

SPRING

From the Lake Shores



Connors Lake • Lake of the Pines



LAKE ASSOCIATION



WATERS | VOLUNTEERS | FISH | FORESTRY

“Preserving and protecting our lakes for today and for future generations.”

a newsletter for the Lake Association Members • Volume 32- May 2022

Words from the President

Well, it's been a while, but plans are coming together to have Independence Day fireworks this year (on Monday, July 4). This has been a touch and go issue during the pandemic, but things are finally looking up for this year. We will have more details as we get closer to the event.

The no-wake buoys in Muskie Bay should be placed in the water in the upcoming weeks thanks to our board members who have worked on this project. Let's also thank the DNR for putting them in for us; they will be maintaining them for us going forward. I would like to thank the Johnsons for their hard work in taking care of the buoys for the last several years.

I would also like to express my condolences to the Johnson Family on the loss of Esther Johnson. I knew her my whole life and always enjoyed talking with her. She will be missed by many. Esther was one of our original board members.

We will shortly be voting on eliminating the July 4th general meeting. Voting will start at the Memorial Day weekend meeting, and ballots will be mailed out to members who cannot attend. Be sure to vote as your feedback is important!

Lastly, thanks to all the hard-working volunteers and donors who make all of this possible.

Dave Bauer



Dave Bauer

KAYAK RAFFLE!!

We are raffling another kayak!! It is a Moken Camo 10 foot. You can see the kayak and purchase your tickets at the Flambeau Forest Inn! This is normally a fast raffle, so don't delay getting your ticket!



Aquatic Invasive Species Report

You have probably noticed the three "Slow No Wake Buoys" at the entrance to Muskie Bay. There is still a significant amount of the invasive Eurasian water-milfoil (23 acres in the fall of 2021) in the bay that is dense and matted on the surface especially in the northern and shallower areas. The milfoil you observe in front of your cabin is abundant and native. We are unable to chemically treat this EWM because our recently revised AIS Treatment Plan dictated by the DNR states we cannot treat the EWM unless we have a 50% frequency of occurrence. Non-chemical treatment methods are expensive and less effective. The water depth and mucky bottom in the bay make for an excellent growing medium for the invasive weed. There are some isolated plants scattered outside Musky Bay except for a small colony in the northeastern bay. We would like to keep the milfoil in the bay and therefore the buoys warning boaters to avoid fragmenting the plants which can easily start a new colony.

The good news is that the frequency of occurrence is decreasing from 48% 3 years ago. Decreasing frequency of occurrence has been observed in other lakes with established milfoil even without treatment. I do not think the milfoil will ever disappear but may begin to act like our native aquatic plants in the future. I have asked the experts and read publications on this phenomenon. Possible reasons include hybridization with the native milfoils producing a less aggressive plant. Climate change, competition and pollution are possible factors.

Predation: a beetle has been shown to preferentially attack and kill EWM. Some 20 years ago the weeds in Connors Lake were greatly reduced by a non-native crayfish. Some years the EWM has been covered with an algae layer stunting its growth. Native weeds are non-invasive because they usually have a natural predator of some type. We have noticed recently that there is a zone of decreased oxygen at about 15 feet. Connors Lake is one of 20 or so lakes being studied by the DNR and may provide some answers.

Tom Stram

Flambeau River State Forest Property Updates

Spring is finally here! We endured a very long winter this year, however we had the highest use of the ski trail and snowmobile trails that we have seen in quite some time. Overall, the property and the wildlife handled the winter months quite well and we are looking forward to a productive season!

