

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh
Annual Report 2021

Board of Directors

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

February 2, 2022

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 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 2021 arranged according to the five goals included in the ***La Crosse River Marsh Strategic Plan, 2021-2025***.

2021-2025 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 and adverse land use changes; through partnerships enhance La Crosse River watershed services.

The *Friends* will coordinate with the City of La Crosse, its consultants, the WDNR and other agencies to address lead and PAH contamination in the marsh.

The *Friends* have and will continue to take a leading role in the City of La Crosse Parks, Recreation, and Forestry project to address hydrology, habitat, and trails.

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 planting, grass cutting and brushing, and invasive plant management.
3. **Hydrology 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.

2021 Annual Report

Again this year we must note that this report 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, including EnviroWednesday programs, volunteer work days, marsh walks, and community events.

1. Protection and Coordination

- **Habitat Protection**

February, 12-15, in partnership with WisCorps, volunteers participated in the Cornell University Ornithology Lab **Great Backyard Bird Count**, a world wide assessment of bird populations. (See Attachment #1)

Friends has compiled **phenological** data for the past five 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. We did not observe successful nesting this year.

Frog and Toad Chorus Survey With volunteers, and in partnership with WisCorps, we conducted three (April - June) frog and toad chorus surveys throughout the southern portion of the marsh. The results were reported to the WDNR.

Muskrat Lodge Survey Muskrat populations naturally vary year to year. This year, John Sullivan conducted a survey of muskrat lodges in a portion of the marsh. (See Attachment #3)

Despite limitations imposed by the pandemic, 65 **volunteers** logged a combined total of 156 hours of work along the trails in the marsh.

- **Coordination**

Friends of the Marsh, represented by Chuck Lee, Karen Acker, and John Sullivan served as local stakeholder consultants to Parks, Recreation and Forestry and SmithGroup, Inc., the environmental engineering firm under contract to the city, on the long-range La Crosse River Marsh Restoration Project. The *Friends* representatives participated in four on site or virtual workshops and contributed substantial follow-up evaluation and comment to each one. Our contributions helped shape the first year report on the project submitted by SmithGroup in November and later presented to members in a virtual webinar. The webinar was filmed and is available on our website.

<https://friendsofthelacrossrivermarsh.com>

Friends of the Marsh endorsed the decision by WisDOT to drop the north-south highway proposal from further consideration as an element of transportation upgrades in the city of La Crosse.

Friends board members continue to monitor deliberations concerning **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. Parks, Recreation, and Forestry has been handed the task of coming to some resolution of this issue with the WDNR.

2. Vegetation Restoration and Management

Native Shrubs and Trees – A collection of wildlife shrubs (30 plants of 6 species) was planted along marsh trails in the spring

and fall of 2021. The species included: high bush cranberry, serviceberry, dogwood, and buttonbush. In addition, about two dozen trees were planted at various locations at the southern end of the marsh, in the spring or late summer. Species included: eastern cottonwood, hackberry, swamp white oak, American elm and American sycamore.

Perennial plantings – Perennial plants, including marsh and common milkweeds, were planted along the Cottonwood Trail. We also maintained native forbes planted in recent years.

Buckthorn Removal. We had several volunteer crews cut and treat Buckthorn at the second and third bends in the Cottonwood Trail.

Trailside tree and shrub trimming. We managed to fit in several 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.

River Point District Wetland Restoration. *Friends of the Marsh* and Parks, Recreation, and Forestry are cooperating to restore the twenty acre wetland and floodplain forest north of Riverside Park, separating the park from River Point District residential and commercial development.

3. Hydrology 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. Water levels were generally lower this year, compared to recent years, reflecting the overall lack of rain. (See attachment #4)

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. We provided assistance in locating two concrete box culverts under the Cottonwood Trail that have been long blocked with debris.

4. Safety

Trail improvement –

We opened a new observation space, looking west from the Grand Crossing Trail.

The annual marsh trail clean up took place on April 24. Organizations, family groups, and individuals joined in this community event.

We spent considerable time this summer trying to manufacture and install railings at two of the concrete box culverts along the Grand Crossing Trail, to no avail. We ran into design, production, and cost problems and, at the end, were surprised by the number of city departments that had a say in what we were proposing. This was not a barrier, but something to keep in mind when we come back to this project in the future.

Friends volunteers cleaned up several abandoned homeless camps in the marsh this year. We have begun to coordinate this task with the police department, Independent Living Resources, and Parks, Recreation, and Forestry. Our efforts are focused on locating camps, finding resources for homeless people, and once the camps are abandoned cleaning them up.

