



Wild rice, Wolf River, Oneida County, photo by Ron Eckstein

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Resilient Like Water: Navigating the impacts of federal changes for our waters

By Carolyn Pralle, Edited by Nancy Larson

When my almost-two-year old takes a big swig of water from his sippy cup, he invariably smacks the cup down and announces, "Ahhh," his bright brown eyes twinkling. "Ahhh," I say back, "that water is good, huh?" Lately, I've been learning not to take our clean water for granted. In many parts of Wisconsin, nitrate pollution, PFAS contamination, lead, and other issues impair our water quality. Although great improvements have been made since the 1970s, the Trump Administration's executive orders, deregulation, and budget cuts threaten to undo protections forged through the Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, National Environmental Protection Act, and other environmental laws.

Protecting water is central to our work at Wisconsin's Green Fire. Water quality dominates our priorities for 2025. We're evaluating what the rapid changes at the federal level mean for Wisconsin, and what actions to take ourselves and with partners. Read on to hear from WGF experts about some water topics we're focused on, and suggestions for actions you can take.

How are recent federal changes impacting water in Wisconsin?

Federal laws and funding to state agencies like the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) are the cornerstone of protecting Wisconsin's waters. WDNR carries out many regulatory programs under the Clean Water Act with federal funding. Cutbacks will mean more pollutants, including toxic substances, in Wisconsin's waters. Staffing reductions at federal agencies will impact the ability to enforce and implement the Clean Water Act. Curtailing research at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and other agencies imperils aquatic ecosystems and public health.

Continue reading on page 5



Reflections

A Message from WGF Leadership

By Meleesa Johnson

Staying True to Our Values

When I sat down to write this reflection, I wondered how I could keep it timely enough.

Conservation news is changing daily, if not hourly. We face a barrage of attacks from the federal government: funding cuts, environmental deregulation, and an atmosphere of shock-and-awe chaos. But we are facing those attacks head on. We are not backing down from our work. We hold strong to our values: integrity, inclusivity, respect, and always grounding our work in science and knowledge. We are "Wisconsin Strong."

I'm proud of the work we do. We truly are a community of voices for conservation. We have a trusted reputation because we live up to our values. We deliver reliable, sound science-based information in our work products. Decision-makers in state and local governments listen to our recommendations. We know how to navigate the process.

Yet, navigating the current chaos is hard. We need strong coalitions, both with tried-and-true partners and new allies. When a new issue arises—whether that's the effects of wake boats on lakes, or attempts to gut the Endangered Species Act—the first question is always: do we go this alone, or work together? Almost always, the answer is "let's work together."

I like building coalitions. It's my passion in both my private life, working to alleviate homelessness in Stevens Point, and in my role as executive

director of WGF. Take the wake boat issue for example. Alongside our partners, we've built a diverse coalition of over 75 organizations representing over 100,000 Wisconsinites. We don't always agree, but we listen to each other. Where we can't find consensus, we find alignment. It's not just wake boats, either. We're organizing and joining coalitions related to climate action, conserving wild birds, dealing with neonics, and building new sources of conservation funding.

The chaos is intense right now, but it is not new. We were forged out of the fires of Wisconsin's Walker Administration. Out of those challenges, we've grown to advance science and conservation in this state we love so dearly.

It's time for us to grow again. We suffered a big financial blow due to funding disruptions for our Farm Sustainability Rewards Project and other grant-funded projects. Yet, we remain committed to our strategic plan and our values. We need to grow our membership, deepen our relationships, and magnify our voices.

I want to hear from you. Scan the QR code below to answer a one-question survey (or email or call) to tell me:

"Why do you choose to support Wisconsin's Green Fire?" Share that message with a friend, a neighbor, a colleague.

Thank you for all you do for WGF. Together, we truly are Wisconsin Strong!



