

September 2025 / Vol 18

A season of change and community action this September

As September arrives, we find ourselves at the turning point of the seasons - cooler mornings, earlier sunsets, and the first hints of colour brushing the treetops. It's a time of both reflection and renewal, and in this issue of Watershed Watch, we share stories that highlight the many ways our watershed is adapting, growing, and preparing for the months ahead.

This month, we look at the generosity of community partners as planning begins for Christmas at Ken Reid, one of the region's most cherished free family events. We highlight a series of Greenbelt hikes that bring together birds, forests, and climate to deepen our understanding of nature's resilience. We take a closer look at why low water declarations take time, and the importance of the three-month average in guiding decisions that protect our communities and resources.

September also marks the start of hands-on tree planting initiatives at Durham East Cross Forest and Windy Ridge Conservation Area, offering volunteers a chance to restore ecosystems and leave a living legacy. And in the third installment of our watershed series, we go beneath the surface of Lake Scugog and its tributaries, exploring how creeks, rivers, and farmlands sustain both local economies and natural ecosystems.

As always, if you have questions, ideas, or suggestions for topics you'd like to see featured in Watershed Watch, please don't hesitate to reach out to John Chambers by email at jchambers@kawarthaconservation.com. Your input helps shape the stories we tell and ensures they remain meaningful and relevant to our community.

With gratitude for your continued support,

The Kawartha Conservation Team

A SEASON OF GIVING: SPONSORS NEEDED FOR CHRISTMAS AT KEN REID

While parents are busy getting their children ready for another school year, staff at Kawartha Conservation are already turning their attention to one of the most magical events of the year, Christmas at Ken Reid.

Each December, the trails and spaces of Ken Reid Conservation Area transform into a winter wonderland filled with holiday lights, festive activities, horse-drawn wagon rides, crafts, music, and of course, a visit from Santa. What makes the day even more special is that it is completely free for families to enjoy, thanks to the generosity of community sponsors.

“Christmas at Ken Reid is all about creating joyful memories and spreading the holiday spirit,” said Carolyn Snider, Community Engagement Technician. “It’s wonderful to see families from across the region come together to celebrate, and our sponsors are a huge part of making that possible.”

The event draws thousands of visitors each year, bringing people together in the heart of nature to share in the simple joy of the season. Local businesses and organizations that sponsor the event not only help ensure it remains free and accessible, but also demonstrate their commitment to supporting community, family, and tradition.

With planning already underway, Kawartha Conservation is inviting sponsors to be part of the 2025 celebration. Those interested in learning more about sponsorship opportunities are encouraged to contact Carolyn Snider at 705-328-2271 ext. 212 or by email at csnider@kawarthaconservation.com.

Together, we can make this year’s Christmas at Ken Reid another unforgettable holiday experience for families throughout our community.



WHERE BIRDS, FORESTS, AND CLIMATE COLLIDE: A SEASON OF LEARNING IN THE KAWARTHA WATERSHED

In the stillness of early morning, the forest is anything but silent. The flutter of wings, the trill of a warbler, the rustle of leaves as a sparrow darts for cover, all tell the story of a landscape alive with movement. Yet, beneath this familiar chorus lies a reality in flux. Birds, forests, and waterways across Ontario's Greenbelt are responding to pressures we can no longer ignore: shifting climate patterns, habitat loss, and the delicate balance between human use and nature's resilience.

This fall, Kawartha Conservation is offering a series of free guided hikes that invite you to step into that story. Three unique events, **Adapting in Flight: Birds and a Changing Climate on Thursday, September 18 at 9:00 a.m. at Pigeon River Headwaters Conservation Area, The Power of Protected Places on Saturday, October 4 at 9:00 a.m. at Durham East Cross Forest, and Habitat Heroes: Supporting Our Feathered Friends on Saturday, October 11 at 8:00 a.m. at Durham East Cross Forest**, will bring you into the heart of the forest with naturalists, conservation staff, and passionate bird experts.

The season begins at Pigeon River Headwaters, where Conservation Areas Technician Jackson Boyes will lead participants through the world of Ontario's birdlife in a time of change. From the steadfast chickadee to long-distance migrants navigating altered weather patterns, every species tells a tale of adaptation and survival. You'll learn how earlier springs, hotter summers, and unpredictable storms are shaping the rhythms of migration and nesting, and why the preservation of Greenbelt habitats is key to giving birds a fighting chance.

