

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh
Annual Report 2019

Board of Directors

Charles Lee, President
John Sullivan, Treasurer
Nancy Heerens-Knudson, Secretary
Karen Acker
Casey Meehan
Ralph Knudson
Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins

February 5, 2020

The ***Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh*** is a 501(c) 3 private, non-profit organization, incorporated with the State of Wisconsin in 2013. Its mission is to preserve, protect, and enhance the La Crosse River Marsh and serve the community through action, advocacy, and education.

The Board of Directors delivered its first annual report to the membership for the year 2015 in February 2016. In March of 2016, the Board completed a five-year strategic plan, which included five goals. It was introduced at our annual member meeting in February 2017. In subsequent annual meetings, Board members have highlighted the major activities and events of the previous year, using the five goals included in the plan as the basic outline for discussion. The annual report to members this year uses the same format: Here are the most significant activities and events of 2019 arranged according to five goals of the ***Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh***.

2016-2020 Strategic Plan – Goals

1. Protection and Coordination: To protect the La Crosse River Marsh and its riparian boundaries; help direct and guide habitat management; expand wetland acres; secure the highest available level of wetland protection; oppose further development of the marsh; through partnerships enhance La Crosse River watershed services.
2. Vegetation Restoration and Management: To protect, enhance and restore native vegetation in the La Crosse River Marsh and its riparian boundaries to ensure a healthy marsh ecosystem, including grass cutting and brushing, invasive plant management, and habitat modification.
3. Hydraulic and Water Quality Management: To maintain and enhance the La Crosse River's connectivity with the La Crosse Marsh to ensure a healthy functioning floodplain. To reduce nutrient, sediment and other

pollutant loads into the La Crosse Marsh through watershed level and local pollutant control measures. Work with local, state, and federal agencies to find opportunities for water level management and storm water management.

4. **Safety:** To develop a healthy, safe recreation environment. Identify opportunities to improve trail safety and, through education, promote the considerate use of trails by all users.
5. **Education:** To offer educational programs about the value of wetlands, the history, the hydrology, and the flora and fauna of the La Crosse River Marsh, and to emphasize the unique place this marsh holds in the life of our community. We wish to be a catalyst for continuing and expanding educational programming in the marsh, and we wish to promote the La Crosse River Marsh as one of the finest urban wetlands in the state.

2019 Annual Report

1. Protection and Coordination

In October, the La Crosse Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department published a **Request for Information** (RFI) from environmental engineering firms to address hydraulic, trail, and habitat issues in the La Crosse River Marsh. The Friends of the Marsh board made significant contributions to both the substance and format of the RFI. In subsequent weeks, Chuck Lee led representatives of eleven companies on tours of the marsh, introducing them to the site and to the priorities of the proposed project. All eleven submitted portfolios.

A **Request for Proposals** was published on December 15, 2019, with proposals due by February 15, 2020. Again, Friends of the Marsh worked closely with Parks, Recreation, and Forestry. The RFP describes a multi-year project with the following goals: 1) **Hydrology** – improved hydraulic connectivity throughout the river/marsh system within the city to facilitate fluctuations in water levels and, when necessary, increase flood water storage; 2) **Recreation Trails** – to maintain a safe, high quality recreational (walk/bike) and commuting trail system. The north-south, city to state bike trail, east-west, river to bluff trails and the recreational loop (Cottonwood and Grand Crossing) trails are essential; 3) **Habitat** – to build upon and maintain biodiversity and native vegetation with habitat as the primary objective.

If the city successfully contracts with an environmental engineering firm to undertake this multi-year project the results will relate to nearly every aspect of the Friends strategic plan.