Planned activities for 2022

- The Connors Creek ATV bridge project is scheduled for completion this October. This project went out for bid in March, and I am happy to report we have a contractor assigned to this project. Also, all permits have finally been obtained and the new bridge is currently in manufacturing. At this time, we can expect to have the contractor on site sometime in mid-September.
- The short swing loop on the Flambeau Hills ski trail will be fully graveled this summer. This is the start of an initiative to develop more bike friendly trails for the summer months and encourage year-round use of our trail systems.
- ATV trail maintenance will continue this year. Last year we were able to get 6 miles of trail in the North graded and graveled. We will continue efforts in the North near Snuss Blvd and then near Feleen Rd. The trail restoration efforts have been very well received.
- We have funding approved to complete further development of 9-mile Landing. This project will add flat rock to the entrance of the river, a canoe/kayak ramp, and a parking lot expansion. This project will occur sometime after Labor Day.
- We will have a contractor on-site to seal, crack-fill, and paint the Headquarters parking lots, Connors Lake boat launch parking lot, and Lake of the Pines boat launch parking lot.
- We will be adding gravel to the trail at Connors Lake Campground. We hope to do the same at Lake of the Pines Campground, however we will have to see where funding and staffing end up.
- The Fishing Pier at Lake of the Pines will be stained and sealed this year. This project will be completed by the Flambeau Correctional Center Staff.
- There will be new, very nice, trash and recycling receptacles placed at both Connors Lake boat launch and Lake of the Pines boat launch.
- Will also be completing a small cell tower project at the Connors Lake Campground. The coverage area will be very small, but visitors will be able to obtain cell phone signal near the bathrooms at the entrance.

- We have a few larger scale projects on the horizon for the 2023-2025 biennium budget. So, starting next year I will begin the planning process for the below projects:
 - Lake of the Pines Campground Upper Vault Toilet. Will be installing a brand-new vault toilet building, complete with new holding tanks.
 - Connors Lake Picnic area vault toilets and changing rooms. Will be installing all new facilities here.
 - Lake of the Pines boat launch. Will be completely re-doing the boat launch itself and adding additional asphalt to the parking area.
 - Connors Lake boat launch. Will be completely re-doing the boat launch itself and adding a boat washing station. This project will have some obstacles so I will be working very closely with engineering.
 - Replacing the vault toilets at Cedar Rapids river campsite.

I think this covers everything currently. We have all our seasonal staff currently working and we will be keeping up with all regular maintenance and smaller improvement projects. I have also been working on building our volunteer base so we can hopefully get some additional help and hold some office hours at the Headquarters again. We are looking forward to another busy year and if anyone has any questions do not hesitate to reach out. Thank you!

I have attached a few photos from this year's Candlelight Ski Event. We had roughly 100 people turn out for this event!



Thin Places on the North Country Trail

By Matt Smith

Something about the woods is forever calling me. The ancient Celts had a term for holy places that make you feel as if you're inches away from heaven – thin places. The forest is certainly my thin place.

Typically, a shotgun or bow accompanies me in forest endeavors.

And if I'm true, in my earlier years I scoffed at folks who went backcountry without a quarry in mind. "Why would someone just walk", I'd mutter under breath shaking head side-to-side. Eating words – something switched in me a few years ago as I learned of the Appalachian Trail and those who section and thru hike it. Intrigued by the pathway, its culture, and those who take on the 2,194.3 miles trek I began reading and watching films on the topic.

The Ice Age Trail near Whitewater was where I tested the practice of walking for the sake of walking. Day hikes lead up to overnights. And I liked it. And found hiking a good substitute for being in the woods when there was nothing to hunt.

Last fall, my wife and I took a day trip from Connors Lake and visited Copper Falls Park up in Mellen. While taking in the beauty of the Falls we came across a North Country Trail marker. Which lead me to investigate this mysterious track. The NCT seems to be a little known footpath stretching east and west over 4,800 miles from North Dakota to Vermont.



"Smith was here!"



During the winter of 2021, I studied-up on the NCT, learning about the dozens of chapters who care for sections for the trail and finding that 61 miles of it pristinely traverses through the northern half Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. It extends from County Highway A to Mellen. Part of the trail passes through the Rainbow Lake and Porcupine Lake Wildernesses where only foot travel is permitted.

Sharing my hopes in hitting the NCT with my good pal, Mark, we struck a deal and started planning our northwoods trek. Thinking to beat the ticks and skeeters,

spring was the mark – April 20th to be exact. The snow would be gone and early enough to avoid the maddening bugs. Hardly! The snow was gone at the cabin on Connors Lake but as we drove north past Clam Lake the dreaded white stuff was still piled up.