Two weeks later, on October 4, the trail shifts to Durham East Cross Forest for The Power of Protected Places, led by Stewardship Coordinator Danielle Marcoux-Hunter. It's more than a walk in the woods; it's a lesson in the quiet, often invisible work of conservation. The Greenbelt, stretching over two million acres, stands as one of North America's most ambitious protected landscapes, safeguarding clean water, preserving biodiversity, and buffering communities against climate extremes.



Our Conservation Area's team with Michael Rogers (top left), Grant Program Manager for The Greenbelt Foundation

Finally, as the leaves begin to turn and the air grows crisp, well-known birder Rob Stavinga returns to Durham East Cross Forest on October 11 for Habitat Heroes. With an early 8:00 a.m. start, participants will catch the forest at its liveliest, when migratory visitors mingle with year-round residents. Rob's deep knowledge and enthusiasm make every sighting an opportunity to understand not just who these birds are, but what they need to thrive.

Individually, each of these hikes offers a window into a different facet of our living landscape. Together, they form a narrative about connection: between species and habitats, between people and place, between the choices we make and the futures we shape.



Rob Stavinga, Birding at Ken Reid Conservation Area.



Tanner Liang, Water Quality Specialist with Kawartha Conservation leading a hike at Durham East Cross Forest.

Attendance is free, thanks to the support of the Greenbelt Foundation, but space is limited to 25 participants per hike. Registration is required at events.kawarthaconservation.com.

This is more than an invitation to walk the trails. It's a chance to see, hear, and feel the forces shaping the natural world, and to understand the role we each have in its story. The birds are already adapting. The forests are already working to protect us. The question is: will we show up to protect them?

WHY LOW WATER DECLARATIONS TAKE TIME: UNDERSTANDING THE THREE-MONTH AVERAGE

For much of the summer, residents across the watershed have looked to the skies and seen the same thing: blue, cloudless days with little to no rain. Streams have slowed, lawns have turned brown, and conversations about water levels have become a common refrain. So when Kawartha Conservation recently declared a Level 1 Low Water Condition, some were left asking, what took so long?

The answer, says Nathan Rajevski, Watershed Resources Technician at Kawartha Conservation, lies in the science of averages.

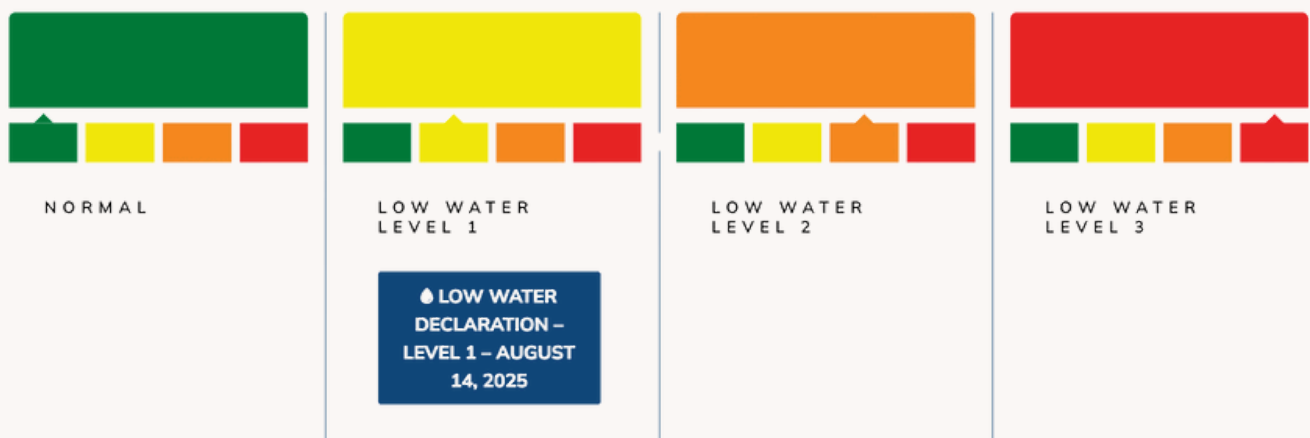
“It’s not just about a dry week, or even a dry month,” Rajevski explained. “Low water declarations are based on a three-month precipitation average. That longer-term view is critical because it gives us a clearer picture of actual watershed conditions, rather than reacting to short-term fluctuations.”

