

The Cherokee Marsh News

The newsletter of the Friends of Cherokee Marsh

Marsh Hay Harvest Benefits the Wetland

Jan Axelson

If you've recently traveled out N. Sherman Ave., maybe you noticed the cutting and harvesting of the grasses and other vegetation in the "east marsh" across the road from the Cherokee Golf Course.

The goal of the harvest, performed by a local farmer under the supervision of Madison Parks, was to remove excess nutrients from the land to encourage the growth of native sedges, grasses, and flowers.

In 2008, with help from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund and other partners, the City of Madison obtained the 200+ acres of the east marsh from previous owner Cherokee Park, Inc. Historically, much of this area was sedge meadow, a type of wetland that has a mixture of sedges (grass-like plants often found in wetlands) along with grasses and flowers.

Sedge meadows thrive in nutrient-poor soils. Over the years, farming and other development have caused volumes of nutrient-rich stormwater to flow onto the east marsh's wetland. The nutrients encourage the growth of invasive plants such as reed canary grass. The invasives out-compete native plants and form a monoculture with little value to wildlife.

With City ownership, the Madison Parks Division has begun the task of restoring the land to a healthy sedge meadow. Harvesting reed canary grass as "marsh hay" helps the land by removing the nutrients in the current year's growth. Harvesting marsh hay has long been a way for farmers to obtain value from land that is too wet to plow.

Cottage Grove farmer Andy Hornung cut and baled the marsh hay from the east marsh. Andy will use the hay as feed and possibly bedding for his beef cattle. The opportunity to harvest the hay was especially welcome because the farm's early hay crop failed due to the drought. No money exchanged hands; the payment was in the harvest.

Perhaps the Hornung name sounds familiar. The east marsh was once part of the Hornung Brothers farm owned by Andy's grandfather and great uncle. As a child, Andy's father, John Hornung, used to cut marsh hay in the east



The marsh hay harvested from the east marsh will benefit the wetland by removing excess nutrients from the land.

Photo by Jim Hughes.

marsh. The patch of woods at the corner of Wheeler Rd. and N. Sherman Ave. is still known as the Hornung woods.

Other management tools for the east marsh include filling ditches and controlled burns. The land has a network of ditches dug long ago in an effort to dry out the land to allow farming. With support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Parks has begun the process of filling the ditches to restore the wetlands. Parks also plans to use controlled burns to kill invasive plants. The burns don't harm the native plants, which have adapted to fire.

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Cherokee Marsh and the Drought of 2012

Jan Axelson

In the midst of this summer's drought, a friend commented to me that I must be very worried about the health of Cherokee Marsh. That comment got me thinking. What effect has the drought had on the wetlands of Cherokee Marsh?

In June of this year, Madison received just 0.31 inches of rain, compared to the average of 4.54 inches. Total rainfall from June 1 through July 26 was 3.58 inches, compared to average total rainfall of 8.72 inches for June and July.

One way to see the effect of the drought is to visit the marsh's natural areas. While unwatered lawns and mowed park land turned a uniform tan due to lack of rain, the natural areas were thick with healthy, growing vegetation. (A bonus of the dry weather is few biting bugs when exploring the areas.)

The wetlands and other nearby natural areas at Cherokee Marsh can survive and even thrive in drought because the native grasses, sedges, flowers, shrubs, and trees are adapted for our climate, which can include long dry spells.

Prairie plants are famous for their root systems, which can pull water from deep in the soil. The roots of big bluestem grass can be nine feet long, while the roots of compass plant, a native sunflower, can reach 15 feet.

Many wetland plants depend more on groundwater from below rather than rainfall from above. Rainwater that seeps into the ground feeds and replenishes the groundwater supply, so with less rainfall, groundwater levels can drop. But again, native wetland plants have adapted to survive fluctuating water levels, which are part the wetland's natural cycle.

The Cherokee Marsh wetlands do face one risk in drought: peat fire. Cherokee Marsh has extensive peat wetlands. Peat soil is organic soil made up of partially decomposed vegetation. If the groundwater levels fall, the peat can dry out. Madison Parks Conservation Resource Supervisor Russ Hefty says, "Peat soil will burn if it's dry. A peat fire will destroy the soil and all that grew in it. The fire won't stop until it hits the groundwater."

For this reason, Parks staff performs controlled burns of the wetlands only when the groundwater is high enough so that setting the peat on fire isn't a danger.

One location where rainfall does make a difference is the upper Yahara River. The water level of Lake Mendota affects the level of the upper Yahara River for over two miles upstream from the HWY 113 bridge.

The water level of Lake Mendota is determined in part by the management of the Tenney Park dam as specified by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. This year's dry summer dramatically demonstrated how



This American avocet was one of hundreds of shorebirds that visited the upper Yahara River's mudflats during low water this summer. *Photo by Jim Hughes.*

managing Lake Mendota at a lower level would benefit the Cherokee Marsh ecosystem.

On July 3, the water level on Lake Mendota fell below its target summer minimum level and remained below the target until the rains of July 26. In mid-July, Lake Mendota was almost 4 inches below its target minimum.