We had arranged a ride from NTC volunteers Ed and Linda Calhan of Ashland. They graciously serve the trail community by offering shuttles for hikers passing through the Chequamegon section. Graciously, Ed picked us up in Mellen and drove us west to the Porcupine Lake Wilderness area. The first mile of our 40 miles began with naïve enthusiasm and energy, we soon found the trail snow covered with deep, heavy, wet snow. Hiking with 36-pound packs through the snow in the Porcupine Lake Wilderness was a leg killer with moist snow from 3 to 18 inches cutting our average speed down from 3 miles to one mile per hour. We thought we would never hit Highway D. The trail is sparsely marked in the Wilderness areas due to Federal regulations and snow coverage made it



Finding ground without snow was a challenge at Lake Three.



Mark takes in the amazing view from Juniper Overlook.

near impossible to follow and read the trail. The payoff was reaching Spruce Overlook which showboats the respectable elevation Wisconsin has – a grand unobstructed view in three directions over the Marengo River valley. We hiked 12.76 miles and at 4:30pm we made to the Marengo River Shelter just as the sky opened-up with a heavy downpour. The shelter was a great respite from the spring rain and having to set-up tents in the rain and slush. The Marengo River was howling with the spring run-off. The crackling fire, pattering rain and the river made for a sweet lullaby as we drifted off for a well-earned slumber.

Day 2 was more of the deep white stuff. We happily pounded out 15.70 miles making it Lake Three. The fresh spring air and free of cell service is good for the

head and soul. Finding snow-free areas to stake the tents was a challenge but we found spots on the west side of the lake. Camping was awesome as the warm sunset and frozen lake made for a refreshing contrast.

The final day, we finally cried "mercy" and escaped the trail by finding fire roads running parallel to the trail. We joked that the gravel roads were more like the trail was expected to be and since we only ran into one other person it was a genuine trail experience. Packing over 14 miles into Mellen we found our parked truck as a gleeful sight that meant a stiff drink and a warm bed back at Connors Lake.

I'll look forward to hitting the North Country Trail to trek the entire 61 miles of the Chequamegon soon and return to the magical forest and trail that leads to within inches of heaven . . . perhaps you will too.

Connors Lake/ Lake of the Pines Fisheries Report; Spring 2022

By Ed Peters

Although it did seem that the winter of 2021/2022 would never end, it does appear that it now has. The vegetation is irrupting as warmer temperatures and May showers have encouraged their growth. I hope that everyone around Connors Lake and Lake of the Pines can get out and enjoy time on the water and do some fishing soon. In addition, it looks like Jeff Scheirer and crew from the Park Falls DNR office will be able to resume regular sampling on the lakes in the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) this year.

Fall 2021 Fisheries Surveys: Jeff sent the results from the 2021 fall sampling on Connors Lake, lake of the Pines, Mason Lake and Evergreen Lake. In each lake fish were collected using alternating current electrofishing and, in each lake, the entire shoreline was sampled. For Connors Lake the total distance sampled on September 29, 2021 was 5.0 miles in 2.1 hours; the Lake of the Pines was sampled on October 4, 2021 (total distance sampled 4.9 miles in 1.9 hours); on Mason Lake the total distance sampled was 3.5 miles in 2.3 hours on October 5, 2021 and; on Evergreen Lake the total distance sampled was 2.2 Miles in 0.9 hours on October 5, 2021. A summary of the results of these surveys are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

These surveys have a couple of purposes. One purpose is to assess the relative abundance of the primary gamefish species in each of the lakes. It is important to recognize that these are relative abundance estimates and not actual population estimates and therefore, it is best to use the number per mile (N/mile) numbers to compare the bodies of water.

The primary purpose of these surveys is to assess the natural reproduction of Walleye in each of the lakes. Of the 232 Walleye captured in Connors Lake, 103 were in the Young of the Year (YOY or Age 0+) size class, which yielded an estimate of 20.60/mile for 2021. This compares to the estimate of 22.40/mile in 2020. In the Lake of the Pines only two out of the total of 87 caught were in the YOY size class and in Evergreen Lake only one of the 21 Walleye caught was in the YOY size class. Both Lake of the Pines and Evergreen Lake had recruitment estimates of 0.4 YOY/mile. None of the Walleyes in Mason Lake were in the YOY size class, so its recruitment estimate was 0.00/mile.