5. Education

Programs

EnviroWednesdays February 3: *Friends of the Marsh* Annual Meeting (virtual)

EnviroWednesdays June 23: The final frog and toad chorus survey for the season; a workshop to learn frog calls.

EnviroWednesdays July 21: Plant Identification Marsh Walk, with Julie Chamberlain.

Aldo Leopold Day Presentation -- Author and naturalist J. Drew Lanham presented "Coloring the Conservation Conversation" as part of the Viterbo University D.B. Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership's Spring Lecture Series at 7 p.m. Friday, March 5 on Facebook Live.

Healthy Wetlands: Navigating Climate Change — September 19, an in person marsh walk presentation by Tracy Hames, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Wetlands Association. Sponsored by the First Congregational Church.

PFAS Seminar —October 4, League of Women Voters virtual seminar on PFAS contamination.

Marsh Restoration Project Webinar — November 17, virtual webinar outlining the first year of the long term marsh restoration project.

Outreach

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. **(1761 followers)**

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. **(970 members)**

<https://www.facebook.com/friendsofthelacrossemarsh>

Web Page

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

Address

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

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh Financial Statement —
December 31, 2021

Balance December 31, 2020	11,359.30
----------------------------------	------------------

Income - 2021

Donations	3,010.00
Donations - PayPal	800.00
Memorials	<u>400.00</u>
Sub-total	4,210.00

Expenses - 2021

Bench	51.39
Insurance	333.00
Marketing	100.00
Post Office Box	106.00
Shipping	145.00
Telescope Repair	505.00
Water Quality Monitor and lab analysis	423.90
PayPal Fees	<u>26.61</u>
Sub-total	1,690.90

Balance December 31, 2021	13,878.40
---------------------------	-----------

State Bank Balance 12/31/2021	13,732.87
PayPal Balance Transfer 12/31/2021	<u>145.53</u>
Total	13,878.40

Other notes:

Total Tree & Shrub Donations =	1,750.00
Total Tree & Shrub Purchases =	1,424.64
Balance =	325.36

Total Household Memberships =	174 (@ \$50/household)
New 2021 Memberships =	12

Attachment #1 – Great Backyard Bird Count

The last three years, the Friends of the Marsh and WisCorps joined the world-wide Great Backyard Bird Count. This year, due to the pandemic, we organized the bird count as a virtual event. Volunteers fanned out across the marsh and later recorded their counts.

That count, including numbers and species, was later entered into the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology “Bird Count” data base. (see below) There were over 13 million bird lists entered, with 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.

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](#).

Great Backyard Bird Count 2021 Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh February 12 – 15, 2021

