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# The Cherokee Marsh News Oct / Nov 2018



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These wetland patches broke off from the shoreline at Cherokee Marsh during the recent high water.

# Summer of high water causes wetland loss and sparks proposals for action

*Jan Axelson*

Due to the multiple big storm events this past summer, the upper Yahara River at Cherokee Marsh has been experiencing high water levels that have resulted in the loss of shoreline wetlands. This year was not the first to see high water and wetland losses in the marsh. Recent high-water years include 1996, 2000, and 2008. As in previous years, this year's high water has prompted discussion of how to reduce flooding and the damage it causes.

## Water levels and dams

From its beginnings at the northern edge of Dane County, the Yahara River flows past farmland, urban development, and undeveloped land on the way to Cherokee Marsh. From around HWY 19 downstream to Lake Mendota, the Yahara River (and much of Token Creek) is bordered by Cherokee Marsh wetlands. From Lake Mendota, the river continues through the Yahara chain of lakes and empties into the Rock River in Rock County.

Even in times of low or normal precipitation, the river just upstream from Lake Mendota is a flowage, or flooded system, due to the Tenney Park dam, which controls the water level of Lake Mendota. If you have paddled or boated on the upper Yahara, you may have noticed that the river narrows dramatically about 3 miles upstream from the HWY 113 bridge. This narrowing is where the Tenney dam ceases to raise the water level.

## Floating wetlands

Where the river is flooded, the shoreline wetlands aren't rooted on the bottom but instead are floating, loosely attached to rooted vegetation further inland. If you've tried to step out onto the shoreline, you may have punched through and learned this lesson the hard way.

Big storms and high winds stress the floating shoreline wetlands to the point where pieces break off and float away. These detached pieces range from small chunks to patches 50 ft or more in diameter. The pieces often drift about, coasting up and downstream and sometimes getting caught in low spots or in

vegetation in the river. But in time, wind and wave action always end up tearing the patches apart, and the remains float downstream, lost forever to Cherokee Marsh.

## Ways to reduce flooding

These are some of the actions that have been proposed to reduce flooding and the damage it causes:

**Increase the flow in the Yahara River.** Faster flow will allow water from storm events to leave the system more quickly. One method used more aggressively this year is cutting aquatic plants that are slowing the flow in the lower Yahara River. Some choke points have other causes that require more expensive fixes.

**Increase stormwater infiltration.** Wetlands are well known for their ability to absorb stormwater and release it slowly. Acquiring wetlands and restoring their hydrology will help reduce downstream flooding following big storm events. Many of the wetlands at Cherokee Marsh are public lands purchased with tax dollars in part to provide flood mitigation. Better stormwater management on farmland and in urban areas can also help keep stormwater on land where it can infiltrate into the ground or be released more slowly into the river system.

**Manage the lakes at lower levels.** The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) specifies target lake-level ranges for the Yahara lakes. Dane County is charged with managing the lakes within their target ranges by controlling the flow at the dams at Tenney Park and two other locations downstream.

For many years, the county's policy has been to attempt to manage the lakes in the middle of their target ranges. Yet in recent decades, the lakes have frequently been over their target maximums, sometimes by a foot or more, while rarely dropping below their target minimums. Even in the extreme drought of 2012, Lake Mendota barely dipped below its target minimum.

A change in management strategy to manage at the target minimums (3 inches below the midrange) could help keep the lakes within their target ranges. The county or other government units can also petition the DNR to lower the target minimums and maximums.

## Dane County supervisors propose action

Dane County supervisors have introduced a resolution to **establish a technical workgroup to address flooding** in the Yahara chain of lakes. The draft version, which might be amended, seeks to respond to these questions:

*How to manage our lakes and reduce flooding with ever increasing volumes of water, mostly attributed to climate change and urban development?*

*How to improve the volume of water leaving the Yahara River system, a chain of impounded lakes connected by low gradient (relatively flat) river with obstructions by 31 bridges and railroad crossings, aquatic plants and sediment deposits?*

*How to reduce stormwater runoff volumes through increased stormwater infiltration and better management of stormwater on impervious surfaces?*

The workgroup will consist of local experts from the university and climate change experts. The group will consider and recommend short and long term actions and will report to the county's Lakes and Watersheds Commission and Committee on the Environment, Agriculture, and Natural Resources by January 31, 2019.

A task force will then make policy recommendations by March 31, 2019. The task force may recommend petitioning the DNR to change the permitted target range for lake levels.

The resolution also commits to **continuing aggressive cutting of aquatic plants** to increase flow in the river and **attempting to manage the lakes at their target minimums** until the County Board acts on recommendations from the task force.

The County Board will likely vote on the resolution on Oct 4.