Table 1. Comparison of number of fish captured and number of fish per mile by species during fall 2021 electrofishing fish surveys for lakes in the Flambeau River State Forest; Connors Lake, Lake of the Pines, Mason Lake and Evergreen Lake.

	Connors Lake		Lake of the Pines		Mason Lake		Evergreen Lake	
	Number	N/mile	Number	N/mile	Number	N/mile	Number	N/mile
Walleye	232	46.4	87	17.76	7	2.0	21	10.0
Smallmouth Bass	23	4.6	3	0.61	16	4.57	2	0.91
Largemouth Bass	27	5.4	17	3.47	0	0.0	0	0.0
Muskellunge	6	1.2	32	6.35	35	10.00	16	7.27
Northern Pike	13	2.6	2	0.41	0	0.0	0	0.0

Table 2. Comparison by species of size (in inches) ranges of fish captured during fall 2021 electrofishing fish surveys for lakes in the Flambeau River State Forest; Connors Lake, Lake of the Pines, Mason Lake and Evergreen Lake.

	Connors Lake		Lake of the Pines		Mason Lake		Evergreen Lake	
	Min Length	Max Length	Min Length	Max Length	Min Length	Max Length	Min Length	Max Length
Walleye	5.3	22.9	6.1	22.4	8.0	25.0	7.1	25.4
Smallmouth Bass	3.0	18.4	9.0	12.4	4.0	20.4	12.0	15.4
Largemouth Bass	4.5	17.4	4.0	16.9				
Muskellunge	17.5	33.4	9.5	38.9	12.5	39.4	12.5	36.9
Northern Pike	22.0	28.9	27.5	29.9				

Smallmouth Bass and Muskies are the only other gamefish species sampled in all four lakes sampled in the FSRF in 2021. Smallmouths are most abundant in Connors Lake and Mason Lake and those waterbodies produced some respectable size individuals during the surveys. As for the Muskies, I was impressed with the numbers per mile in Mason Lake and Evergreen Lake, which even exceeded Lake of the Pines, but I also think that since these were shoreline surveys, Connors Lake Muskies may have retreated to deeper waters and were “out of range” of the electrofishing gear. Just another lesson in gear selectivity.

Finally, we come to Largemouth Bass and Northern Pike, which were only sampled in Connors Lake and Lake of the Pines. Largemouth Bass were the second most common (N/mile) gamefish species in Connors Lake and the third most common in Lake of the Pines during the fall 2021 survey, but we apparently don’t need to worry about breaking any state or world size records, anytime soon. However, they could give some nice action for kids or adults working some poppers in the weed bed areas (just be aware of the EWM). And, of course, I saved my favorite species (Northern Pike) for last. It looks like I will be working the outside perimeter of the bullrush beds in Connors Lake again this summer, so that I won’t be too much competition for those of you who concentrate on Walleyes. However, that also puts me in the area for a chance at a nice Largemouth Bass or Muskie too.

2019 Muskellunge Population Estimate: Last year I did spend some time detailing the mark and recapture fish population for Walleye. In this report we will take a look at the two-year population estimate of Muskie populations in Connors Lake and lake of the Pines. This work commenced with marking Muskies with Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags captured in Fyke Nets and by electrofishing during the spring (April and May) of 2019 (Table 3). Since the fish were marked in 2019, the population estimates are actually for that year (*Ricker, W.E. 1975. Computation and Interpretation of Biological Statistics of Fish Populations. Bulletin 191, Bulletin of the Fisheries Research Board of Canada.*). In 2021 Muskies were sampled by Fyke netting and checked for PIT tags in May of 2021 in Connors Lake and in April 2021 in Lake of the Pines. The population estimates for Muskies larger than 20

inches total length in Connors Lake (in the fall of 2019) totaled 130 and in Lake of the Pines totaled 479. That works out to be 0.3 Muskies per acre in Connors Lake and 1.75 Muskies per acre in the Lake of the Pines. Those are the best estimates, but since there is an element of chance in whether or not a marked or an unmarked fish is caught, the population of Muskies in Connors Lake could be as high as 198 and the Muskie population in Lake of the Pines could be as high as 709.

