



THE NORTH BRANCH

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE AU SABLE NORTH BRANCH AREA FOUNDATION

Fall/Winter 2019

Protecting the North Branch for over 75 years



From the President's Desk

It's that time of year again. As I write this, the forest floor is carpeted in copper colored pine needles. The trees are still green, but with pops of shimmering reds and yellows. It's fall. The chainsaws are humming, the splitters are droning, and backs are aching from the labors of gathering firewood in preparation for winter. Seems like a good time to review your Foundation's 2019 efforts on behalf of the North Branch watershed.

The River Keeper's kept on keeping. River obstructions were removed as necessary for safe trips down the North Branch.....Our watershed committee successfully completed its first riverbank erosion remediation project, issued a guiding policy statement for future remediation projects, and identified future potential remediation sites.....A committee was formed to monitor the proposed remediation of the Otsego Lake drain outlet which discharges lake water into the North Branch.....The Upper Au Sable Fisheries Work Group continued to meet, discuss and make proposals to assess the health of the North Branch fish population.....The William (Bill) Ross Memorial Scholarship was funded with monies donated to the Foundation by friends of Bill Ross. See accompanying article for more details.....The annual Foundation dinner was a sellout and a warm and fuzzy evening was enjoyed by all.

Special thanks to Howard Johnson and Marlene Swiss for their donations of the cedar seedling centerpieces for the annual dinner.....The Communications Committee awarded our first photo contest prizes to Gary Boyd and Norm Fred.....Our annual public meeting held in September was well attended. Professor Mark Luttenton gave a presentation on his proposed study of the sand loads and aquatic insect biomass in the North Branch. The post presentation audience discussion was lively and interesting.

All in all, it was an exciting and busy year. Thank you to all our members for your contributions. Stay warm this winter and enjoy the snowy white beauty of our North Branch watershed.

Mike Inman

Sand - Blessing and Curse

by Glen Eberly

The Au Sable River, yes, the name means River of Sand. But, has the Au Sable North Branch become The Au Sable Beaucoup River - River of too Much Sand? This is a critical question that needs to be answered to plan much needed restoration work on our beloved North Branch.

A wise Dr. Bryan Burroughs, current Executive Director of Michigan State Trout Unlimited, recently told me that sand in the Au Sable watershed is both a blessing and curse. I bristled at the "blessing" term but he quickly explained. Our Au Sable watershed is one of only a handful of systems, in the world, that drain a glacial outwash plane. Our terrain is made up of sand, gravel, cobble, clay and silt.

The Blessing:

Freestone streams in other parts the country have wild fluctuations of stream depth and velocity where precipitation and snow melt runs off into the streambed causing very high water in the spring and low water in the fall. A heavy rain event can cause a dramatic river surge at any time of the year. However, the sand and gravel of our glacial terrain allows the rain and snow melt to soak into the ground creating an aquifer wherein springs continually feed the stream and keep the depth fairly stable, the water cool and clear year round.

The Curse:

Sand in the streambed covers gravel, which is required for trout and insect reproduction. Aquatic insects provide about 90% of trout food in a wide stream, such as the North Branch. Thus, an excessive sand load in our stream can have a drastic negative effect on our trout population.

The Question:

Is a significant increase in sand load in our streambed responsible for the dramatic decline in our trout population over the past couple of decades?

The Answer:

We don't have the answer yet. But, at the request of Anglers of The Au Sable, Dr. Mark Luttenton of Grand Valley State University has proposed a study which will measure both sand load and aquatic insect biomass (amount of food in the water). Mark is the Associate Dean of the Graduate School and a Professor of Biology. He is also an Associate Research Scientist in the Annis Water Resource Institute. He has planned and executed numerous stream projects including Brown and Brook Trout Telemetry Studies on the Au Sable, trout diseases, and Stream Community Bioenergetics. Dr. Luttenton will utilize graduate students to perform the studies over a two-year period. The entire North Branch will be mapped to define streambed makeup. This will provide a valuable tool for planning restoration work in the future to uncover productive gravel. Insect studies will be done by collecting the "insect drift" in nets in areas of gravel, sand, cobble and silt. This will measure the volume of insects flowing in the river which make up the available trout food. Previous studies done by Michigan DEQ have measured the quality of insects in our river and declared our insect population to be excellent. But, a qualitative measure only means that the important aquatic insects (mayflies, caddis, and stone flies) are present in our stream. It does not measure the biomass to determine if we have sufficient insect volume to feed a healthy population of trout.

