

The Cherokee Marsh News

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Volunteers celebrate achieving 6-year goal

Jan Axelson

On Sept 29, we celebrated the completion of six years of volunteer efforts to remove invasive phragmites (giant reed grass) from an area of high quality vegetation in the Cherokee Marsh State Natural Area (SNA). We will need to return periodically to remove resprouts, but the first and most time-consuming pass through the area is now complete.

We began the project in 2012 at the suggestion of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR)'s newly hired volunteer coordinator, Jared Urban. Stands of phragmites were becoming so dense that the diverse, original native wetland plants were being crowded out.

To remove the phragmites, we use the *bundle, cut, and treat* method. We gather stalks of phragmites into bundles tied waist high with biodegradable sisal twine. Using garden shears, we cut the bundles above the twine and apply herbicide to the exposed tops of the stalks.



Volunteer Jim Hughes cuts and treats phragmites in the SNA.

We do the work in late summer when the plants are drawing sugars down into their roots and will draw the herbicide down as well. The stalks share a root system so even if we miss a few, the entire colony is affected. This method takes time but has virtually no effect on the surrounding vegetation. Volunteers who apply herbicide have Aquatic pesticide certification from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection.

Since 2012, we've removed phragmites from 4 acres of wetlands. That's 170,000 square feet and over 50,000 bundles tied, cut, and treated!



Fringed gentians grow in the Cherokee Marsh fen.

The DNR designated 325 acres of Cherokee Marsh as an SNA because it contains an outstanding example of sedge meadow and fen plant communities. The sedge meadow has tussocks of grass-like, triangular-stemmed sedges and wildflowers such as Joe pye-weed, boneset, and turtlehead. A fen is a type of wetland fed by alkaline ground water and supports flowers such as fringed gentian, white lady's slipper, and bog goldenrod.

The SNA lies east of the Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park North Unit's trail system and is difficult to access due to lack of public access points, no maintained trails, and the difficult, tussocky and wet terrain. The best way to see the site is to join us on a work day. Or watch for an announcement of a guided tour, which we offer occasionally through the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the dozens of volunteers who have participated in this project over the last six years. Special thanks to Jim Hughes and Tim Nelson for leading work days and helping out through the entire six years and to Jared Urban for providing supplies, helpful guidance, and welcome encouragement.

[About the Cherokee Marsh State Natural Area](#)

[Sign up to be notified about volunteer events](#)



Jan Axelson (left) and Dorothy Wheeler meet in the marsh to discuss an issue.
Photo by Anita Weier.

Northsiders guide the Friends of Cherokee Marsh into its second decade

Anita Weier

(A version of this article appeared in the [Northside News](#).)

Jan Axelson credits her dedication to protecting and restoring Cherokee Marsh to her enjoyment of Wisconsin's natural wonders after moving to Madison from New Jersey for college. "I had no mentors growing up regarding environmental activism," she said. "I credit Wisconsin with giving me an environmental consciousness."

Dorothy Wheeler did have a mentor – her father Richard A. Hemp, who served on the state Natural Resources Board and loved the outdoor world. She recalls the polluted Wisconsin River that flowed through the paper mill town where she lived

and how it got cleaned up after laws were passed that made dumping waste into the river illegal.

Both women have served on the Board of the Friends of Cherokee Marsh for 10 years – ever since the organization was started to protect the marsh from development. (Two others, Janet Battista and Muriel Simms, have served for nine years.) All four are Northsiders.

Jan moved to the Cherokee Park neighborhood in 2000, in part to be close to the marsh for kayaking, canoeing, hiking, skiing and bird watching.

Then in 2006, the City of Madison was working with developer Cherokee Park, Inc. to provide recommendations for land use and development on the company's land in the marsh area. "There were concerns about preserving the wetlands," she recalled. First a steering committee met and then the Friends of Cherokee Marsh formed as a nonprofit in 2007. Axelson has been president for eight years.

The Friends have broadened their involvement, advocating for the city to acquire more land for the marsh. So far, more than 360 acres have been acquired and added to Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park.

An original informal group of about 20 people has grown into a membership of 200 that this year celebrated the Friends' 10th anniversary. Volunteer projects include restoring native plant communities and keeping close track of proposed developments so they do not hurt the marsh.

"Cherokee Marsh is by far the biggest conservation park in the city, with three units: North, South and Mendota. State and county land adds to the total," Axelson said. "The wetlands at the head of the chain of lakes reduce flooding by storing storm water and releasing it slowly. The marsh provides food and shelter for birds and other wildlife, as well as a place for recreation and reflection by humans."