- **Habitat Protection**

In February, in partnership with WisCorps, volunteers participated in the Cornell University Ornithology Lab **Great Backyard Bird Count**, a world wide assessment of bird populations. Thirteen volunteers recorded nineteen species of birds.
(See Attachment One)

In partnership with WisCorps, *Friends* conducted three **frog and toad chorus surveys** in the marsh, beginning in April and ending in July. This is a citizen science project designed, together with previous surveys, to measure amphibian well-being and habitat health. At nine sites in the marsh, we gauged chorus frequency for the American Toad, Chorus Frogs, Grey Tree Frogs, Green Frogs, and Leopard Frogs.
(See Attachment Two)

Friends has compiled **phenological** data for the past four years, charting the arrival/appearance of spring. (See Attachment Three)

In February, after a month of deliberations before the city Board of Public Works, **Xcel Energy** accessed the marsh from Myrick Park using a large tracked vehicle (the Marsh Master) to take test borings in preparation for replacing its power lines in the marsh. Subsequent to this experience, Friends assisted in the preparation of a new, more detailed, access agreement for the city to use in future construction projects involving the marsh. John Sullivan prepared an access report in August to describe the impacts of Xcel Energy's heavy equipment use in the marsh. Monitoring revealed impacts on sediment, water depth and vegetation in the access corridor.

Black Tern Nesting Platforms – A dozen black tern platforms were again placed in the marsh in late spring to try to enhance black tern nesting. The platforms were placed at two locations. One site was north of the observation decks and other site was west of the Grand Crossing Trail and north of the Dog Park. There were no signs of black turn use and there were few black tern sightings during the nesting season. However, there was obvious use by ducks and muskrats.

Culvert Maintenance – Periodic culvert cleaning was performed at

two round culverts in the Grand Crossing Trail. These culverts are located several hundred yards north of the Dog Park. These culverts are cleaned to improve water flows and reduce high water levels in the East Cell of the marsh. These culverts have become more critical over the years since similar culverts in the Grand Crossing Trail near the Dog Park are no longer functioning.

- **Coordination**

Represented the Friends on the Environment Leadership Forum (Parks, Recreation, and Forestry), a body charged with trail planning and management.

The Board met with Karl Green (UW Extension) concerning La Crosse River watershed issues and planning. These discussions are ongoing.

Met with the city Parks, Recreation, and Forestry staff and crew to review our 2019 Trail Maintenance Plan, which outlined our plans for 2019 and our general relationship with Park & Rec. regarding marsh and trail issues.

2. Vegetation Restoration and Management

Wildlife Shrubs and Trees – A collection of wildlife shrubs (30 plants of 6 species) was planted along marsh trails in the spring and fall of 2019. The species included: high bush cranberry, serviceberry, silky dogwood, sand cherry and nannyberry. In addition, about two dozen trees were planted at various locations at the southern end of the marsh, along the Grand Crossing Trail and the east end of the Willow Trail in the spring or late summer. Most trees were planted near the Willow Trail following the completion of the riprap work along the La Crosse River. Species included: eastern cottonwood, silver maple, swamp white oak, American elm and American sycamore.

Perennial plantings – About 30 perennial plants consisting of marsh and common milkweeds, cupplants, winterberry, cardinal flower and blue lobelia were planted along trails, especially areas where buckthorn removal has occurred. In addition, seeding with forbs and grass seed occurred at one restoration site located north of the spillway on the west side of the Grand Crossing Trail in the fall of 2019.

Buckthorn Removal Mid-summer, with the assistance the Mayor's WisCorps crew, we cleared Buckthorn and Honeysuckle from the

second bend area of the Cottonwood Trail. This involved pulling new shoots from cuttings we had done a year or two earlier. To facilitate this work, we purchased a number of tools: Uprooter, Pullerbar and dibble bar landscape tools. At the end of the summer we had several volunteer crews cut and treat Buckthorn along the Grand Crossing Trail just south of the footbridge.

Garlic Mustard Again this year, with the assistance of the Mayor's WisCorps crew, we pulled and bagged Garlic Mustard along the Veteran's Trail.

Worked with a WisCorps nature class planting perennials

Trailside tree and shrub trimming – three work outings.

Trailside mowing -- Coordinated trailside mowing with Property Reliance LLC and the city Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department, mowing the edges of the Cottonwood Trail, Grand Crossing Trail (south of the footbridge) and the Jim Asfoor Trail.

3. Hydraulic and Water Quality

Water Quality - Bi-weekly water quality monitoring was conducted at 7 monitoring stations located in the southern portion of the La Crosse Marsh. This monitoring has been ongoing for about the last two years to characterize the general water quality conditions in the marsh.