The Ontario Low Water Response Program, which guides conservation authorities across the province, requires this broader lens. While it may feel obvious after two months of dry weather that water supplies are under stress, officials need to confirm that the trend holds over the longer term before issuing a formal declaration.

This measured approach helps ensure declarations are grounded in evidence and consistent across Ontario. It also provides municipalities, farmers, and residents with confidence that when a low water condition is declared, it reflects a sustained reality, not just a passing dry spell.

For Kawartha Conservation, the three-month average is more than a statistical exercise; it’s a way to align perception with science. **“We know people see how dry it’s been and wonder why a declaration isn’t immediate,” Rajevski said. “But by looking at the bigger picture, we can provide a reliable assessment of how our water resources are truly being impacted.”**

In a summer marked by parched fields and shrinking creeks, that bigger picture is becoming increasingly clear.



PLANTING THE SEEDS OF TOMORROW: VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR RESTORATION EFFORTS

This fall, Kawartha Conservation is inviting community members to roll up their sleeves and help restore two of the watershed's most treasured landscapes, Durham East Cross Forest and Windy Ridge Conservation Area.

On Thursday, September 26 at 9:00 a.m., volunteers are needed at the Durham East Cross Forest North Entrance (4560 Devitts Road, Scugog). The work will focus on the forest's fragile disturbed site, where participants will help plant more than 1,300 native grasses and perennials to strengthen an ecosystem that provides vital habitat and natural resilience.

“This project is about restoring a unique part of Durham East Cross Forest and ensuring it can continue to thrive,” said Jackson Boyes, Conservation Areas Technician at Kawartha Conservation. “We’re asking volunteers to join us in making a real, hands-on difference.”

Two days later, on Sunday, September 28 at 9:00 a.m., the focus shifts to Windy Ridge Conservation Area (998 Mount Horeb Road, Omemee), where volunteers are invited to take part in TD Tree Days, supported by TD Friends of the Environment Foundation. This family-friendly planting event offers a chance for residents to directly contribute to a healthier environment close to home.



Father and son assisting with a volunteer planting.



Trees ready to be placed in their planting location.

The momentum continues into October. On Friday, October 4 at 11:00 a.m., volunteers will return to Durham East Cross Forest (4560 Devitts Road, Scugog) for the creation of a new “tiny forest” - a dense, fast-growing planting designed to maximize biodiversity and ecological benefits in a compact space. The project is made possible through the support of Trees for Life, the Landscape Ontario Durham Chapter, and the Greenbelt Foundation.

“These partnerships are critical,” said Will Chapple, Forestry and Landowner Services at Kawartha Conservation. “They allow us to scale up restoration, bring communities together, and create lasting change in the watershed. But we can’t do it without volunteers, their energy and commitment are what make these projects possible.”

From planting native grasses to restoring a highly disturbed area of the park, to building a tiny forest, these fall initiatives are a chance to work side by side with neighbours, give back to the land, and leave a living legacy for generations to come.

BENEATH THE SURFACE: THE HIDDEN INFLUENCE OF LAKE SCUGOG AND ITS TRIBUTARIES

From the tranquil shores of Lake Scugog to the quiet farmland of Mariposa and Layton, a network of rivers, brooks, and creeks works around the clock to sustain the watershed, and the people who live within it.

This month, in the third installment of our five-part exploration of the Kawartha Conservation watershed, we focus on a cluster of subwatersheds that converge around Lake Scugog: Layton River, Mariposa Brook, and the lake itself.

Spanning hundreds of square kilometres, these water bodies don't just carry water, they carry the weight of local economies, farming livelihoods, aquatic biodiversity, and the delicate balance between development and natural function.

“These are complex systems,” said Nancy Aspden, Director of Integrated Watershed Management at Kawartha Conservation. “What happens upstream - on the land, in the soil, through weather and usage - has a direct impact downstream on water quality, flooding, recreation, and even drinking water.”



