

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh
Annual Report 2020

Board of Directors

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

February 1, 2021

The ***Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh*** is a 501(c) 3 private, non-profit organization, incorporated in 2013 with the State of Wisconsin. 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 2020 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.

2020 Annual Report

Here we must note that this year bears the imprint of the ongoing **Covid-19 pandemic**. Many of the events, activities, and programs that have been staples of our organization and membership were cancelled or not scheduled due to community spread of the virus: EnviroWednesday programs, volunteer work days, marsh walks, and community events.

1. Protection and Coordination

- **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 fourteen species of birds. (See Attachment #1)

Friends has compiled **phenological** data for the past four years, charting the arrival/appearance of spring. (See Attachment #2)

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. According to our observations, there was **one successful Black Tern nest** located north-west of the observation platforms.

A **Black Bellied Whistling Duck** with a brood of ducklings nested near the Myrick Park Center this summer. This was the first official record of a successful nest in Wisconsin.

Though more limited this year than in the past, **volunteers** logged a combined total of 118 hours of work along the trails in the marsh.

- **Coordination**

Parks, Recreation, & Forestry published a **Request for Proposals** on December 15, 2019 for a five year environmental services project in the marsh, with proposals due by February 15, 2020.

Friends of the Marsh worked closely with Parks, drafting the RFP.

This will be 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.

Parks, Recreation, and Forestry conducted two rounds of review before selecting a contractor. *Friends* board members participated in both rounds. The first featured proposals by eleven firms. The list was narrowed down to three finalists. From our board, Karen Acker and Chuck Lee participated in virtual interviews/presentations and in the final selection of SmithGroup, Professional Environmental Services. A contract for the first of five years has been written and will be finalized shortly.

In November, the *Friends* board endorsed a resolution introduced to the La Crosse Common Council to remove the **North-South Transportation Corridor** from the WisDOT list of enumerated projects. The resolution passed the council unanimously and has been sent on the Governor Evers and Craig Thompson, Secretary of the WisDOT.

Friends board members met with the City of La Crosse consultant John Storlie, of Coulee Environmental Solutions, Inc., on December 3 regarding his report outlining **remediation options for the lead contamination** in the east cell of the marsh and **PAH contamination** along the south and eastern bank of the marsh.

Storlie submitted this report to both the city and DNR. John Sullivan and Chuck Lee have subsequently had a conversation with the DNR about remediation options. There is nothing final to report here.

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 2020. The species included: high bush cranberry, serviceberry, silky dogwood, arrow wood and plum. 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, tamarack, alder, swamp white oak, American elm and American sycamore.

Perennial plantings – Perennial plants, including marsh and common milkweeds, were planted along the Cottonwood Trail. In addition, seeding with forbs and grass seed occurred at sites located at the second and third bends in the Cottonwood Trail. Wild Rice was seeded in two locations in the eastern cells of the marsh.

Buckthorn Removal. At the end of the summer we had several volunteer crews cut and treat Buckthorn at the second and third bends in the Cottonwood Trail.

Garlic Mustard. Again this year, we cut and pulled Garlic Mustard along the Veteran's Trail.

Trailside tree and shrub trimming. We managed to fit in four volunteer work outings to maintain trails, trimming overhanging branches and cutting back thick edge vegetation.

Trailside mowing. We 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 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. (See attachment #3)

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.

4. **Safety**

Trail improvement – In September a volunteer crew cleared vegetation from **two overlook sites** on the Veterans' Trail. Both are a short distance north of the footbridge and both look to the east. In the spring of 2021 a Park & Rec crew will install large limestone boulders to widen these overlooks and we will install benches.

Two **observation decks** are in the planning stage. One will be placed on the edge of the Grand Crossing Trail north of the dog park. The other will be on the edge of the Veterans' Trail north of the footbridge, looking to the west over the river and floodplain forest.

5. **Education**

EnviroWednesdays

February 5: *Friends of the Marsh* Annual Meeting

March 4: Film and Discussion, "NATURE: The Serengetti Rules"

March 7: Washburn Neighborhood Garden Expo

Aldo Leopold Day Presentation -- Tuesday March 3, 2020. Joe Wiegand, "Teddy Roosevelt and American Conservation" Viterbo

University. Saturday March 7, 2020 Craig Thompson, WDNR, “Birder in Chief—Teddy Roosevelt’s Bird Conservation Legacy.”

Outreach

Backwaters an album of instrumental music by Mike Starling, inspired by the Driftless Region environment and released by Momentous Records on YouTube and other digital platforms, featured photographs of the La Crosse River Marsh. Mike offered this album as a free download and encouraged listeners to make a donation to *Friends*. Watch the video at **momentousrecords.com**. Listen to the album at **mikestarling.bandcamp.com**.

Marsh Matters “Curb nutrient pollution in marsh,” Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins, La Crosse *Tribune* (May 17, 2020)

Marsh Matters “Birds Flock to La Crosse Marsh,” Ralph Knudson, La Crosse *Tribune* (September 27, 2020)

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 1,659 followers and 1,559 Page “likes.”