Water Levels - Daily to bi-weekly water level monitoring has continued at several sites in the southern end of the marsh. The primary site has been at the Gun Club culvert located just to the north of the trailhead on the Cottonwood Trail. Water level monitoring in the marsh began in late 2015 and has revealed moderate to high seasonal fluctuations and a general increase in water levels over the past four years.

4. Safety

Kiosks – Friends constructed four kiosks to replace outdated trail signs. Park & Rec. installed them at trailheads and provided new trail maps that were installed on each kiosk.

5. Education

Nature Guide

During the fall semester 2019 the Friends were fortunate to have a UWL intern, Biology and English major Erin Merklein, work with us to produce a nature guide for the Cottonwood and Grand Crossing loop trail. Erin also wrote summary review articles for three EnviroWednesdays programs.

EnviroWednesdays

Jan 2: Film, "Racing to Extinction"

Feb 6: Friends of the Marsh Annual Meeting

March 6: Driftless Environments and Habitats with Melinda Knutson

April 3: Container Gardens with Joyce Cielecki

May 1: "Strange Beasts and Odd Relatives: How Modern Biology is Shaping Our View of the Tree of Life" with Meredith Thomsen

June 5: Nature Photography with Jeff Sanders

July 3: No session

August 7: "Honey I Shrunk the Universe" with Gordon Stewart

Sept 4: Driftless Prairie Pollinators with Scott Leddy

Oct 2: Nature Poetry with Paul Kosir

Nov 6: "Groove with the Guru" (alternative fuel vehicles) with Chris Schneider

Dec 4: Water Quality and Moonlit walk with Wisconsin Conservation Voters

Outreach

Feb 2: Progresstival

March 2: Washburn Garden Expo

March 2: Climate Action Festival

March 26: Leopold lecture: Tom Mangelson, Wildlife Photographer

March 28: Marsh walk as part of Leopold celebration

April 27: Earth Fair Clean Up

April 28: Earth Fair

June 9: Open Streets

Sept 10: Richard Frost and Karen Acker led the Gundersen Brain Trauma Support Group for marsh walk

December 21: Solstice Walk

Friends of the Marsh Financial Statement – December 31, 2019

Balance December 31, 2019	7,808.90
Income – 2019	
Donations – general	900.00
Memorial – Eagan	990.00
Memberships	550.00
T-Shirt Sales	110.00
Reimbursement – C. Lee	19.79
	<u> </u>
Sub-total	2,569.79
Expenses – 2019	
Buckthorn Removal	471.00
Marketing	25.00
Trees and Shrubs	135.00
Garden Cart	150.00
Karen’s Classroom Repair	300.00
Neighbors Day	250.00
Kiosks Supplies	647.28
	<u> </u>
Sub-total	1,978.28
Balance Dec. 31, 2019	8,400.41
State Bank Balance 12/31/19	8,400.41

Notes:

Total Tree & Shrub Donations = \$1,750.00

Total Tree & Shrub Purchases = \$1,325.64

Balance = \$424.36

Total Volunteer Hours (2019) = 108

Facebook Page and Facebook Group

The *Friends* [Facebook Page](#) is the principal means of communication between the Board and membership and between members and the public. It provides wetland information and education. Currently, we have 1,200 Page “likes.” Through this social media platform, for example, members record observations of significant phenological events in the marsh.

(See attachment 3)

The Friends [Facebook Group](#) is primarily a photo-sharing network. Group members post photos and marsh observations to this site. Currently it has 325 members.

Web Page

<https://www.friendsofthelacrossrivermarsh.com/>

Address

Friends of the Marsh
P.O. Box 1642
La Crosse, WI
54602-1642

Attachment #1 – Great Backyard Bird Count

The last two years, the Friends of the Marsh and WisCorps joined the world-wide Great Backyard Bird Count. On a cold Saturday morning volunteers fanned out along the marsh trails and returned to record their sightings of twenty bird species.