Students and professionals at our 3rd Annual Wisconsin Conservation Retreat, co-organized with UWO-SEAC, Jan. 2025

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Take Meleesa's
1-question survey:

<< Scan here or go to:
<https://tinyurl.com/why-i-support-WGF>

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Riddle answer from page 8:
Fire



LIGHTNING FLASH UPDATES



Neonics: Common Insecticides with Big Ecological Consequences

by Bill Fisher

Insects: we marvel at them and are annoyed by them. They pollinate our garden asters and squash plants but feed on our tomato plants and corn crops. We try to control insects with insecticides, and the most widely used insecticides in Wisconsin, and the world, are neonicotinoids or “neonics” for short.

Neonicotinoids were introduced in the 1990s to replace another class of harmful insecticides called organophosphates. In the last decade, the use of neonics has dramatically increased. Nearly all corn seeds and the majority of soybean seeds planted in the United States are coated with neonics. Foliar sprays are used on garden plants and even on pets to control fleas and ticks.

An effective neurotoxin, neonics easily dissolve in water. They accumulate and persist in soil. Neonics are transported in groundwater and via runoff to streams where they kill aquatic insects that provide food for trout and other organisms that live in streams, rivers, and lakes. Beneficial insects such as pollinators including bees and butterflies are killed or suffer delayed mortality by eating pollen, nectar and other plant tissues containing neonicotinoids. Neonics have also been shown to impact human health, particularly in pregnant women.

Currently, neonics are exempt from federal regulation, and although Wisconsin tracks pesticide contamination, it lacks enforceable standards for neonics. The European Union has banned the use of neonics. What does this mean for Wisconsin's Green Fire? WGF is teaming up with other conservation and health organizations to support active research and education for all people on the use of neonics and alternatives. Stay tuned for more details on our website and in future newsletters.



Child admiring an
American dagger moth larva,
photo by Mark LaBarbera



Update: Farm Sustainability Rewards (FSR) Project

Our FSR Project team has been designing and modeling an innovative program to reward producers who meet increasing levels of environmental performance on their farms. Although our funding agreement for this project goes through the end of 2025, we, like so many groups that have contracts with federal agencies, are experiencing funding reimbursement disruptions and uncertainty over the program's fate. These disruptions are significant and had the potential to impact operational continuity.

Therefore, as of April 1, 2025, we made the difficult decision to suspend most project activities and furlough project staff. We remain committed to advancing sustainable agriculture in Wisconsin despite this disruption. A small group of volunteers will work over the next few months to evaluate alternate funding options, continue to develop relationships with county conservation departments and interested farmers, and review project scope.



Supporter Spotlight: Mark & Carrie Asplund

by Erica LeMoine

Carrie and Mark Asplund of Birnamwood have been major donors to Wisconsin's Green Fire (WGF) since 2022. Carrie is a horticulturalist and Mark is a retired general surgeon. Mark is a current member of the WGF Board of Directors and multiple WGF Work Groups.

Erica: How did you first get involved with WGF?

Mark and Carrie: It was Marge Gibson from the Raptor Education Group, Inc (REGI) who first told us about WGF. We were talking about the wolf hunt when we were up visiting her. Green Fire had been instrumental in wolf conservation, so we started looking into it.

Erica: Why do you support WGF and what does our science-based approach mean to you?

Mark and Carrie: WGF helps with things we think are very important. We're very interested in conservation and climate in all aspects. Political solutions have just divided us as a country. I think that a science-based apolitical solution is more important and more effective.

Erica: What conservation issues matter most to you and why?

Mark: I think climate and wolf conservation were the first to catch our attention. I've always had the philosophy that we are obligated to give back to make the world better, especially with climate and our grandchildren. I don't want to be the generation responsible for destroying the world. We care about conserving the beauty of Wisconsin. We both grew up in Wisconsin and love every aspect of it, whether it's the birds or the prairie plants.

Carrie: The birds and the effects of pesticides matter to me. Anything that humans are involved with that we can change to make better is important to us. Getting the word out with more education is important. We try to spread the word about WGF whenever we can with family, friends, and acquaintances.

Erica: What else has been a highlight of your experience supporting WGF?