The *Friends* [Facebook Group](#) is our primary means for Facebook members to record their phenological observations and other marsh observations. Many of these are documented with photos. Currently it has 676 members.

Web Page

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

Address

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

Friends of the Marsh Financial Statement – December 31, 2020

Balance December 31, 2019 **8,400.41**

Income – 2020

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Donations – general | 2,725.00 |
| Donations – PayPal | 686.00 |
| Donations – Observation Deck | 200.00 |
| Memberships | 250.00 |
| T-Shirts | <u>70.00</u> |
| Sub-total | 3,931.00 |

Expenses – 2020

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|
| Basal oil (herbicide treatments) | 59.13 |
| Herbicide (Triclopyr 4) | 41.83 |
| Marketing | 25.00 |
| Trees & Shrubs | 99.00 |
| Seed (Prairie Nursery) | 283.55 |
| Refreshments | 56.85 |
| Printing costs | 61.20 |
| Web Domain Fee | 229.95 |
| Post Office Box Fee | 92.00 |
| PayPal Fees | <u>23.60</u> |
| Sub-total | 972.11 |

Balance December 31, 2020 **11,359.30**

State Bank Balance 12/31/2020 **10,948.52**

PayPal Balance Transfer 12/31/2020 **410.78**

Total **11,359.30**

Other Notes:

Total Tree & Shrub Donations = \$1,750.00

Total Tree & Shrub Purchases = \$1,424.64

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.

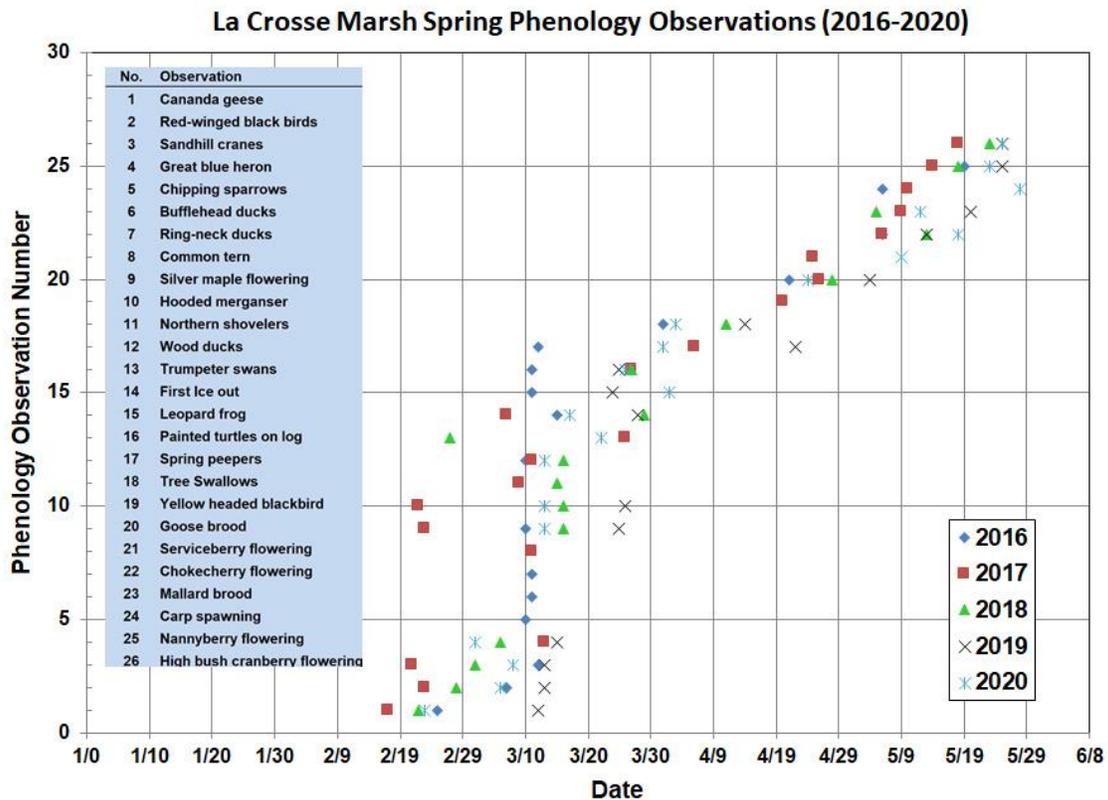
The Great Backyard Bird Count is a joint project of the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) and the [National Audubon Society](#) with partner [Bird Studies Canada](#) and is made possible in part by founding sponsor [Wild Birds Unlimited](#).

2020 Report

Number of participants = 13

Pigeon – 14
Mourning Dove – 12
Merlin Hawk – 1
Downy/Hairy Woodpecker – 2
Pileated Woodpecker – 1
American Crow – 1
Black-capped Chickadee – 3
White-breasted Nuthatch – 1
European Starling – 12
American Robin – 1
House Sparrow – 30
House Finch – 1
Dark-eyed Junco – 4
Northern Cardinal -- 9

Attachment #2 – Phenology



Attachment #3 – Water Levels

**Water Levels in the East Cell of the La Crosse Marsh
October 2015 to October 2020**

