

HERON TRACKS

The Official Newsletter of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy
Volume 27 Number 3 Fall 2020



Executive Director's Corner



When this year began, who could have predicted the path that it would take? The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy went into 2020 with plans for how we thought the year would progress. We watched those plans unravel before our eyes when COVID-19 began to impact our state. We cancelled in-person events including our 25th Annual Spring Banquet and a CWC 35th anniversary celebration that never got beyond the initial planning phase. We transitioned to working from home. We cancelled travel plans. We sorta got used to remote meetings, sorta. We learned to wear a mask when we had to go out in public. We learned to keep socially distant. We watched our circles get smaller and smaller until only the people that truly mattered were left in them. We learned to cope.

At the same time we watched something amazing happen. People rediscovered the outdoors. We watched birds in our backyards. We gardened. We walked in our neighborhoods and our local parks. We hit the local trails instead of hitting the gym. Nature became our place to find comfort and peace of mind. The parking lots at Bundy Hill and Sylvan Solace and other CWC preserves seemed to be constantly full this spring when people were working from home and kids were home from school.

As the year progressed, the visitation rates never really seemed to slow down. As people returned to work and school, they just shifted their visits to evenings and weekends. This summer we did a usage study of our four flagship properties (Audubon Woods, Bundy Hill, Hall's Lake, and Sylvan Solace). We found that over a four week period more than 1,300 people visited those four locations! If anything, the numbers for fall have risen as people have enjoyed the (so far) mild weather and beautiful fall colors. We predict that those four properties alone will have hosted more than ten thousand visitors by the end of the year.

We saw a surge in new memberships to the CWC – approximately twenty percent of our current members never held a membership prior to 2020! When we were able to host in-person events again with social distancing, registration, and limits on participants, we had people requesting to be placed on waiting lists. Even our volunteer outings drew crowds, with people queuing up to build trails and remove invasive species. We've known all along that our personal lives and the life of our communities are enriched by connections to the natural world. This year we've experienced the mental, emotional, and physical benefits that exposure to the natural world provides.

We want to keep those good feelings going in the New Year. We want you to stay involved, interested, and active in the outdoors. We're already planning a slate of activities to get us through the winter with sunrise hikes on the Winter Solstice and New Year's Day, full moon hikes throughout the winter, snowshoe hikes, and as many other events as we are able to schedule. We'll also be starting a year-long celebration of a milestone anniversary for Sylvan Solace Preserve (see page 5) and introducing three new programs to fill your year with adventure (see page 2 for more details).

Do we know what challenges next year will bring? No, but we're excited to find out!

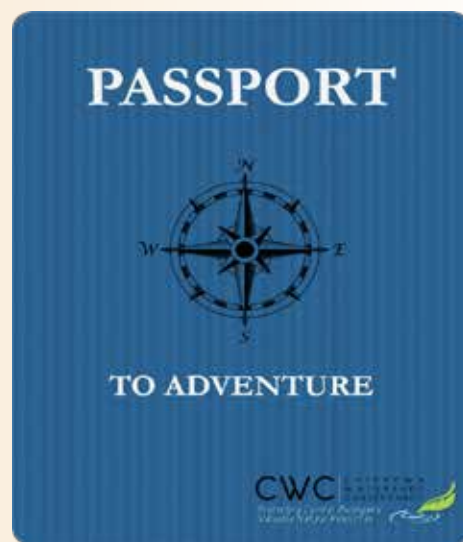
Until then Be Well and Happy Trails.

Mike LeBlond

We want you to get outside and exploring year round. With that in mind, we've created three new programs to help you get off the couch and out the door.

CWC PASSPORT TO ADVENTURE

Are you looking for your next local adventure but don't know where to start? We've compiled a checklist of adventures centered on CWC preserves (downloadable from our website). Complete as many of the checklist items as possible. In December 2021 we'll ask you to submit your checklist to be entered into a prize drawing. CWC staff will be also be completing this list of adventures over the next year and sharing our experiences online.



BIG TREE CHALLENGE

We want to find the biggest tree on a CWC preserve. We don't know where it is or what species it might be. That's where you come in. We want you to explore our preserves and find the biggest trees that you can find. Measure their circumference (at 4.5 feet from ground level), take a photo, and record the GPS coordinates. Submit this data to us and we'll sort through it to pick winners in two categories: biggest broadleaf tree and biggest needleleaf tree. The individuals that submit the two winning entries will receive prize packages.