The lower, more stable water levels have encouraged the growth of desirable aquatic plants such as sago pondweed, long-leaf sago pond plant, and American lotus. These plants attract wildlife, capture sediments, and help prevent erosion by buffering the shorelines.

The lower water levels also resulted in mudflats along the river's edge. In July, the mudflats attracted hundreds of migrating shorebirds, including a rare American avocet, normally found only as far east as the Dakotas. Also enjoying the low water levels were large numbers of great blue herons and sandhill cranes.

Keep in touch!

Email group - news and discussion

www.groups.yahoo.com/group/cherokeemarsh

Facebook page - news

www.facebook.com/friends.of.cherokee.marsh

Facebook group - photos, open discussion

www.facebook.com/groups/cherokee.marsh

Events Calendar

Directions to locations follow the event listings.

Canoe or Kayak the Cherokee Marsh Restoration

Saturday, August 4, 8:00 – 11:00 am

School Road Boat Landing

View restored beds of American lotus and learn how the plantings are helping prevent erosion along the river. We'll also look for herons, sandhill cranes, bald eagles, and other marsh critters. The guide will be Madison Parks' Conservation Resource Supervisor Russ Hefty. This is a joint trip with Madison Parks, Madison Audubon, and the Wisconsin Wetlands Association.

Bring your own canoe or kayak for this tour.

The Friends at Ride the Drive Northside

Sunday, August 12, 10:00 am – 3:00 pm

Ride the Drive Northside is a chance to bike Northside streets without cars. The Friends will have a table at the corner of Troy Dr. and Forster Dr.

www.cityofmadison.com/parks/ridethedrive/northside

The Friends at the Clean Lakes Festival

Saturday, August 18, 11:00 am – 3:00 pm

The Clean Lakes Festival will again be at Olin Park, 1156 Olin-Turville Court, off John Nolen Dr. on Lake Monona. Stop by our table and say hi.

www.cleanlakesfestival.com

The Friends at Northside Farmers Market

Sunday, August 19, 8:30 am – 12:30 pm AND

Sunday, September 16, 8:30 am – 12:30 pm

On these dates, the Friends will be at the Northside Farmers Market, in the Northside TownCenter, on the corner of N. Sherman Ave. and Northport Dr.

www.northsidefarmersmarket.org

Look for Bats!

Saturday, September 22, 7 – 9 pm

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park North Unit

Did you know that a single little brown bat can catch 1,200 mosquito-size insects in an hour? Learn about bats, the world's only flying mammal, and explore the park at night with guide Andrea Blattner, who will use a portable bat detector to find and identify bats as they feed on insects overhead. Presented with support from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource's Bat

Monitoring Program.

Fall Color Walk

Wednesday, October 10, 5:30 – 7:00 pm

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park North Unit

Enjoy the fall colors and learn how fire and brush removal help the prairies and oak openings thrive. The guide will be Madison Parks' Conservation Resource Supervisor Russ Hefty. This is a joint trip with Madison Parks and Madison Audubon.

Directions

Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park North Unit

6098 N. Sherman Ave. Head north on N. Sherman Ave to the parking lot at the end of the road.

School Road Boat Landing

Heading north on Northport Drive/HWY 113 from the intersection with N. Sherman Ave., turn right on School Rd. Where the road curves right onto Wheeler Rd. take an immediate left into Cherokee Marsh Conservation Park. Follow the gravel road to the boat landing.

Friends of Cherokee Marsh

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www.CherokeeMarsh.org

To protect, preserve, and restore the beauty, value, and health of the Cherokee Marsh and upper Yahara River watershed.

Directors

Jan Axelson (President)

Timothy Baker

Janet Battista (Vice President)

Dana Erlandsen

Lesleigh Luttrell (Treasurer)

Lydia Maurer

Justin Sargent

Muriel Simms

Dick Walker

Dorothy Wheeler (Secretary)

Advisor (non-voting)

Don Hammes



Membership Form

Join or renew online at CherokeeMarsh.org

YES! I want to be a Friend of Cherokee Marsh.

Your contribution of time, talent, or funds will help preserve and restore the crucial wetland ecosystem of Cherokee Marsh.

- Individual \$15
- Family \$25
- Mallard \$50
- Osprey \$100
- Sandhill Crane \$250
- Great Blue Heron \$500

- Additional donation \$ _____
- Additional donation \$ _____ in honor of _____
- Additional donation \$ _____ in memory of _____

Memberships are per calendar year. New memberships paid after June 30 are valid through the current and following year.

In addition to my contribution, I can help with

- Field work
- Publicity
- Tours
- Education
- Board/Committees

Other _____

Name _____

Family member(s) _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone _____ Email _____ Second Email _____

We won't sell or distribute your email address.

- Don't publicize my financial support.

Please mail this form and payment to:

Friends of Cherokee Marsh, PO Box 3390, Madison WI 53704

Thank you for joining us in our effort to protect this valuable resource!

www.CherokeeMarsh.org

The Friends of Cherokee Marsh are dedicated to protecting, preserving, and restoring the beauty, value, and health of Cherokee Marsh and the upper Yahara River watershed.

The Friends of Cherokee Marsh is a Federal tax-exempt charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.