session is limited to 12 participants.** Contact Paul Quinlan at pquinlan@cityofmadison.com to register.

New! Moth walk

Sat, July 20, 8 pm – 9:30 pm

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park, North Unit, 6098 N. Sherman Ave. Follow N. Sherman Ave. north to the parking lot at the end of the gravel road. ([map](#))

Celebrate National Moth Week and join naturalist Jeff Steele on this new night walk to see and learn about moths and other night-flying insects. We'll walk to different viewing spots to view insects under ultraviolet light. Be prepared for mosquitoes. A flashlight may be helpful for walking. Sponsored by the Friends of Cherokee Marsh and Madison Parks. Rain date July 26.

New! Butterflies of Yahara Heights

Sat, July 27, 10 am – 12 noon

New! Look for butterflies at Yahara Heights County Park. With Ginny Nelson and Pam Skaar.

Yahara Heights County Park, Catfish Ct entrance. Heading north from central Madison on HWY 113/Northport Dr., 1/3 mile past HWY M, turn right on River Rd., then immediate right onto Catfish Ct. Just after the farm fields on the left, you will see a trailhead sign and gravel parking area, which is where we will meet.

The address for navigating is Catfish Ct, Waunakee, WI 53597.

Sponsored by the [Southern Wisconsin Butterfly Association](#)

Board meetings

Wed, June 19, 5:30 pm – 7 pm

Wed, July 17, 5:30 pm – 7 pm

Warner Park Community Recreation Center, 1625 Northport Dr ([map](#))

Members and the public are welcome at our monthly board meetings. Occasionally we reschedule, so contact us to confirm: (608) 215-0426, janaxelson@gmail.com

Receive notices about upcoming events and volunteer opportunities

Our newsletter comes out six times / year. You can also sign up to receive timely notices and reminders, including announcements for last-minute events and volunteer opportunities that don't make it into the newsletter.

[Sign up](#) to receive notices about upcoming events and volunteer opportunities.

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