BUNDY HILL VERTICAL MILE CHALLENGE

Looking for a physical challenge in 2021? From the parking lot to the summit of Bundy Hill, there's an elevation change of 170 vertical feet. To climb a mile at Bundy Hill you need to make 31 round trips to the summit and log at least 37 trail miles! Don't worry, you don't have to do it all at once. Take a week, a month, or even all year. The only rule is that you must snap a photo of the summit marker on each trip. Once you've completed the challenge, send us a collage of your summit photos and we'll mail you a pair of stickers commemorating your feat.



Further details of these programs will be available on our website prior to January 1st, 2021.



Volunteers constructed a new section of trail at Hall's Lake Natural Area.



Removal of a large dock that had washed up along the river bank at Neyer Preserve.



New puncheon installed at Hiawatha Hills Preserve



A new section of trail at Sylvan Solace Preserve to replace a section that frequently flooded.



Trail restoration volunteers at Audubon Woods Preserve.

Did you miss out on stewardship volunteer opportunities in 2020? Check cwc-mi.org/events or follow us on Facebook or Instagram @cwc_mi to keep up to date on upcoming volunteer opportunities. Our 2021 stewardship season will begin in March.



Volunteers met at Sylvan Solace to remove Autumn Olive during one of many work sessions with Mike LeValley.



An area at Sylvan Solace Preserve that has been completely cleared of Autumn Olive.



Huge piles of Autumn Olive that were removed during a volunteer work session.

2020 STEWARDSHIP SUCCESS

Stewardship of our preserves is one of the biggest ongoing challenges that we face as an organization. We started 2020 with a list of stewardship tasks that we wanted to accomplish before the end of the year. Thanks largely to a dedicated corps of volunteers we were able to complete a litany of new projects and backlogged tasks such as trail construction at Hall's Lake Natural Area; trail restoration at Bundy Hill Preserve and Sylvan Solace Preserve; boardwalk construction at Neyer Preserve and log puncheon construction at Hiawatha Hills Preserve; erosion control at Audubon Woods Preserve; and invasive species removal at Bundy Hill, Audubon Woods, Hall's Lake, and Hiawatha Hills. One of our biggest stewardship successes of the year was the removal of invasive autumn olive from nearly eleven acres of Sylvan Solace Preserve! Overall volunteers contributed more than 200 hours towards stewardship projects this year. We are extremely grateful for everything they helped us accomplish.



A new boardwalk replaces a makeshift temporary boardwalk at Neyer Preserve.

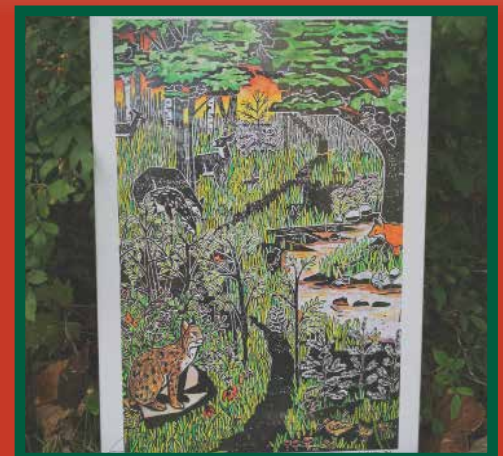


CWC Anniversaries

The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is starting to come of an age where we are experiencing major milestone anniversaries. The year 2020 marked our 35th year as an organization and the 25th anniversary of our first property, the Wakelin McNeel Preserve. This coming year will see milestone anniversaries for two more CWC properties. The first portion of the Hiawatha Hills Preserve was donated to the CWC by Mid-Michigan College in 1996. Also celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2021 will be Sylvan Solace Preserve. This seventy-eight acre preserve was donated to the CWC in November 1996 by Donald and Nancy Nagler. Because Sylvan Solace is one of our four "flagship" preserves, over the next year we'll be celebrating its Silver Anniversary with a series of special events, articles, and social media posts that highlight the property's past, present, and future.



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and many more!

Thank you to each and every one of our volunteers and supporters!

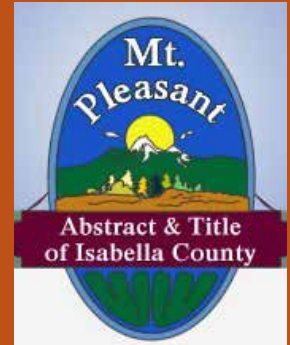
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