Carrie: I loved meeting the woman who started WGF, Terry Daulton. The origin of WGF is a powerful story.

Mark: The people that we have met are so smart, so dedicated, so knowledgeable--they put me to shame. You know, it's just such a really good group of people. I know a little bit about a lot of things, but I am not an expert. I tell people all the time about the talented, and, you know, just good people at WGF.

Erica: Thank you so much, Mark and Carrie! 

Learn more about supporting WGF at
[wigreenfire.org/make-a-difference/
support-our-work](https://wigreenfire.org/make-a-difference/support-our-work).

Resilient Like Water | From page 1

Wetland deregulation: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and courts redefined the Waters of the United States Rule. As a result, many wetlands are no longer protected by the Clean Water Act. WGF analysis indicates that federal protection will be removed from over 80% of wetlands in Wisconsin. Wisconsin still has strong state-level wetland regulations. However, Wisconsin is not adequately staffed to regulate and enforce what was previously handled by the Corps of Engineers. Wetland losses will make our communities less resilient to flooding and impacts from climate change. Wetland losses here and nationwide will impact wildlife, especially migratory birds.

Drinking water: The federal Executive Order related to DEIJ will impact initiatives to provide lead-free drinking water to low-income communities of color in major cities like Milwaukee. Funding cuts to agricultural conservation programs through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will slash efforts to improve water quality in rural communities. Pollution from agricultural runoff like phosphorus and nitrate continues to impact groundwater and surface waters, polluting drinking water for humans as well as negatively impacting fish, birds, insects, and other parts of the natural world. While the current EPA has announced actions to combat PFAS contamination, details remain unclear. State funding for PFAS cleanups also remains out of reach for Wisconsin communities.



Fish kill in Big Eau Pleine Flowage in Marathon County in 1976, caused by low dissolved oxygen associated with chronic agricultural runoff and water drawdown. Photo by Bob Martini

"Our family enjoys eating local fish. I worry that declines in federal protections will lead to more contaminants and more fish consumption warnings across the state." - Tom Hauge

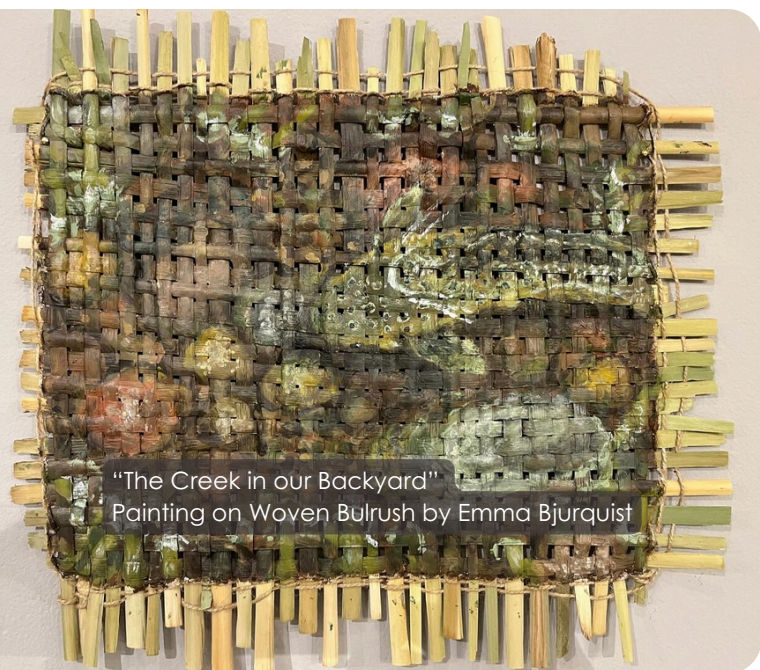
Fish and wildlife: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff in Wisconsin provide critical work to conserve and protect endangered species and their habitats and support landscape-scale habitat restoration in the Great Lakes. They also protect the Great Lakes through sea lamprey control and work to prevent invasive carp species from decimating ecosystems. Office closures and staff cuts put Wisconsin ecosystems in jeopardy.