That count, including numbers and species, was later entered into the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology “Bird Count” data base. (see below) There were entries from every continent. Our La Crosse contribution was a small part of the total, but it was significant none-the-less. Participants in the Great Backyard Bird Count help scientists understand how things like climate change are impacting bird populations so we can better inform conservation efforts.

Join us this year for the La Crosse **Great Backyard Bird Count**. Saturday February 15, between 10:00 and 2:00. Come any time. You do not have to stay out the entire four hours – fifteen minutes is enough! Bring family. Bring friends. No experience necessary. Meet in the Marsh View Room of the Myrick Park Center.

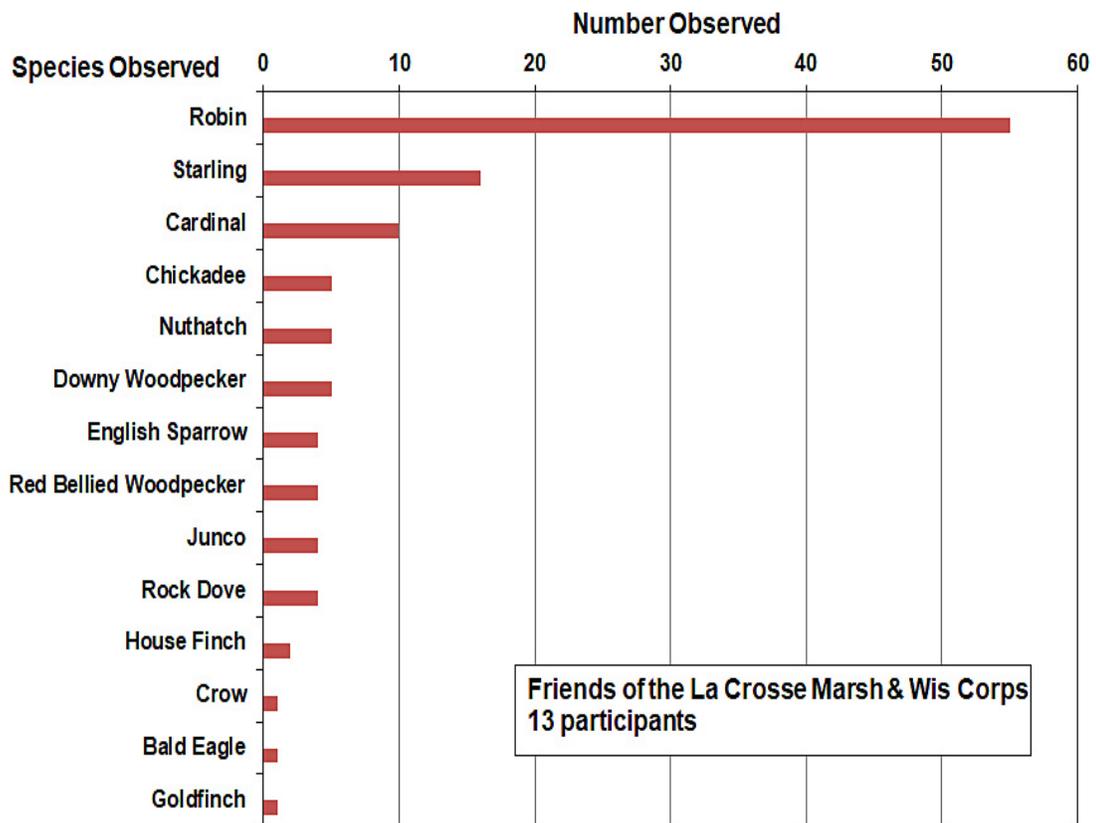
The Great Backyard Bird Count is a joint project of the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) and the [National Audubon Society](#) with partner [Bird Studies Canada](#) and is made possible in part by founding sponsor [Wild Birds Unlimited](#).