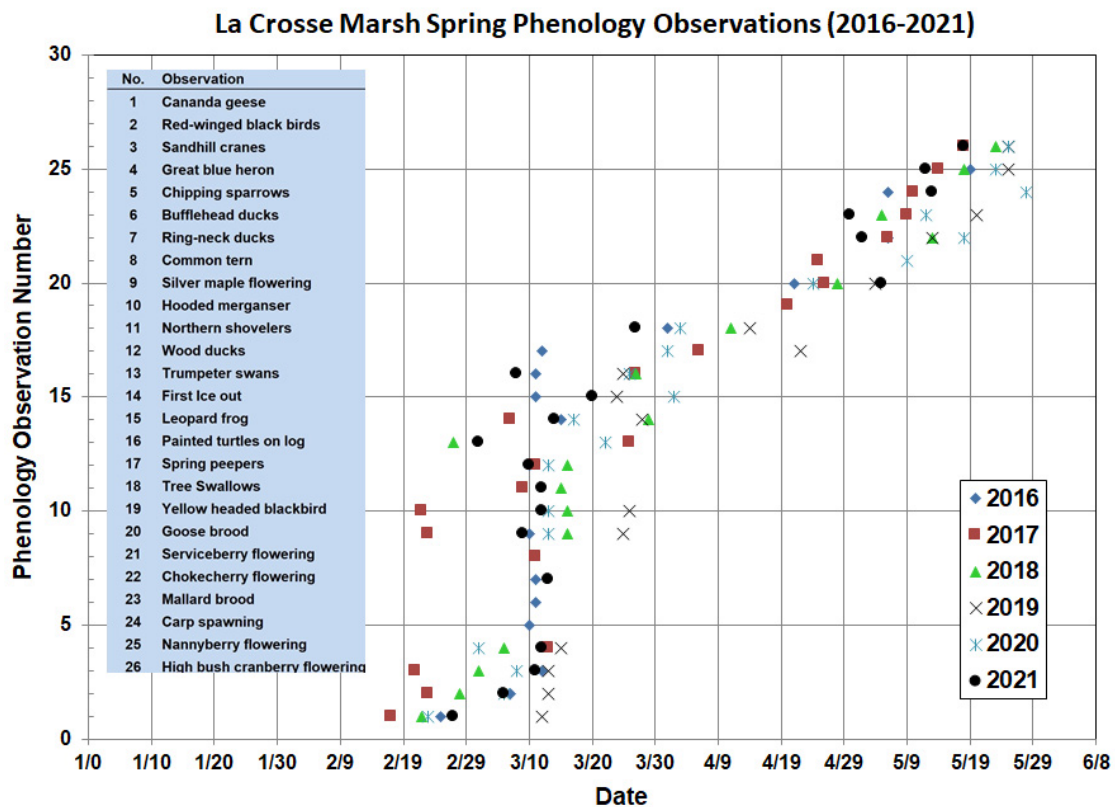
22 Species – 171 Individuals

1 Bald Eagle
3 Red-tailed Hawk
6 Red-bellied Woodpecker
10 Downy Woodpecker
7 Hairy Woodpecker
1 Pileated Woodpecker
2 American Crow
14 Black-capped Chickadee
2 Tufted Titmouse
8 White-breasted Nuthatch
1 Brown Creeper
53 English Sparrow
4 American Goldfinch
3 American Tree Sparrow
6 Junco
27 Dove
3 Robin

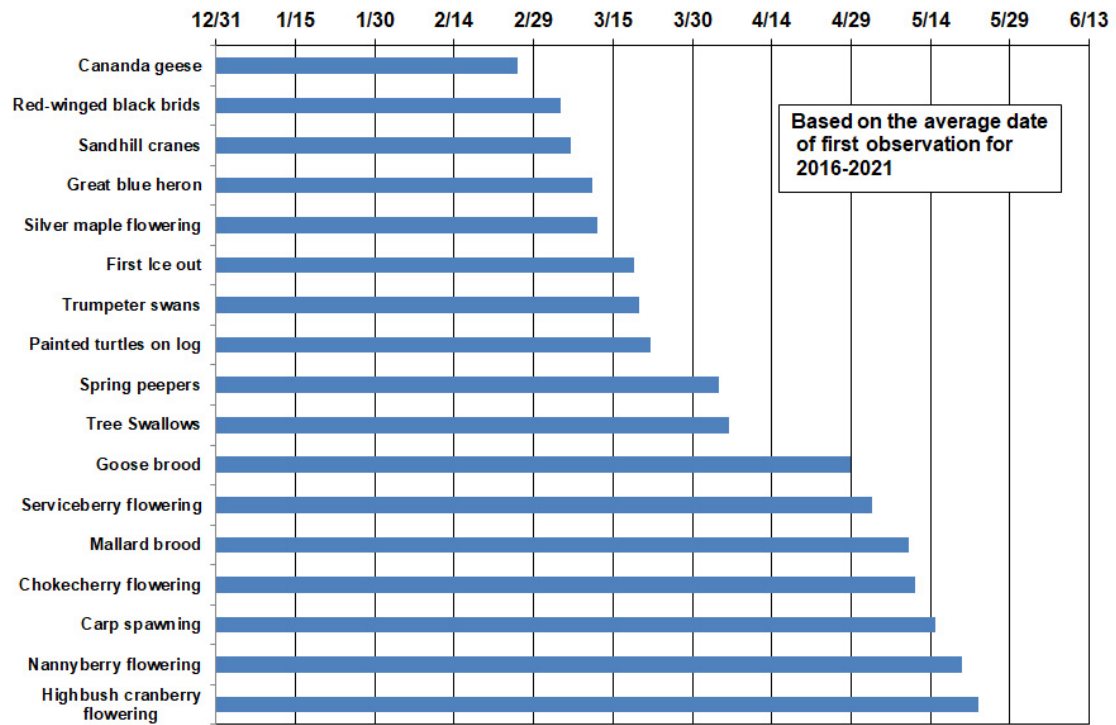
11 Cardinal
 3 Rock Pigeon
 4 Mallard
 1 White Throated Sparrow
 1 Blue Jay

Volunteers: Total = 11

Attachment #2 – Phenology



Spring Phenology in the La Crosse Marsh



Attachment 3 - Survey of Muskrat Lodges



Attachment #4 – Water Levels

**Water Levels in the East Cell of the La Crosse Marsh
October 2015 to November 2021**