What should WGF members do in the wake of all these threats to Wisconsin's waters?

Use our voices for conservation! Many of our work group leaders continue to emphasize the importance of contacting your elected officials by phone, email, or in-person.

Michael Cain, co-chair of WGF's Public Trust and Wetlands Work Group adds, "Make it clear that our water resources are critical to our economy and way of life. Steps need to be taken to assure we do not revert to the neglect and mistakes that occurred prior to the 1970s."

Tom Jerow, WGF's Board President says: "Follow our state motto: *Forward*. Forward to clean water and healthy ecosystems. Forward to a clean energy economy. Forward to climate adaptation and resilience."



"The Creek in our Backyard"
Painting on Woven Bulrush by Emma Bjurquist

Call for art submissions! Show us your creative side at wigreenfire.org/art-writing-submission-guidelines

What is harming Wisconsin's large non-hunted wild birds?

An update on WGF's ongoing work with wildlife rehabilitators.

by Kerry Beheler and Mike Meyer

Have you ever brought an injured wild animal to a wildlife rehabilitator? Wildlife rehabilitation is a licensed activity in Wisconsin and wildlife rehabilitators provide essential community services. The Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources (WDNR) requires wildlife rehabilitators to complete and submit an annual report of their patient intakes and final outcomes every calendar year. These data are important but can be inconsistently recorded.

In early 2021, WGF learned that Wisconsin's wildlife rehabilitators were noting increased numbers of illegal shootings and harassment of non-hunted large wild birds including bald eagles, hawks, owls, loons, swans, cranes, and other species. We began a collaborative engagement of WGF wildlife experts and Wisconsin wildlife rehabilitators to dig into the data.

We started with Phase 1 from 2022-2024 as our "proof of concept." (Find our Phase 1 report at: <https://tinyurl.com/injured-birds-phase1>.) We explored datasets from four wildlife rehabilitation centers with consistent records for the 5-year time period 2017-2021. One challenge was the lack of standard reporting formats. We asked: despite this disparate but vital data, is it possible to identify causes, trends, and spatial patterns, and extract quantifiable morbidity and mortality information? The answer was Yes!

Wildlife rehabilitators can serve as an early warning system for zoonotic diseases such as highly pathogenic avian influenza, or bird flu. The data we evaluated revealed injuries and deaths from many causes including collisions with vehicles or buildings, exposure to lead and other man-made toxins, or from being shot. Why does this matter? These birds are an integral part of healthy functioning ecosystems, and many people enjoy seeing these large non-hunted birds. Protecting them conserves biodiversity.

Now in Phase 2 of this Injured Wildlife Project, we are documenting the extent of injury occurrences, quantifying possible trends, and identifying policy, education, and partnership actions. By refining and statistically quantifying the data in a consistent format, we can standardize these important wildlife data for meaningful comparison and analysis. That includes temporal and spatial trends through a Wisconsin Geographic Information System (GIS).

Another important part of Phase 2 is a set of regional stakeholder meetings with rehabilitators planned for fall 2025. The purpose of these meetings is to gather, discuss and learn from the rehabilitators, and to build confidence in the new uniform reporting template. We aim to create collaborative opportunities between Wisconsin wildlife rehabilitators, WDNR wildlife staff, and conservation wardens.

Our Injured Wildlife Project is one part of how WGF works to advance science-informed analysis and policy solutions that address Wisconsin's greatest conservation challenges. Stay tuned for more updates in 2025!

Project funding has been generously provided by: James F. Dutton Foundation, another private foundation, and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology (WSO).



Bald Eagle on nest along the Trimble River, Pierce County, photo by Jeff Henry



UPCOMING EVENT!



PRAIRIE DAY

featuring Neil Diboll, award-winning ecologist & author from Prairie Nursery

Join us for this special event hosted by Mark and Carrie Asplund!