2019 Report

Number of participants = 13

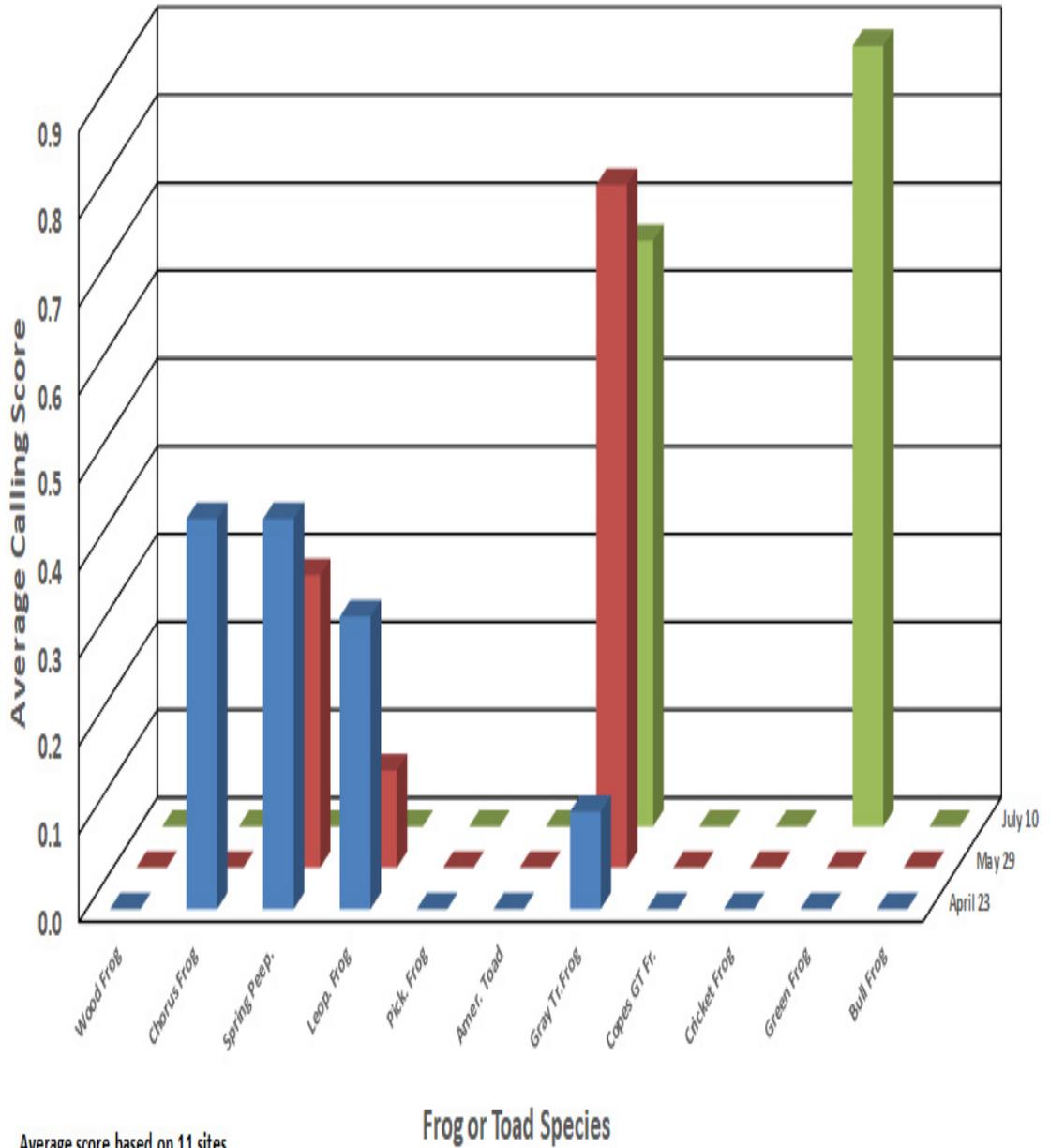
Chickadee — 5
Junco — 4
Bald Eagle — 1
Starling — 16
Downy Woodpecker — 5
Red-Bellied Woodpecker — 4
English Sparrow — 4
Robin — 55
Nuthatch — 5
Cardinal — 10
House Finch — 2
Goldfinch — 1
American Tree Sparrow — 1
Rock Doves — 4
Crow — 1
Pileated Woodpecker — 1