Table 3. Results of Muskellunge mark and recapture population estimates for Connors Lake (marking using fyke nets and boom shocker; 28 April to 13 May, 2019 and recapture survey using Fyke nets; 2-21 May, 2021) and Lake of the Pines (marking using fyke nets and boom shocker; 28 April to 13 May, 2019 and recapture survey using Fyke nets; 2-30 April, 2021).

Size Range	Connors Lake				Lake of the Pines			
	20.0-29.9	30.0-33.9	34.0-37.9	38.0+	20.0-29.9	30.0-33.9	34.0-37.9	38.0+
Number Marked (PIT tags) 2019	7	5	10	8	19	11	15	6
Recapture Survey 2021								
(Total Captured)	12	12	7	4	33	20	13	12
(Recaptures)	2	1	2	0	1	2	3	2
Population Estimate (N)	30	33	27	40	323	77	53	26
Total Population Estimate	130				479			
Confidence Limits	Lower 95% = 61		Upper 95% = 198		Lower 95% = 186		Upper 95% = 709	

2022 High Efficiency Gear Harvest in Connors Lake: Connors Lake is the only lake in the FRSF where a tribal harvest of Walleye and Muskellunge takes place. The 2022 Safe Harvest Limit for Walleye was set at 144 individuals and the Safe Harvest Limit for Muskellunge was set at 9 individuals. The Bad River Tribe declared a limit of 86 Walleye and 5 Muskellunge for the 2022 season. As of May 23, 2022 the Bad River Tribal harvest was 86 Walleye and 0 Muskellunge. It appears that the Tribal Harvest is complete for 2022.



Kim Smith

In addition to its remarkable size, North America’s largest native moth, boasts brilliant colors, distinctive patterns, and curvy shapes.

The sheer magnitude of the Cecropia Silkmoth amazes observers. This native moth can cover the palm of a large hand with its generous wingspan of about 15 cm (~6 inches). The moth is brown near the hairy orange and white body and head. Each forewing and hindwing has an ivory mark ringed in orange and black in the center of this brown area. White and orange lines cross all the wings near the center. A large black and blue eyespot sits at the upper corner of each forewing. An ivory and beige border undulates along the edges. Legs are furry and bright red-orange.

Caterpillars have 5 instars, each with a slightly different appearance. Early caterpillars are completely black with black spiky hairs. They become pale with black hairs and dots. Later, they are green with yellow bumps with black spikes. Mature caterpillars are plump and fleshy with light blue thorns where the bumps used to be. A silk cocoon forms on the stem of a host plant and the magnificent winged adult emerges. Hosts include a variety of popular trees like maple, willow, oak, and pine as well as other flowering plants like honeysuckle. Threats to the population of Cecropia Moths include a parasite that eats caterpillars from the inside out, viral pathogens, as well as hungry squirrels, pollution, inadvertent insecticide poisoning, and habitat loss due to urbanization.



