

HERON TRACKS

The Official Newsletter of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy
Volume 28 Number 2 Summer 2021



Common Milkweed at Peterson Natural Area

Executive Director's Corner

Have you ever heard the term *Shifting Baseline Syndrome*? Shifting Baseline Syndrome is defined as a gradual change in what is considered the normal condition of the natural environment. Maybe you can recall a time in your life when there were significantly greater numbers of songbirds, bees, butterflies, fireflies, etc. than there are today? For younger generations, the reduced populations of these organisms as they exist today seem normal. The baseline has shifted and younger generations will never know the difference.

While Shifting Baseline Syndrome is almost always used in the context of describing a biome diminished by human-caused degradation, the reality is more complex. What is not often discussed is that we have the ability to shift the baseline in either direction. There are success stories such as the conservation efforts made to restore the populations of species like the Kirtland's warbler and bald eagle. Even the white-tailed deer and wild turkey were once nearly extirpated from Michigan and their populations were brought to current levels through decades-long conservation and restoration campaigns.

The existence of the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy is itself an example of the baseline being shifted in a positive direction. When I was born, the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy did not exist. It would not be founded until two months before my tenth birthday. McNeel Preserve, the CWC's first preserve, was acquired by donation when I was nineteen years old. I'm now forty-five years old and the CWC currently protects more than 5,400 acres through owned nature preserves and conservation easements on private land. Not one of those acres was protected when I was born. In my mind that is a significant positive shift in the baseline!

Talking to younger generations about how the baseline has shifted can be difficult because they see a natural world that appears to them as "normal" while we may see a world that is a shadow of its former self. This is one of many reasons why it is important for us to measure the world that we now see. In this issue of *Heron Tracks*, you'll find articles about a year-long survey of wildflowers and a survey of tree species. Both surveys are being conducted at Sylvan Solace Preserve as part of our celebration of the preserve's Twenty-fifth Anniversary. The tree survey follows up on one conducted twenty years ago. Both surveys will provide a baseline for future studies. We plan to replicate these studies at other preserves beginning next year.

We can make a difference in shifting the baseline through our actions. Every time we plant a native tree or wildflower. Every time we adopt a pollinator-friendly practice in our gardens. Every time we stop to move a turtle off the road. Every time we introduce someone new to the outdoors. Every time we volunteer our time for a conservation project. Every time we donate to a cause that protects and restores natural habitats. Every time we take small actions such as these, we have the potential to nudge the baseline in a positive direction. What have you done lately to shift the baseline?

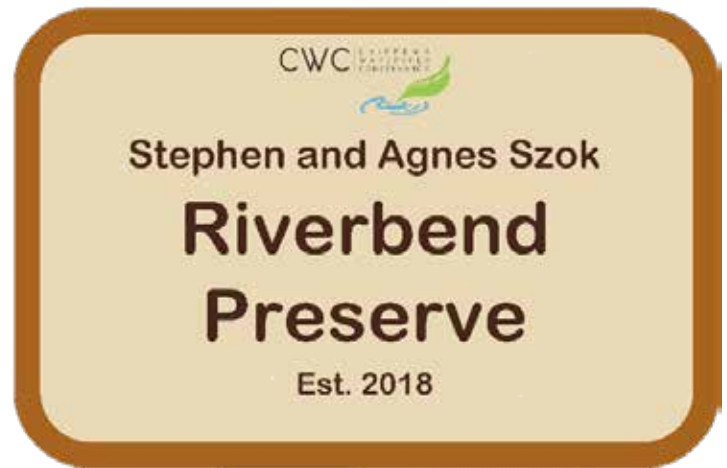
Stay Well and Happy Trails!



Mike LeValley, Executive Director

“...we have the ability to shift the baseline in either direction...there are success stories...”

Construction has begun on a staircase allowing access to the Chippewa River at the CWC's Szok Riverbend Preserve. This property was originally gifted to the CWC with the intent that it become a public river access site. Once completed, this site will provide the only formal public access site along a 24 mile stretch of river between Island Park in Mt. Pleasant and Geneva Rd. in Midland County. This access site will open up a previously inaccessible stretch of the Chippewa River to paddle-sports enthusiasts and anglers. Construction is scheduled for completion by October 1st 2021.



The original cost of this project was estimated at \$30k – 40k. Due to increases in construction costs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project will instead cost \$62.7k. The Chippewa Watershed Conservancy has received grants and private donations to cover approximately two-thirds of the cost of construction. We are currently seeking additional grant funding and accepting donations to support construction of this project.

Established in 2018, this 3.4 acre preserve is located along the Chippewa River in Chippewa Township, Isabella County. The preserve was purchased by the grandson of late Midland County residents Stephen and Agnes Szok and donated to the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy in their honor. The preserve protects approximately 900 feet of wooded riverbank.

For more information or to donate visit cwc-mi.org/szok-riverbend-preserve/.