2019 Great Backyard Bird Count Results for the La Crosse Marsh - 2/16/2019



Attachment #2 – 2019 Frog and Toad Survey

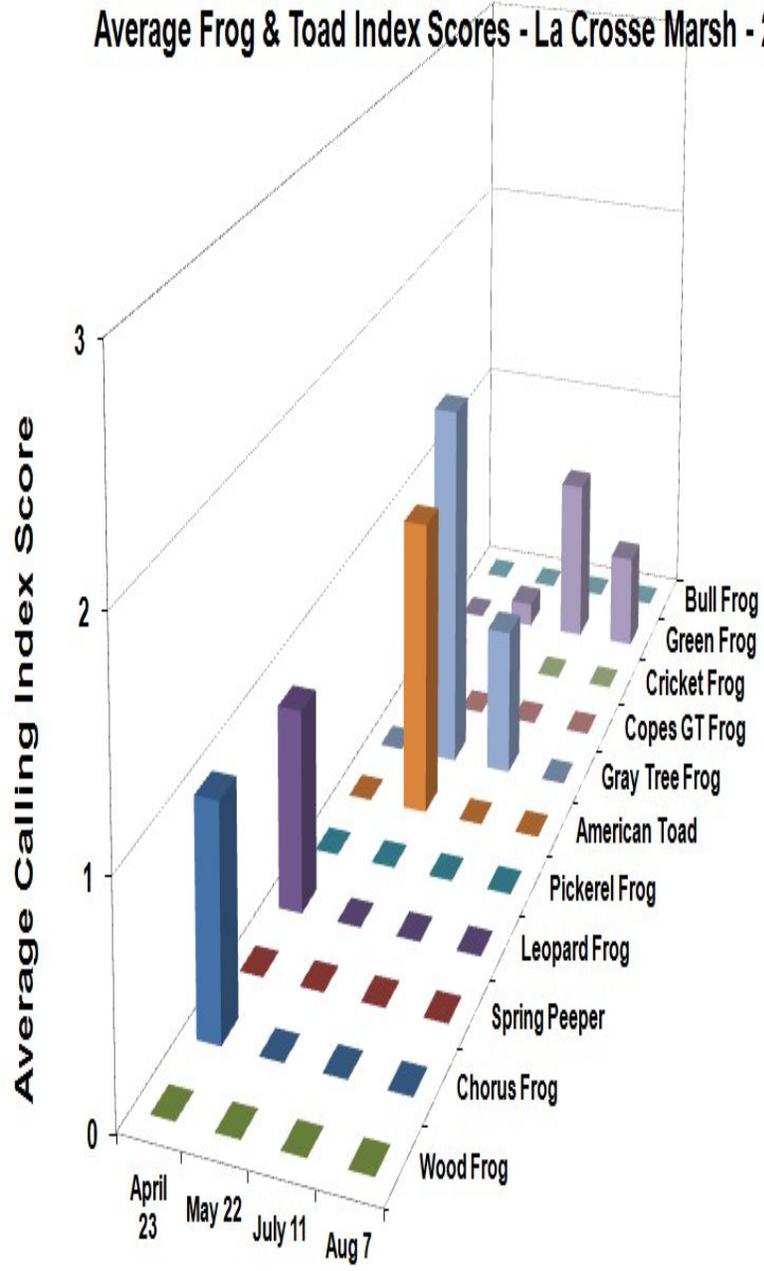
La Crosse Marsh Frog & Toad Survey Summary for 2019