Lake Scugog

A LAKE WITH A LEGACY

At the centre of this month's story is Lake Scugog, one of the largest and most shallow lakes in the region. With an average depth of only 1.4 metres, it is highly sensitive to change, particularly from nutrient inputs that can fuel excessive weed growth and algae blooms.

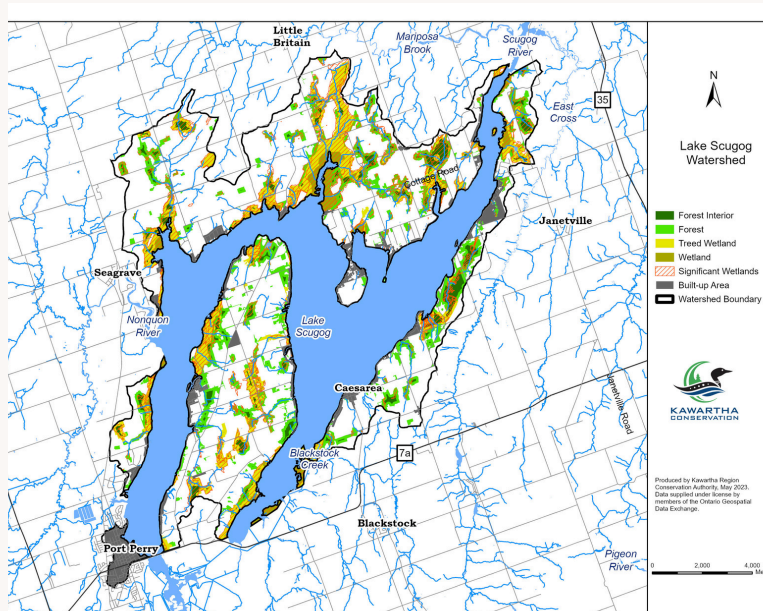
Its subwatershed spans over 571 km², encompassing a mix of urban and rural land uses, including Port Perry and nearby agricultural zones. Nearly 30% of the subwatershed is in natural cover, with wetlands serving as vital ecological filters.

Lake Scugog functions like a headwater system, relying on its immediate subwatersheds rather than large external inflows. Unlike Balsam Lake, which is fed by the Burnt River and benefits from steady inflows of clean water, Lake Scugog relies heavily on its immediate surroundings. That makes it far more vulnerable to local land-use changes: its subwatersheds account for a greater share of its drainage, and it lacks the buffering effect of a large, clean water source.

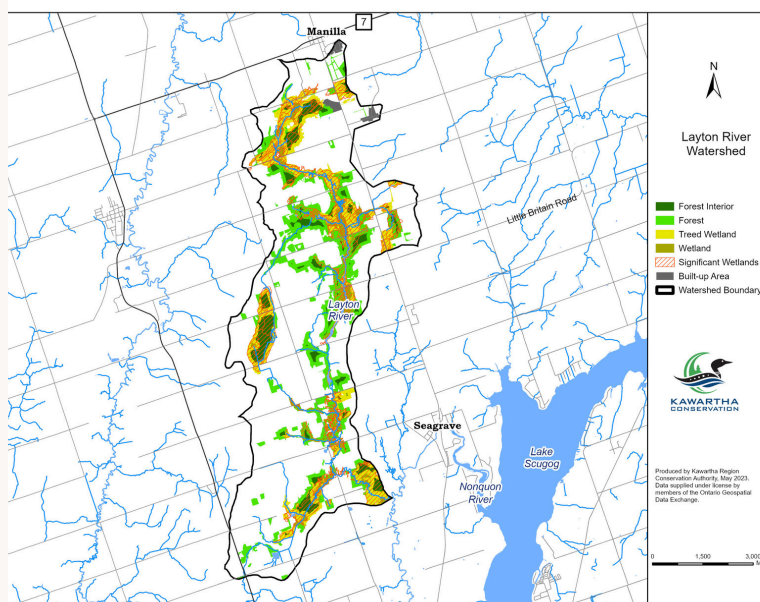
“Lake Scugog is like a mirror - it reflects the cumulative impacts of everything happening across its tributaries,” said Aquatic Biologist Brett Tregunno. “Because it’s shallow and warm, it’s especially vulnerable to phosphorus inputs and sedimentation.”