Hikers at Hall's Lake Natural Area should notice a change later this summer. We're adding an approximately 0.4 mile loop at the end of the Outback Trail. This trail will loop around a wetland in the northeast corner of the Natural Area before returning back to the existing trail.



Thank you to the Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan Council for the donation of forty-eight eastern white pine seedlings! These trees have been planted at Sylvan Solace Preserve to increase the age range and structural diversity of the existing pine plantation.

Wildflowers of Sylvan Solace

We know that our twenty-three preserves and thirty-seven easements protect a wide range of plant and animal species but it can be difficult to know exactly what is protected without performing an extensive inventory. In the past we've conducted several one day surveys of the species found on our preserves and staff and volunteer preserve monitors routinely note the species that are encountered during visits but these are snapshots of a single moment in time and don't provide a full picture of species diversity.

This summer, as part of our yearlong celebration of the 25th Anniversary of Sylvan Solace Preserve, we've undertaken a comprehensive survey of species at the preserve with a focus on plants including trees, ferns, and wildflowers. Of these, cataloguing wildflower species takes the most work because of both their ephemeral nature and the fact that different species bloom at various times from March through October. An inventory that does not span the entire growing season will necessarily be incomplete.

We've been astonished by the diversity of species found on the preserve. Sylvan Solace Preserve includes a variety of distinct habitats from open meadows to oak aspen forest to floodplain. Some of the highlights documented so far include a surprising abundance of Large-flowered Trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*) and Wild Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*); the diversity of flowering shrubs including multiple native Serviceberries (*Amelanchier* spp.) and Hawthorns (*Crataegus* spp.); a patch of Arrow Arum (*Peltandra virginica*) along the edge of the river; and the presence of plants more commonly associated with prairies such as Pale Indian Plantain (*Arnoglossum atriplicifolium*) along the drier upper portions of the riverbank.

The first wildflower of the year, Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*), was catalogued on March 19th. The expectation is that the last wildflower catalogued will be Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) sometime in early October. Initially the goal for this project was to document one hundred fifty species of wildflowers (including trees and shrubs) over the course of the growing season. We reached that goal on July 5th! Our new projection is somewhere between two hundred and two hundred twenty species. For a complete list and to learn more about the species that have been documented check out our series of online posts at www.cwc-mi.org.



Wild Mint



White Oak



Canada Anemone



Fringed Polygala



Skunk Cabbage



Ninebark



Michigan Lily



Wild Columbine



Mayapple



Wild Geranium



Rough-fruited Cinquefoil

Trees of Sylvan Solace

In 2001 there was a tree survey done at Sylvan Solace Preserve. This summer I am updating this survey. Using the list from 2001 as a base I am able to identify many of the species originally found. I am also seeing the new species growth. Being able to see the diversity change over time is one of the unique draws to this type of research. Seeing that some trees have been there for longer than I've been alive and others are so new they might not make it, is part of why a survey like this is so important. Knowing what is or is not able to grow can give clues as to what the soil is like, what other species are there and how the landscape affects the species. Trees can show a lot about the history of the land. In land conservation it is important to understand the history of the land as it has a major effect on the species growth. If there was a large amount of air pollution, there might be more birch as they are good at absorbing polluting particles. Surveys like this are so important at showing the positive affect trees have on the land around them.

We can now know that some species are better at controlling air pollution and others are better at balancing soils pH. This can help future generation protect land and species. The same way the survey done in 2001 is helping me have an understanding of what is on the property, this updated version will help future research projects have the same head start. Some of the important species found are Michigan's state tree, the White Pine. The White Pine tree is a very durable species. This is ideal for Michigan as there can be some intense weather throughout the seasons. Because this species is so strong they help a great amount with erosion control. This is perfect for the preserve as its goal is to help the land and species as much as possible. There are also a variety of Maple trees on the property. Maple trees are quick growing trees and easy to grow. Trees can take a long time to grow, having a quick growing, easy to manage tree is a great start to a protected area of land.



CWC Intern Caroline Roberts



White Pine at Sylvan Solace Preserve



Members who attend will be entered to win a tasting package for Young Farm's Winery!



We're raffling off 4 nights at a stunning vacation rental in Florida + a \$500 Visa Gift Card to fund your trip!



Win the ever popular hand woven basket by Grannie Annie!



You're invited to the 2021 CWC Fall Fundraiser

Join us at **Little Flower Barn** in Lake Isabella on **Thursday, October 14th from 5-9 PM** for a catered dinner, drinks, live music and the President's Bob Ball Award Presentation.

The Fall Fundraiser will feature:

- Raffles with prizes by local artisans
- A member prize drawing
- Cornhole Competition
- Update on CWC projects
- 50/50 Drawing
- Live Music



Win an English Picnic set featuring a custom charcuterie board by local woodworking company Cone Furnishings!



Also up for grabs is a stay at the Grand or Sugar Beach Resort in Traverse City along with some Up North experiences!



2020 Bob Ball Award Winner
Pat Block

Register, buy raffle & 50/50 tickets or become a sponsor with the QR Code or by visiting:
<https://bit.ly/CWCFallF>



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