DATE
16 August 2025



TIME
12:00 pm CT



LOCATION
Biramwood, WI



COST
Free!

Details at wigreenfire.org/events

PROFILES IN CONSERVATION



Ron Eckstein *by Don Behm*

Ron Eckstein is a Jack-of-all-conservation-trades. He worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) in Rhinelander for 36 years as a wildlife biologist before his retirement in 2010. Today, Ron is known to WGF supporters as co-chair of the Public Lands and Forestry Work Group, a founding WGF member, and one of WGF's original Board leaders. He currently also serves on the board of the Northwoods Land Trust.

During his WDNR years, Ron witnessed the dramatic resurgence of bald eagles in Wisconsin from the seat of a small airplane during twice yearly surveys of occupied nests (1990-2018), and up close after climbing into those nests atop towering white pines to band and collect blood samples from eaglets (1976-1989). His work helped chronicle population growth and mortality rates, as well as contaminant levels in eaglets.

He was a fully trained special conservation warden helping with gun deer seasons and walleye runs in Spring and investigating trash dumping in state forests. Ron reviewed timber sales on state forests and worked to improve forest habitats for wildlife, particularly game species such as deer, bear and woodcock. And he participated in twice yearly aerial surveys of osprey nests (1976-2010) as well as annual aerial surveys of wild rice beds (1988-2010).

Most memorable were the eagle-eye views of lakes, wetlands and forests after climbing up white pines to their sprawling nests at an average height of around 80 feet above the ground. Whether leaning over the nest's rim or sitting inside to hold eaglets, Ron moved with the top of the tree as it swayed back and forth in each gust of wind. He still smiles about it, saying "the views were beautiful." After retirement, Ron continued working as a volunteer on the eagle and osprey nest surveys for eight more years.



Ron banding eaglets, 1985



Kathleen (Kathy) Wendling *by Amy Mueller*

Kathy Wendling is a Wisconsin's Green Fire member who recently joined the WGF Wildlife team and has an inspiring story of wetland conservation. While serving on her local Town Planning Commission in 2012, two properties in the sensitive headwaters of North Pikes Creek came up for sale. Kathy and two other women knew those sites should be preserved.

With a lot of resourcefulness, Kathy helped create a new 501c3 named the Friends of North Pikes Creek Wetlands (FNPCW) located in Bayfield County. Kathy is the current President of the Board and oversees the ongoing preservation of a combined 410 acres.

Additional priorities for Kathy and FNPCW are wetland education and accessibility. To ensure the wetland was easily accessible they installed a boardwalk and trail signage about the surrounding ecosystem. Even more impressive, Kathy has hosted more than 50 educational programs at Beaver Hollow. She knows this outreach has helped change the hearts and minds of people about the importance of this wetland and the biodiversity it supports. Her passion for connecting people to nature is evident in everything she does. Kathy confesses, "I've always liked everything outdoors."

The North Pikes Creek Wetlands were originally created by beavers. As Kathy began to relocate beavers to the property to help restore it, she began to understand all the benefits beavers provide to both wetlands and people. "The beavers do so much for people – they are such natural architects of water." She is now a devoted beaver believer!

Currently, Kathy is busy organizing a multi-year tree planting effort to replace black ash trees doomed to invasive emerald ash borers. The project will help underplant the existing doomed ash trees with trees native to southern Wisconsin. Migrating trees northward builds climate resilience for the future. No doubt, Kathy's forward thinking will make conservation impacts for years to come.



Kathy relocates a beaver at North Pikes Creek



Can you solve this
conservation riddle?

I leap without legs. I dance in the night.
Warm your heart or give you a fright.
Keep me contained or watch me go wild.
I'm kin to the stars but nobody's child.

Who am I?

(Answer inside on page 3)

Riddle by Carolyn Pralle

Sun through the rain in northern
Wisconsin, photo by Ashley Gries

Together, our green fire
burns brightly!

Thank you for all you do for
Wisconsin's Green Fire.
Will you continue your support
with a donation today?

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