From insectidentification.org

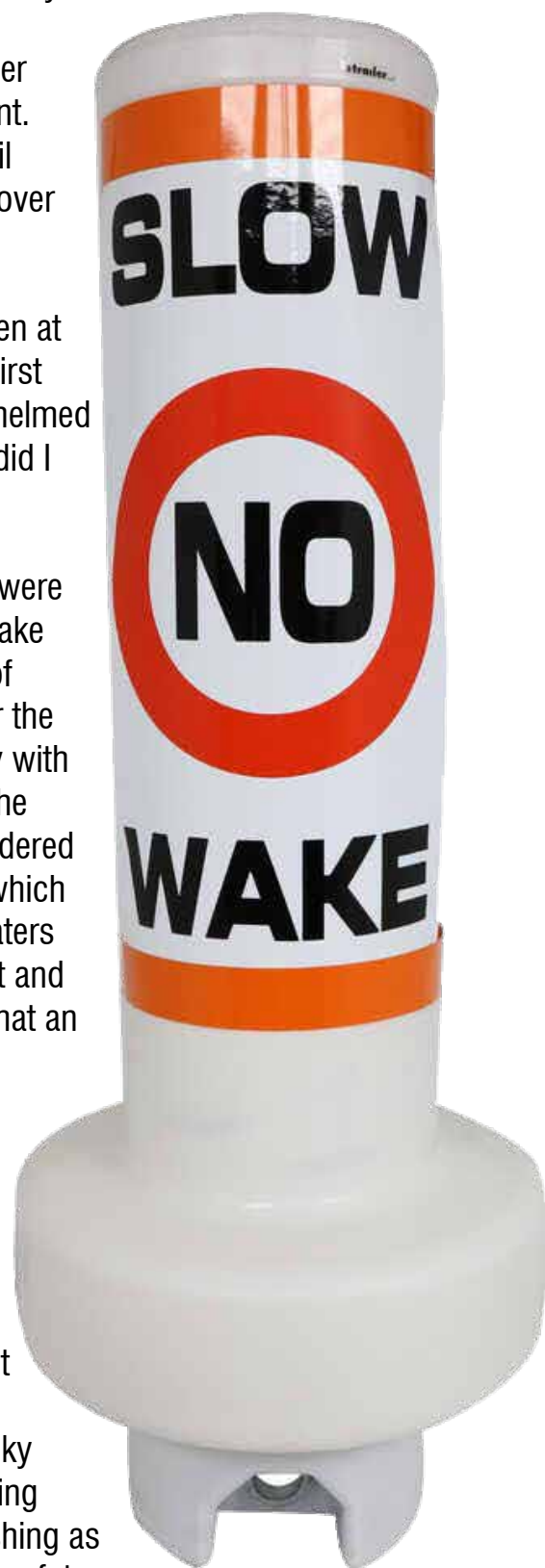
NO WAKE ZONE – MUSKY BAY

The issue in Musky Bay is Eurasian Milfoil, it can spread as a mat over the waters, limiting access but more importantly affect the fish in our lake. After much consideration and discussions with the DNR it was decided that No Wake Buoy's in Musky Bay are a necessity. We needed to find additional means to control the spread of Eurasian Milfoil. As we all know the propellers from boats cut the leaves of the plants especially at higher speeds. These pieces then fall to the bottom and regrow a new plant. Many plants do not regrow in this manner, however, Eurasian Milfoil does. These new plants than are added to existing plants and take over shallow areas of the lake.

I have been in the Sawyer County Area since the 1960's. I have been at Connors Lake beach since the early 1970's, a really neat beach. I first started boating on Connors Lake in the early 1990's. I was over whelmed by the Lake, its depth but also the Islands I THOUGHT I saw. Little did I know at that time that these Islands were mats of Eurasian Milfoil.

When the Lake Associations was formed in the early 2000's there were a number of issues, Eurasian Milfoil being one of the issues. The Lake Association was established, as I am told, for the primary reason of water level, however Eurasian Milfoil was also a real concern. After the establishment of the Lake Association Tom Stram worked tirelessly with the DNR and others to determine how to control Eurasian Milfoil. The results, from my point of view, are outstanding. I really never considered purchasing a property on Connors Lake until I boated on it again, which was in 2008 or 2009. The Islands where gone. It has very deep waters which allows for great recreational boating not affecting fish habitat and substantial shallower water areas allowing for great fish habitat. What an excellent combination.

Now the DNR is limiting the use of chemicals to control Eurasian Milfoil. We can all really agree with that. There has been no proof that these chemicals affect our lake, however, it seems best to limit chemicals put into our lake. What we do know is that controlling Eurasian Milfoil has a positive effect on fish habitat. Limiting high speed boating in Musky Bay will have a positive effect on our lake as advised by DNR from results they have from other lakes in our area. So please help us on this issue. Speeding in Musky Bay, can result in a fine from the DNR. We highly encourage reporting offensive actions. We continue to have a very exuberant lake for fishing as well as motor sports so let's all embrace it. Let's have many positive future



years on Connors Lake as well as on Lake of the Pines. Many people have said to me that our two lakes are jewels in the area.

I would really like to thank Ed Peters and Tom Stram for all of their work with the DNR, the Town Board and others and for them writing the applications for the permits and working with them to get the permits approved. Anyone who has been involved in this process knows these few words over simplify the process.

To Ted and Jaime Wilson, thank you so very much for putting the anchors into the waters for these buoys. Really great working with you, what an enjoyable experience. In addition, Ted has volunteered to put in the new anchor lines for the shallow water buoys. The current anchor lines have deteriorated or disappeared, (as would be expected over time) so we have to replace. Ted thank you very much. So let's all give a shout out to Ed, Tom, Ted and Jaime. It's really great to have leaders like them.