## **County budget initiatives**

County Executive Joe Parisi and County Board Chair Sharon Corrigan have announced a series of 2019 budget initiatives that focus on flooding. Even initiatives that target areas downstream of Cherokee Marsh may help the marsh by allowing Lake Mendota to drain faster when needed. The initiatives include:

**Create a Dane County Conservation Reserve Program** to pay farmers and property owners to help convert lands at greater risk of runoff to prairie and grasses that are more able to hold soil and reduce water runoff and erosion. (\$750,000)

**Add funding for conservation acquisitions** to permanently secure properties that improve the ability to reduce stormwater runoff and improve water quality. (\$8 million)

**Add funding to the urban water quality grant program and add stormwater volume control as an eligible project type.** Municipalities may apply for grants to support projects that improve the quality or reduce the volume of urban stormwater runoff. (\$1 million in new money)

**Perform real-time modeling of the benefits and considerations for various lake level scenarios.** The modeling can also help identify points of restriction in the river channel where flow rates may be diminished due to built-up sediments. The goal is a more complete picture of how the ecology of the Yahara lakes could be impacted by water level changes during both flooding and drought conditions. (\$75,000)

**Identify locations where flow is constricted and improve flow using sediment removal and other remedies.** (\$2 million)

**Purchase two aquatic plant harvesters and a hydraulic crane** that will mount to an existing barge to improve the county's ability to remove aquatic plants, trees and other large items of debris that restrict flow in the river. (\$490,000)

**Design replacing a bridge on HWY N on the lower Yahara River** (\$150,000) plus an estimated \$1 million for the county's share of construction in 2020.

**Begin analyzing restoration of Door Creek wetlands near Lake Kegonsa.** (\$200,000)

## Show your support

After many years of little action, the county resolution and budget initiatives show a substantial willingness to address the problem of lake levels and flooding. [Contact your county supervisor](#) to let them know you fully support the

resolution to form a technical workgroup and the budget initiatives.

## Learn more about lake levels and flooding

[County budget initiatives](#)

*Recovery, Rebuild, Resilience: Dane County Budget Flood Initiatives.* Wed, Oct 10, 8 am. See **Upcoming Events** in this newsletter.

Links to these items at madison.com may require an account, and the material may be removed at some point:

[Joy Zedler: Invaluable wetlands fight floods](#)

[Richard Lathrop: Help lakes drain to prevent floods](#)

[Jonathan Barry: Six ways to address Yahara lakes flooding](#)

[Impatience surfaces over slow search for ways to prevent the next flood](#)

From our June/July 2010 newsletter:

[The Gradual Destruction of a Floating Island by Virginia Swisher](#)

[Friends of Cherokee Marsh Lake Levels page](#)



## **New waste oil dropoff site under construction at South Cherokee**

A new waste oil dropoff site is finally under construction at the entrance to Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park's South Unit at the corner of School Rd and Wheeler Rd. First planned for 2016, the project was delayed due to a lack of bids on the project,

Obtaining a permit for the new site required improving other aspects of the site to meet current codes and also has provided an opportunity to move the site away from the middle of the park's entrance area.

The site will replace the current 1000-gallon tank with two 500-gallon tanks so the site can continue to operate if the contents of one tank become contaminated. (The tanks are tested once per week. The tests occasionally reveal PCB contamination, apparently from oil produced before PCB were banned in 1979.)

The new site is just east of the current front parking area, in an area of road right of way that dates from when the intersection of School Rd and Wheeler Rd was reconfigured years ago.



## **Leaf-free Streets** *For Clean Waters*



**For clean water, keep leaves out of the street**

*Anita Weier*

The beautiful colors of autumn also contribute to the ugly green color of our lakes in summer unless residents manage fallen leaves properly. Leaves that are put in the street or gutter are washed into the lakes where nutrients contribute to algae growth.

City waste control officials stress that leaves should not be put in the street. Instead, pile leaves and yard waste (not mixed with brush) at the street edge for collection. But beware that when you pile your leaves at the curb for city collection each fall, those leaf piles are exposed to rain which seeps through the piles, making a rich nutrient tea that flows along the curb into storm drains and then to the lakes. Those nutrients are a significant contributor to the algae that turns our lakes into a green smelly mess in the summer.

You are not required to bag or cover your leaves. They can be left loose at the curb for collection. However, leaves can be blown into the street if they are not covered. Also, city equipment used to pick up leaves from the curb can destroy much of the grass below them.

Bagging leaves is better, and compostable paper leaf bags are best. In any case, leave the bags open at the top so city workers can see what is inside. Plastic bags will be left loose on the terrace and some may have been cut open. An alternative is covering your leaf piles with a tarp or plastic sheeting to prevent them from blowing away.

Leaves and yard waste may also be taken to city drop-off sites. The closest is 4602 Sycamore Ave.