Many fishermen and property owners have witnessed a significant reduction in insect volume in the North Branch over the past 10 years. Some insect hatches such as Grannom Caddis and Gray Drake have disappeared while others, Hendrickson, Sulphur, Tricos and Brown Drake have shown a severe decline, This, possibly, has contributed to the trout population decline, especially in the upper reaches of the North Branch.

Funding:

Our valuable conservation partner, Anglers of the Au Sable will be funding the majority of the \$36,000 cost of this project. Because this is one of the most important projects currently planned for the North Branch, this foundation will also be contributing to this project while we assist Anglers with identifying additional sources of funding.

We will keep you informed of progress of this very timely and important project.

No Place for Fertilizer

by Laura Justin

Executive Director, HeadWaters Land Conservancy

On Memorial Weekend, I spoke to a large gathering at the Otsego Lake Association annual meeting. Unfortunately, the message I had to share may soon affect many more of us than those living on Otsego Lake. This is an excerpt from my presentation:

Last fall, while standing on our dock, looking out toward the lake, I noticed a thick line of something that looked just like blue paint coming down the shoreline. My first thought was that someone had dumped something in the lake which was infuriating, but confusing, because of the way the substance travelled. I tried to find a source but was not successful. Two days later, the canal was a bright milky blue color and the DEQ was on their way to take water samples. The results were bad and the DEQ went door-to-door on both sides of the canal to warn us all to stay away from the water. We were in the midst of a bloom of blue-green algae, which is more specifically cyanobacteria.



It's not hard to understand what's happening, why it's happening or how to fix it. There are straightforward causes and solutions but we all have to participate to be successful.

- *Cyanobacteria is present in the lake all the time, and almost every part of the environment. In low levels, it's not harmful and an important part of the biodiverse ecosystem. Just like anything in nature, once an imbalance begins is when things start to go wrong.*
- *Cyanobacteria can increase rapidly in warm, calm waterbodies. As climate change models indicate, our temperatures will continue to increase over time, allowing for more growth of algae and cyanobacteria*
- *Fertilizer run-off from lawns puts phosphate and nitrogen into the water, greatly increasing the likelihood of a toxic bloom. Models for the Great Lakes show a 30% increase in rainfall, especially in the spring. This is the same time that fertilizers are applied and rapidly washed into the lake during a hard rainfall.*
- *Fertilizer remains in the "lake-load" for years after it enters the water. It can continue to cause blue-green algae blooms for years into the future, even if all fertilizer applications were ended immediately*
- *The canal was tested in two different areas for 12 different cyanobacteria microcystin toxin variants. The acceptable level for "recreational contact" is 20 PPB or less. 10 of the microcystin toxin levels came back normal, but 2 of them, known to cause harm to animals and humans, exceeded a safe threshold. The LR variant toxin was recorded at 67 PPB, and more worryingly, the less-studied but possibly more toxic and more persistent variant LA toxin, was found at a concentration of 170 PPB.*
- *The one factor we can 100% control is to STOP USING SYNTHETIC FERTILIZER ON OUR LAWNS! Although it will take several years for the fertilizer levels to subside in the lake, it can ONLY happen if we stop fertilizing our lawns with synthetic fertilizers*
- *As I am writing this article, news that the start of another massive cyanobacteria bloom on Lake Erie was just released. Lakes and rivers we thought were pristine could soon join this list unless we spread the word that no level of fertilizer is acceptable – not near Otsego Lake or the Au Sable River or any body of water. This is a vitally important step for keeping "Up North" a place we love.*

William (Bill) Ross Memorial Scholarship

The Kirtland Foundation is honored to establish the William (Bill) Ross Memorial Scholarship in memory of Bill Ross from Lovells, Michigan at Kirtland Community College thanks to the generosity of his many friends who donated to the Au Sable North Branch Area Foundation in his memory.