Thank you,

Florian Wisinski
Treasurer – Connors Lake / Lake of the Pines Lake Association



FIREWORKS!!

July 4th at 10:00pm at the Connors Lake beach/swim area.

Rick will not be doing them this year, but we found someone else who is willing to put on a show for us! The fireworks are made from biodegradable rice paper and will dissolve in a day or so after they are shot off. The new company needs about 30 minutes for set up and the show will be about 30 minutes long. We will need people to stay away from the beach and swim area during the show. We could also use some volunteers for clean-up, traffic control, and miscellaneous duties. You can be on the water in your boat during the show but stay away from swim area please. If you or friends need parking the Flambeau Forest Inn has a large field that you can park in and walk to the beach.



Connors Lake Open/Coniferous Bog

On the south and east shore of Muskie Bay there is a special plant community called an open/coniferous bog. The peninsula at the southern edge of Muskie Bay and extending into the lake is an island connected to the shore by a bog.

Many years ago, there was a large U-shaped log cabin on the island leased from the state by the Peloquin family. Bogs are a specialized wetland type found on a carpet of sphagnum moss or peat moss that tend to be acidic and low in nutrients. Bogs are one stage in the succession from open water to a hardwood forest. They originate from a floating mat of sedges that become colonized by sphagnum mosses. The mat gradually thickens, becomes stable and is invaded by evergreen shrubs, sedges, and eventually immature and stunted black spruce and tamarack. Bogs provide habitat for a special gathering of flora including orchids and insectivorous plants: pink lady's -slippers, nodding ladies tresses orchids, pitcher plant and sundew. Also found are herbs and low shrubs including cranberry, bog rosemary and leatherleaf. I have not seen pink lady's-slippers in this bog but rather along the shore of Papoose Lake. Bogs are an important habitat for northern wildlife species especially amphibians, reptiles and birds.

Last year our Loon pair checked out the bog for possible nesting purposes. Occasionally a family of otters pass my dock and disappear into the bog. Commercial sphagnum moss or peat moss harvesting has been used for fuel, mulch, packing, bedding and during WWI as a surgical dressing. This summer, check out the bog close up with your canoe or kayak.



Pink Lady Slipper



Pitcher Plant

Natural Connections

Hemlock and Paper Birch: An Odd Couple

By Emily Stone, Naturalist/Education Director at the Cable Natural History Museum

Eastern hemlock thrives in the deep shade of its elders, while paper birch craves almost full sun. These evergreen and deciduous trees could hardly be more different...until you look more closely at their tiny, winged seeds and the nurse stumps where they each find purchase. In this week's Natural Connections, we'll explore the relationship between this odd couple while snowshoeing on the beautiful Forest Lodge Estate.

At the trail intersection I turned left, looked up, and paused for just a moment to appreciate the dark green lace of the hemlock thicket in front of me. Several "redwoods of the east" towered elegantly in a grove. Beneath them, broken-topped boles wore the same dark brown furrowed bark. And filling in between were young hemlocks of all ages lending a shimmer of green to the mostly black-and-white forest.

This is one of my favorite spots along the trails of the Forest Lodge Estate. Mary Griggs Burke, the Cable Natural History Museum's founder, bequeathed her 872-acre retreat on the south shore of Lake Namakagon to the Forest Service for research and education. Northland College manages access. I often guide hikes. The crunching of a dozen snowshoes behind reminded me that I wasn't alone in this special spot.

Why is a grove of bushy baby hemlocks so special? Here in northern Wisconsin, we are at the far edge of eastern hemlock range. Just a few outliers exist farther west and north, but the heart of their habitat extends up Appalachia to the northeast. Perhaps the trees just

haven't had time to migrate back after the most recent glaciation plowed them away—only 14,000 years ago or so—or maybe the moisture runs low as the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains creeps in across the plains. Even in places where hemlocks are abundant, white-tailed deer often nibble the young ones to death and regeneration can be spotty.

We admired the thicket—that has somehow escaped the deer—and breathed in the magical, primordial air (is that being overly dramatic?). Then a bitter gust off the icy lake set us moving again.