Dorothy, who has lived on the Northside since 1966, was an advisory member of the Friends board while she served on the Dane County Board from 2004 to 2010 and has continued as a board member since.

Wheeler says that public purchases and protection of environmentally significant land is vital. She also led the fight to protect Lake View Hill from development by turning it into a county park that was declared a conservancy.

"Our environment is so beautiful – green and lush," she said. "It wouldn't matter how many good things we did if the environment was wrecked."

Major achievements of the group so far have been establishing a permanent Cherokee Marsh Conservation Fund, financing school children's trips to the marsh for environmental education, and establishing relationships with state, city and county land managers. "We are a source of volunteers for them as well as providing input," Axelson explained.

The Friends also sponsor a candlelight walk in the winter and monthly bird and nature walks.

"We welcome new participants in the Friends and the Friends Board. Interested people are invited to come to our meetings at 5:30 p.m. on the third Wednesday each month at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center," she said. Dues for the Friends cost \$15 for an individual or \$25 for a family. Joining up is easily done on cherokeemarsh.org.

"We are all-volunteer, so what we can accomplish depends on the skill, time and interest of volunteers. That's why it is vital to have an active group of people volunteering – whether it be one time or ongoing."



Jim Mand (left) and Paul Noeldner check a bluebird box and trail cam.

Adventures of a first year bluebird monitor

Jim Mand

Having just finished my first season as the Cherokee Marsh North Unit bluebird monitor, I'd like to reflect on what I have learned.

Having first joined Friends of Cherokee Marsh in 2009, I was not actively involved. But after retiring last year on Labor Day, I was looking for opportunities to contribute.

Volunteer Paul Noeldner mentioned that the group needed a bluebird monitor, and since I only live up the road from the marsh at Cherokee Condos and have had a life-long interest in birds and wildlife, it seemed like an ideal opportunity. And it gives me a chance to get out in nature and hike the trails for two hours while checking the nest boxes.

So in mid-April, Paul and I walked the trails, fixed up nest boxes, labeled and marked each box, relocated one box, and installed one new box, for a total of 14. Paul gave me valuable insights into nesting materials and habits and also provided some of the tools I would need for observations and repairs.

My responsibilities included checking each nest box at least once per week. During the height of the nesting season, I was out to the marsh every 4–5 days. I kept track of nest building and the number of eggs laid and chicks hatched and fledged. The nesting species included eastern bluebirds, tree swallows and house wrens.

While walking the bluebird trail each time, I started to keep track of all the other birds that I observed along the way and recorded the birds identified and numbers. I set up an account with eBird (ebird.com). This helped me start a life list as I contributed data and pictures to the site.

I also joined BRAW (Bluebird Recovery Association of Wisconsin), which provides a very helpful downloadable guide for monitors, and to which I sent all my data for this year's season. I also provided updates during the season to Paul Noeldner and Jan Axelson of the Friends of Cherokee Marsh.

I enjoyed going out to the marsh because it seemed there were usually new adventures waiting each time.



Some highlights: Right off, on May 08, while walking out to Box 1-B in a newly burned area, I spotted a deer skeleton half buried in the ground. It included the vertebrae, ribs, and lower jaw all bleached very white. Another time I came across a fox snake on the trail by the rock outcropping near the chain-link fence. Besides the usual rabbits, squirrels and chipmunks, I also spotted a doe and her fawn just off the entrance road to the parking lot.

One day while checking boxes 6 and 7, I observed a sandhill crane suddenly fly up from the middle of the prairie, carrying a snake in its beak while being chased off by half a dozen tree swallows in hot pursuit.

During midseason, I started to see female turkeys along the trails. On one occasion while walking through the woods near the pond at the north end of the park, I came across several chicks on the path. Not knowing what they were, I walked up to look at them. An angry turkey charged out of the bushes to protect them as they scurried back for cover. She continued to charge me four times and backed me up at least 15 feet before she rejoined the chicks in the bushes.

It was quite common to see sandhill cranes in various parts of the marsh, sometimes with young ones following them. I enjoyed listening to the adults calling back and forth.

At the end of the season, while checking box 8-B, which had not been active since mid-July, I discovered that a predator (owl or hawk?) had used the top of the box as a perch while eating its prey (a smaller bird). The box was covered with tufts of feathers, and there were many clumps of feathers scattered in the tall grasses around the pole. It's an old horizontal box, unlike the vertical ones in use now.