Kawartha Conservation has conducted extensive research in the Lake Scugog watershed, and in partnership with the Township of Scugog and the Lake Stewards, continues to monitor and model changes in water quality.

“We’re using the data we collect to better understand seasonal variations and long-term trends,” added Tregunno. “That helps us inform stewardship efforts and management plans that are grounded in science.”



Lake Scugog watershed map



Layton River watershed map

TRIBUTARIES OF CHANGE

Among the lake’s most significant contributors are the Layton River and Nonquon River, which drain vast agricultural landscapes in the west and northwest of the watershed.

The Layton River, covering 118 km², is characterized by rolling farmland and relatively limited forest cover. It plays a critical role in moving water, and nutrients, into Lake Scugog.

“Much of this land has been cultivated for generations,” said Aspden. “It’s productive, valuable land—but it also creates challenges for runoff management and erosion. That’s why our monitoring and restoration programs are so important.”

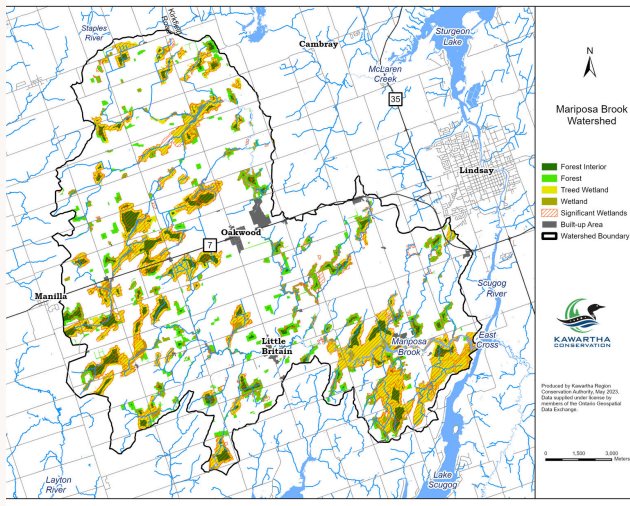
Just south of Layton, Nonquon River winds through a 192 km² subwatershed with a similar mix of cropland and low-density development. Once again, water quality shifts along the brook’s journey, with forested upstream zones giving way to more phosphorus-laden runoff in lower sections.

“When we sample in Nonquon, we’re not just looking at numbers - we’re looking at patterns over time,” said Tregunno. “That’s how we can support farmers and landowners with practices that reduce impacts without disrupting livelihoods.”

A TALE OF TWO CREEKS

Also feeding into Lake Scugog are Blackstock and Fingerboard Creeks. Both subwatersheds feature a mix of farmland, wetlands, and headwater streams, many of which drain from or near the Oak Ridges Moraine.

“These headwater areas are incredibly important,” said Aspden. “They collect and filter water before it reaches the broader watershed. Keeping them healthy helps protect everything downstream.”



Mariposa Brook watershed map



Integrated Watershed Management team sampling on Lake Scugog.

PROTECTING A LIVING SYSTEM

Collectively, these five subwatersheds represent a living system, a vast and responsive network that feeds, filters, and fuels the Kawartha Lakes region.

“We often think of water as static, a lake is a lake, or a creek is a ditch,” said Tregunno. “But in reality, these systems are dynamic. They respond to land use, to weather, to climate. They tell us, in real time, how the environment is doing.”

As pressure grows from climate change, population increases, and intensifying land use, the need to protect and understand these systems has never been greater.

“These creeks and rivers don’t have loud voices,” said Aspden. “But they are always telling us something. If we listen, and act, we can ensure they continue to support our communities, our economies, and our ecosystems for generations to come.”

COMING IN OCTOBER:

In Part Four, we’ll explore more subwatersheds across the region, from fast-moving streams to inland brooks, each with their own role in keeping our watershed healthy and resilient.

For more information on how Kawartha Conservation can help.
Conservation Lands: conservationareas@kawarthaconservation.com
General info: geninfo@kawarthaconservation.com
Permitting: permits@kawarthaconservation.com
Planning: planning@kawarthaconservation.com