Many people knew Bill for his love of the Au Sable River and his conservation efforts. He served on the Au Sable North Branch Area Foundation and was its Chairman for two years. Its Board felt that this scholarship was a perfect way to recognize him for all he did for people in the area. This scholarship will give first preference to students residing in Lovells Township and second preference to students living in Crawford County.

“We are so grateful that this scholarship has been created in Bill’s memory and that this will help individuals from our area to get assistance in pursuing their education that will lead to jobs they will enjoy”, stated Janet Ross, Bill Ross’s widow.

The Ross scholarship will be awarded annually in his memory.

People wishing to give to the William (Bill) Ross Memorial Scholarship at Kirtland can do so by contacting David Lepper at the Kirtland Foundation at 989-275-5000 ext. 446 or david.lepper@kirtland.edu

Annual Meeting Presentation Brings out Large Attendance

The Foundation Annual Meeting, held September 14 at Lovells Township Hall, saw the largest attendance ever. After a review of 2019 activities by the directors, Professor Mark Luttenton, Grand Valley State University, presented information on the current health of the Au Sable system and his planned study of biomass in the North Branch. We learned that trout population has declined across all age classes (egg, fry, young and adults). Possible reasons for the decline include: habitat, temperatures, disease and food supply.

However, it is not all bad news. The water below the Grayling Hatchery has already improved since commercial fish rearing has been eliminated. This indicates that if we can determine specific reasons for the decline, we can take steps to improve the health of the river and its trout. Your foundation will help fund this important study and will keep you informed of progress with the study and our efforts to improve the trout population in the North Branch.

We appreciate your tax deductible donations that make our work possible. We can also accept credit card donations on the web site. Please use the form below to help us maintain and improve our North Branch

Au Sable North Branch Area Foundation

www.ausablenorthbranch.org

Here is my (our) contribution to support the Foundation:

Name: _____ Contribution Amount: _____

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Prevent Riverfront Erosion

by Eric Bankhead

We have noted some riverfront property owners are still mowing clear down to the river's edge. In doing so you are setting your riverfront up for erosion. Which leads to sand in the river, which covers both insect habitat and spawning gravel! Both of these are concerns for the Foundation as well as many other conservation groups here on the Au Sable Watershed.

A buffer strip of native vegetation can prevent the loss of valuable property. Native vegetation absorbs the energy from the current and high water events to prevent erosion. Lawns or short cut grass at the river edge is a common cause of riverbank erosion, as the roots are too shallow to hold the soil. A vegetative strip also prevents contamination from running into the river during rain storms and spring snow melt.

So when you mow, leave a natural strip of 6 feet or so to let the native plants re-establish themselves. Native grasses, sedges, ferns, and bushes have roots that grow much deeper than a mowed lawn. Plant some Cedar trees as well.



From Landscaping for Water Quality, Van Buren Conservation District, Illustration by Glenn Wolf

2019 Photo Contest

We are fortunate to have an number of talented and creative photographs in our area. After to reveiwing all the wonderful submissions, the two winners of the contest are Gary Boyd for his picture of and eagle and Norm Fred for his photo of kayakers on the North Branch (which was used as our front page photo for this newsletter). Both received gift certificates to the Lovells Tavern as their prize. Additional outstanding photos were submitted by Scot Jacot, Bonnie Marsh, Janet Remus and Bonnie Sciba. Their photos can be seen in the Photo Gallery on our web site.

we will be accepting photos for our 2020 Photo Contest from now until June 10, 2020 and will announce the winners at our Annual Dinner. Please send your photos to: northbranchphotos@gmail.com.



A BIG Thank You to Our 2019 Supporters!

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 Jim and Linda Ross, in memory of Bill Ross
 Chuck Wheeker, in memory of Gretchen Wheeker Fergason
 Jim and Ida Wine, in memory of Bill Ross

UPCOMING EVENTS

Trout Opener and Leaky Waders Run
 April 25, 2020 Lovells Twp. Hall

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 248-891-5446
 Marjie Warner, Treasurer
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Mission Statement: *To preserve, protect and enhance the natural endowments of the watershed of the North Branch of the Au Sable River for the benefit of wild fish and game and public enjoyment and appreciation.*