Problems encountered: box 0, the newly installed box that is first on the trail, became infested with tiny black ants and their eggs. A female swallow had already started to lay eggs in the nest. At first, they infiltrated the bottom corner of the nest. I purchased Poultry Protector, a non-toxic spray from Farm & Fleet. It's an all-natural solution of enzymes used for chickens and their coops to protect from mites, fleas, and ticks. The next visit, the ants had multiplied and infested the whole bottom of the nest. This time I sprayed the whole bottom of the box and underneath the nest. The next visit, all the ants were gone and never came back.

The tree swallow hatched all six of her eggs successfully.

Predation of eggs & mortality of chicks: the biggest problem seemed to be disappearance of newly laid eggs and young chicks dying in the nest (usually after several days of high heat and humidity). Among the bluebirds, there were at least 6 eggs disappeared and 2 dead chicks. Among the tree swallows, there were at least 21 eggs disappeared and 14 dead chicks. My goal next season is to try coming up with some measures to cut down on predation by mice, snakes, raccoons, or whatever.

Results:

Eastern bluebirds – 25 eggs laid, 15 hatched, and 10 chicks fledged.

Tree swallows – 37 fledged.

House wrens – 7+ fledged.

The bluebirds started nesting first, around April 20. They used up to 5 boxes. Box 10 had 2 successful nestings. The tree swallows all started nesting from May 14 to 18. They were aggressive and dominated the prairies in June and July. Then the house wrens moved in and took over 4 boxes starting on June 29 through July 13.

Happy birding!



Mowing and shrub removal planned to improve habitat at North and South Cherokee

We asked Madison Parks Conservation Resource Supervisor Paul Quinlan for an update on management activities in the conservation park. Here is his report.

We mow a couple of times each year to "push back" the edges of the trails by trimming the tall grasses and other vegetation that bend over into the trail. This mowing also helps control woody growth and prevent it from growing closer to the grassy path that we mow about once every two weeks. This wide zone of shorter vegetation also makes a good firebreak.

Some other areas are being mowed to follow up on recent restoration efforts, such as the Wheeler Woods area between the pair of storm water ponds east of School Road at the South unit and the prairie east of the parking lot at the North Unit.

We are looking forward to expanding some higher quality woodland habitats this winter and have contracted two firms to remove buckthorn, bush honeysuckle, and other woody shrubs.

At the South Unit, the contractors will be working on the outside edge of the White Oak Loop – the trail loop that extends west from the west end of Wheeler Road. They will also be working on either side of Daryl's Woods, north of the new storm water pond at Bonner Lane, to expand one of our highest quality woodlands.

At the North Unit, they will be working all along the border of the woodland and the riparian marsh from Hickory Island, where the south (downstream) riverside boardwalk begins, north to the park boundary.

(Many of the place names mentioned come from the folklore that has developed among our Conservation Park staff after working around them for many seasons. Some are simply descriptive, some have stories behind them.)

[North Unit and South Unit information and trail maps](#)

Thank you to the PLATO group

This past August, volunteers Jan Axelson and Paul Noeldner led a hike at Yahara Heights Park for the PLATO group of Madison (platomadison.org). As a thank you, the participating members donated a total of **\$270** to the **Cherokee Marsh Conservation Fund**. The fund provides a permanent, ongoing source of funding for restoration at Cherokee Marsh. Thanks, PLATO members!



Leaf-free Streets

For Clean Waters

Keep your street leaf-free to protect our waters

Preliminary results from a leaf management study led by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in Dane County suggest that fall is a critical time of year to take action for clean water.

According to USGS Hydrologist Bill Selbig, "In some areas, more than 50% of the annual amount of phosphorus in urban storm water can come from leaves in the street." When it rains, storm water flows through leaf piles in streets creating a "leaf tea" that is rich in dissolved phosphorus. This leaf tea travels through storm sewers or other drainage systems and makes its way to our lakes, rivers and streams.

And the phosphorus in the leaf tea fuels algae growth—a single pound of phosphorus can produce over 300 pounds of algae.

In the fall, keeping leaf litter off of streets before it rains can reduce the amount of phosphorus in urban storm water by 80% compared to no leaf removal.

Join us in keeping streets leaf-free this fall. Before the rain...