Another solution urged by city officials is managing leaves on your own property. The Leave the Leaf program is designed to reduce phosphorus runoff from leaves, improve the quality of area soil and lawns, and reduce the need for more leaf collection trucks and staff. Leaves left on the lawn can reduce the use of chemical fertilizers. Leaves also make great mulch, garden cover or rich compost.

Though you may not be able to compost or mulch all leaves onsite, any amount of leaves that you can handle at home will benefit the environment and help save tax dollars.

Many people mulch grass clippings right back into our lawns. This provides valuable nutrients for our lawns and reduces trips to the yard waste-drop off



sites. Mulching leaves back into your lawn also lessens the time spent raking in the fall.

City staff advise using your mower to mulch leaves into your lawn. Mowers cut leaves into small pieces, allowing them to fall into and beneath the grass canopy instead of resting on it. This process results in increased surface area, which in turn makes it easier for insects and microbes to consume the leaves and get the nutrients back into the soil.

Studies have concluded that lawns in which leaves were mulched right into the grass were healthier than lawns with no leaves added and had fewer weeds.

Much of this information, as well as more tips, is available at [ripple-effects.com/Leaf-free-Streets](http://ripple-effects.com/Leaf-free-Streets)

*A version of this article appeared in the Northside News.*



## Photographers needed!

Your photos can help show folks in Madison and beyond how special Cherokee Marsh is. The Friends and the Northside News are seeking good photos of Cherokee Marsh.

If you would like to see your photos in **this newsletter and in other publicity for the Friends**, we would love to hear from you. Send to

[info@cherokeemarsh.org](mailto:info@cherokeemarsh.org).

An upcoming issue of the [Northside News](#), mailed to all Northside Madison households, will feature photos of Cherokee Marsh and other natural areas on the Northside. Send your photos to [submissions@northsidenews.org](mailto:submissions@northsidenews.org).

A good place to capture photos is at our monthly Bird and Nature Outings and other events; see the calendar below or [on our website](#). Especially needed are photos that show families and kids enjoying the outdoors in and around the marsh. Photos with recognizable children require verbal permission from a parent or guardian for public use.



## Upcoming events

[See full calendar](#)

### Bird and nature outings

**Sun, Oct 7, 1:30 pm – 3 pm**, Cherokee Marsh trails with Naturalist Guide Barney White

**AND**

**Sun, Nov 4, 1:30 pm – 3 pm**, Cherokee Marsh in fall with Master Naturalist Kathleen Wolf

**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](mailto:paul_noeldner@hotmail.com)

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

## **Recovery, Rebuild, Resilience: Dane County Budget Flood Initiatives**

**Wed, Oct 10, 8 am – 9 am**, meet and greet, refreshments @7:30 am

**The Edgewater Hotel**, 1001 Wisconsin Place, Madison [map](#)

In the wake of historic late summer flooding that resulted in millions of dollars of damage in Dane County, County Executive Joe Parisi and John Reimer, Deputy Director of Dane County Land & Water Resources Department, will discuss new initiatives the county will include in its upcoming 2019 budget proposal to aid flood recovery, increase lake health, and build future resiliency.

This event is one in a series of Yahara Lakes 101 talks sponsored by the Clean Lakes Alliance.

**Admission \$10**, free for Friends of Clean Lakes. [More information and registration.](#)

## **Guided walk with Parks staff at North Cherokee**

**Wed, Oct 10, 5:30 pm – 7 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](#))

From Madison Parks: with so much to see, we needed a second tour of the North Unit of Cherokee Marsh. Even if you went on this tour in June, you will still gain different insights into this ecosystem. The leader for this walk will be veteran conservation crew member Brandon Mann.

Conservation Park Tours are a staff guided, easy walk held seasonally at various conservation parks. These events are free to attend, family friendly and no registration is required. Walks are held rain or shine.

[More information](#)

## Learn about County Parks' forestry program

**Thu, Oct 11, 9 am – 11 am**

**5720 River Rd.** Take Northport Dr / HWY 113 north past the HWY M intersection. At the next stoplight, turn right onto River Rd and travel 1.5 miles. Look for a driveway and large shed on the right. [map](#)

Adam Alves, Dane County Parks Forester, will give an overview of our forestry program. Learn about resources (trees, native shrubs and foraging options) available for Friends groups. Learn about where trees and plants can be planted in our park properties. Learn about the "gravel bed" program and get a better understanding of trees, shrubs that are available for groups to plant on county lands.

[Sign up](#)

## Hayrides and hikes

**Sat, Oct 20, 1 pm – 4 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](#))

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. The last hayride leaves at 3:40.

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

Sponsored by Madison Parks and the Friends of Cherokee Marsh.

[More information](#)

## Board meetings

**Wed, Oct 17, 5:30 pm – 7 pm**

**Wed, Nov 21, 5:30 pm – 7 pm**

**Warner Park Community Recreation Center, 1625 Northport Dr**

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](mailto: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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