Average score based on 11 sites over 3 dates

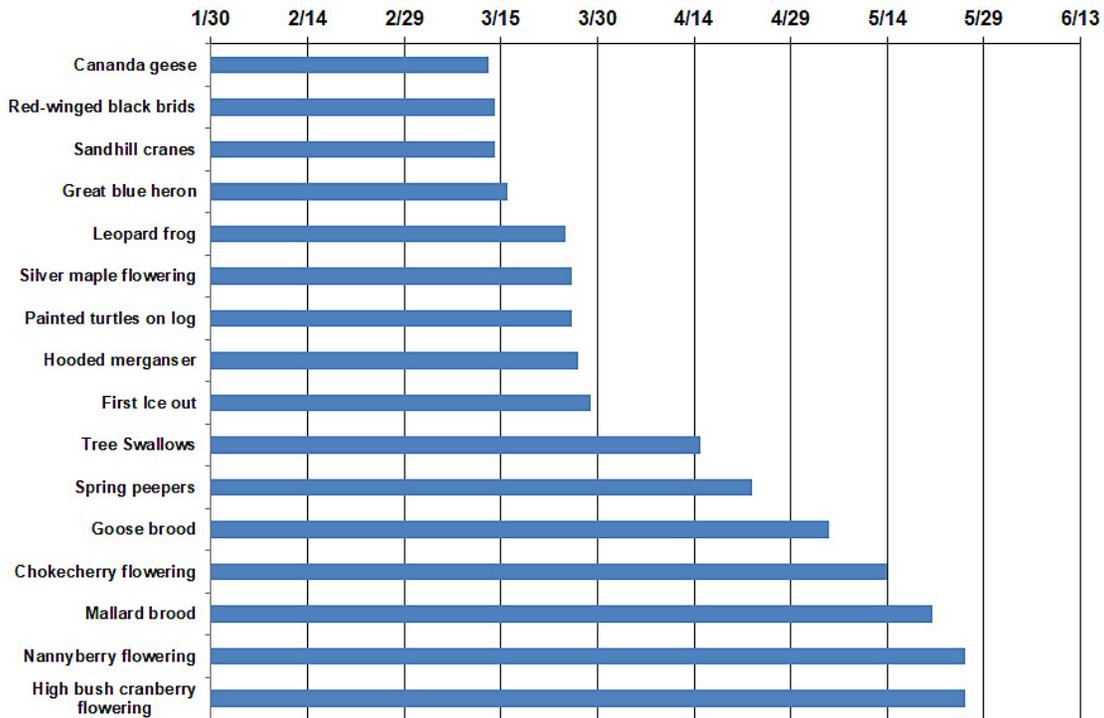
Frog or Toad Species

Average Frog & Toad Index Scores - La Crosse Marsh - 2018



Attachment #3

Spring Phenology in the La Crosse Marsh in 2019



2019 – Phenology La Crosse Marsh

- Canada geese – March 13th (John Sullivan)
- Sandhill cranes – March 14th (Chuck Lee)
- Red-winged blackbirds March 14 (John Sullivan)
- Great blue heron – March 16 (John Sullivan)
- Woodchuck – March 22 (Theresa O'Connor Amberson)
- Leopard frog – March 25 (John Sullivan)
- Painted Turtle on Log – March 26 (Justin Holten)
- Silver Maple trees flowering – March 26 (John Sullivan)
- Common Mergansers – March 27 (John Sullivan)
- Hooded Mergansers - March 27 (John Sullivan)
- Buffleheads – March 28 (Nancy & Ralph Knudson)
- Ring Neck ducks – March 28 (Nancy & Ralph Knudson)
- Ice-out – March 29 (John Sullivan)
- Garter Snake – April 3(Justin Holten)
- American egrets – April 7 (Jeff Sanders)
- Chorus frogs calling - April 7 (Carolyn Jenkins)
- Leopard frogs calling - April 8 (John Sullivan)
- Tree Swallows – April 15 (John Sullivan)
- Box Elder flowering – April 17 (John Sullivan)
- Blue winged teal – April 18 (John Sullivan)

- Dragonflies – April 20 (John Sullivan)
- Sora rail – April 20 (John Sullivan)
- Spring peepers calling – April 23 (Chuck Lee)
- Easter Gray treefrog calling – April 23 (Chuck Lee)
- Goslings – May 5 (Rochelle Hartman)
- Mosquitoes – May 5 (John Sullivan)
- Black terns – May 12 (John Sullivan)
- Choke Cherry flowering – May 14 (John Sullivan)
- American toads calling – May 15 (John Sullivan)
- Mallard brood – May 21 (Rob Tyser)
- Monarch butterfly – May 22 (Justin Holten)
- Highbush cranberry & Nannyberry flowering – May 26 (John Sullivan)