1. **Remove leaves from the street** in front of your home.
2. **Pile the leaves on the terrace** for pick up. Or better yet, [use the leaves for mulch or compost](#).
3. **Sign up to receive Leaf-free Streets Rain Alerts** this fall (Oct. 1– Nov. 30). You will receive alerts via text or email 1–2 days before a significant rain event to remind you it's time to remove street leaves.

To learn more or to sign up for Leaf-free Streets Rain Alerts visit: www.ripple-effects.com.

A few minutes before the storm can have Ripple Effects on our waters all year long.



Upcoming events

[See full calendar](#)

Bird and nature outings

Sun, Oct 1, 1:30 pm – 3:00 pm, early fall hike with Master Naturalist Tom Murn
AND

Sun, Nov 5, 1:30 pm – 3:00 pm, whither the geese? with Master Naturalist Alex Singer
AND

first Sunday of EVERY month, year-round, ALWAYS 1:30 pm – 3:00 pm

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

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](#))

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

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

Hayrides and Hikes

Sat, Oct 21, 1 pm – 4 pm

Tour Cherokee Marsh on a tractor-pulled hay wagon, take a short guided hike, or do both! Plus enjoy free hot cider and marshmallows to roast on the fire.

Hayrides are \$3/person (age 2 and under free) to offset the cost of Parks staff time. Volunteers from the Friends of Cherokee Marsh will lead free, short nature hikes.

No reservations needed. Show up any time from 1 pm to 3:30 pm for a hayride or a hike.

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.

If you have questions, contact Jan at janaxelson@gmail.com or (608) 215-0426

Sponsored by Madison Parks and the Friends of Cherokee Marsh.

Effigy mound tour

Sun, Oct 22, 1 pm – 3 pm

Yahara Heights Park, Catfish Ct entrance

Tour Yahara Heights Park and learn about the bear mound and panther, or spirit, effigy mound.

Leading the walk will be Bob Birmingham, former State of Wisconsin Archaeologist and author of the book *Indian Mounds of the Four Lakes Region*.

Directions: heading north from 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 small parking area, which is where we will meet. The address for navigating is Catfish Ct, Waunakee, WI 53597.

Sponsored by the Friends of Cherokee Marsh. Questions? Contact Jan at janaxelson@gmail.com or (608) 215-0426

Effigy mound work day

Sat, Nov 4, 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Meadow Ridge Park

Help care for the bear effigy mound in this park by cutting brush that is growing on and around the mound. Wear long pants and closed toed shoes, wear or bring a long-sleeved shirt and hat, bring drinking water. Tools provided; bring a long-handled loppers if you have a favorite.

Directions: Heading north on Northport Dr/HWY 113, just past Warner Park, turn left onto Troy Dr. In about 1.25 mile, Troy Dr curves right and becomes Green Ave. Turn left onto Meadow Ridge Ln and follow it to the end at Meadow Valley Dr. Park on the street.

The address for navigating is:

[Register for this event](#). Registering helps us plan for tools and other supplies.

Sponsored by the Friends of Cherokee Marsh and Madison Parks. Questions? Contact Jan at janaxelson@gmail.com or (608) 215-0426

Seed collecting at Westport Drumlin

Wed, Oct 4, 4 pm – 6 pm

Wed, Oct 11, 4 pm – 6 pm

Wed, Oct 18, 4 pm – 6 pm

Wed, Oct 25, 4 pm – 6 pm

Westport Drumlin Preserve

The Natural Heritage Land Trust is hoping to plant over 5 acres of prairie this fall at Westport Drumlin Preserve just north of Cherokee Marsh. All the seed will be collected at Westport Drumlin and other nearby remnant prairies.

If you can help, email Land Manager Tony Abate at tony@nhlt.org. Tools, buckets, and snacks will be provided. You bring your boots, gloves, and an appetite for cookies. Feel free to bring a friend. If the weather doesn't cooperate, Tony will notify you by email.

Directions: From the intersection of HWY 113 and County HWY M on the northeast side of Madison, go north on 113 for about 1.5 miles. Turn right onto Bong Road (Arboretum Dr will be on the left). Travel 3/4 mile on Bong and turn into the farmstead driveway on your left. If you reach the top of the hill on Bong, you've gone too far.

The address for navigating is **5148 Bong Rd, Waunakee, WI 53597**.

Board meetings

Wed, Oct 18, 5:30 pm – 6:30 pm

Wed, Nov 15, 5:30 pm – 7:30 pm

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

Warner Park Community Recreation Center, 1625 Northport Dr

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