Just around the corner two grayish, old paper birch trees caught my eye.



Inside this tiny eastern hemlock cone are even smaller seeds that need a little bit of luck to ever become a tree. Photo by Emily Stone

At first glance paper birch and eastern hemlock are about as different as trees can get. There's the bark, of course: smooth, pale, relatively thin and peeling, vs. thick, dark, corky ridges. Also their leaves, and the fact that birches lose their broad, bright green suncatchers each fall while hemlock holds on tight. Hemlock holds onto life a lot longer in general—growing for hundreds of years—while birches live a more human-scale existence

of mere decades.

Over those centuries, the acid in hemlock needles washes nutrients out of the soil, while the rapid decomposition of birch leaves results in soils enriched in Ca, Mg, K, Mn, Fe...an alphabet soup of minerals.

One of the first things I learned in botany class was that hemlocks are the most shade tolerant tree in their range, while paper birches are at the other end of the spectrum, only exceeded by aspen and pin cherry in their demand for sun. Plus, paper birch is near the southern end of its range here but extends north to the edge of the treeless tundra. In contrast, yellow birch's range, shade tolerance, and ecology more closely

match that of hemlock—so much so that "hemlock-yellow birch" is an official cover type.

I wouldn't have been surprised to see yellow birch in this forest, and yet here instead was its sun-loving relative growing among the hemlocks.

A few more steps down the trail, I spotted one of my favorite teaching spots. Under heaps of snow were the spiked turrets and sloping sides of a hemlock stump, likely rotting since 1888 when this area was clearcut by the Northern Wisconsin Lumber Company. From that stump rose a slender young hemlock tree, only a few inches in diameter and maybe twice as tall as me. And, brushing away the snow, I revealed another piece in the puzzle: the grayed bark of a long-dead birch tree, its knee still hooked over the edge of the old stump where it had once grown, too. Not even steps away, this odd couple had almost been hugging.

This scene tells not of the trees' differences, but what they have in common. Hemlocks bear their seeds in tiny cones, not unlike the cylindrical catkins of birch, which are just more fragile and ephemeral. And inside each structure are tiny seeds flanked by papery wings. Those seeds mature in late summer, and drop throughout the winter, sometimes skittering over crusty snow in a race to get farther from the crushing shade of their parent tree. While both species produce lots of seeds almost every year after they reach age 15, they face equally poor

odds that any one seed will ever germinate, survive seedlinghood, or become a new tree.

One thing that increases the odds of successful germination in hemlock and the birches is a lucky landing on the spongy surface of a rotting log or stump. Here—like on my friend who died in 1888—the moist environment, relatively warmer temperatures above ground level, and protection from pathogenic fungi—result in a cozy nursery. Without the benefit of a nurse log or nurse stump, the trees would need bare soil, consistent moisture, and a

lot more luck.

With that in mind, maybe it's not so crazy to think that the hemlock grove we passed earlier—where they have somehow, against the odds, sprouted like crazy—does have a little magic in the air.

Emily's award-winning second book, *Natural Connections: Dreaming of an Elfin Skimmer*, is now available to purchase at www.cablemuseum.org/books and at your local independent bookstore, too.

For more than 50 years, the Cable Natural History Museum has served to connect you to the

Northwoods. Visit our *Mysteries of the Night* exhibit before it closes at the end of February. Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and cablemuseum.org to see what we are up to.



Inside the cone-shaped catkins of birch are their tiny, winged seeds. Four-pointed bracts protect the seeds until it all falls apart. Photo by Emily Stone.



Nurse stumps are warm, damp places where seeds of hemlock, birch, and more can find a slightly more hospitable place to germinate. As the stump rots away under the new tree, roots often form funny looking knees. Photo by Emily Stone.

TEE SHIRTS!!

We are also selling Lake Association Tee Shirts this year. They available at the Flambeau Forest Inn!

The colors available are dark gray, brown, teal, and olive. Sizes available are small-2xl (not all colors are available in all sizes).

Costs range from \$15.00 through \$19.00 depending on size (small-2xl=\$15.00 and 2xl=\$19.00). There are a limited quantity of sizes and colors.



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