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JUNE ACROSS THE WATERSHED: STEWARDSHIP, WATER AND THE SEASON AHEAD

As June settles across the Kawartha watershed, the landscape feels fully alive again.

Forests have filled in with green. Wetlands are alive with birdsong. Shorelines are growing thick with reeds and wildflowers. The lakes are busy with anglers, paddlers, cottagers, and families returning to the water after another long Ontario winter.

But beneath all that seasonal beauty is something deeper happening across the watershed - growth, change, resilience, and the constant balancing act between people, water, and the natural systems that support both.

In this month's edition of Watershed Watch, we explore some of those stories.

We take a closer look at one of the questions heard most often around Lake Scugog each summer: "Why are there so many weeds?" The answer reveals far more than many people might expect about the history of the lake, the role aquatic plants play in supporting fish and wildlife, and why a healthy lake does not always look the way people think it should.

We also travel into the Talbot River watershed, where stewardship staff and agricultural landowners continue working together to improve water quality through long-term monitoring, wetland restoration, tree planting, and practical environmental solutions that support both farming and healthy waterways.

This edition highlights another successful spring tree planting season, with nearly 16,000 seedlings planted across private properties throughout the watershed. While the work itself happens over just a few weeks, the benefits will continue growing for generations - helping strengthen forests, improve wildlife habitat, protect water quality, and support climate resilience across the region.

You will also meet two of our seasonal staff members, Sydney Comeau and Natalie Caines, whose passion for ecological restoration, water, wetlands, and conservation offers a reminder that the next generation of environmental stewardship is already taking shape.

At this time of year, it can be easy to think of nature simply as scenery - something we enjoy during weekends at the lake, evening walks, or summer holidays. But the stories in this edition serve as a reminder that healthy watersheds do not happen by accident. They are shaped over time through stewardship, science, partnerships, and the choices communities make every day.

As always, thank you for taking the time to stay connected to the work happening across the Kawartha watershed. We hope you enjoy this month's edition of Watershed Watch and find time this season to get outside and experience the watershed for yourself.

The Kawartha Conservation Team

WHY LAKE SCUGOG HAS SO MANY WEEDS - AND WHY THAT'S NOT A BAD THING

If you have ever pushed off from shore on Lake Scugog and felt your propeller start to thrum, or stepped into the water and brushed against something leafy, you have probably asked the same question many others have, “What is with all these weeds?”

For some people, they are a nuisance. For others, they are a sign of a healthy lake. And for almost everyone, they are something you cannot ignore.

Lake Scugog is one of the most popular lakes within easy driving distance of the Greater Toronto Area. It supports boating, beaches, and fishing, and it is also a Provincially Significant Inland Fishery. It is a working lake, a recreational lake, and a home lake for thousands of people. But beneath the surface, it is also full of aquatic plants, both native and invasive, growing in thick beds across much of the lake.

So why is Lake Scugog so weedy?

Part of the answer is that many of us have been shaped by what you might call the ‘Muskoka effect.’ We are used to seeing clear water, rocky shorelines, and sandy bottoms, and we assume that is what a ‘good’ lake should look like. Those lakes can be beautiful, but they are often relatively low in nutrients, which also means they tend to support less life. At the other extreme, a lake overloaded with nutrients can tip into trouble, with runaway algae growth and declining water quality. A healthy lake lives somewhere in between.

Lake Scugog is different because it is not a classic deep, rocky lake. It is a flooded wetland.

When the dam was built in the 1800s, a large, shallow wetland was turned into the lake we see today. Wetlands are shallow, usually rich in nutrients, and full of sunlight from top to bottom. Put water, light, and nutrients together and you get something very much like a greenhouse. In Lake Scugog’s case, it is a very large, underwater greenhouse, and plants thrive in those conditions.

And those plants matter.

Aquatic plants and algae are the foundation of the lake’s food system. They are how energy enters the system. A healthy lake needs both. If you remove the weeds, you do not get a clean, empty lake. You create space for algae to take over, which is how you end up with blue-green algae blooms and fish kills.

Weeds also produce oxygen, provide places for fish to lay eggs, shelter young fish, and help keep the water cooler by shading it. In other words, the things that can make swimming or boating inconvenient are the same things that make Lake Scugog a productive fishery and a healthy ecosystem.



So are weedy lakes good or bad?

Like most simple questions about nature, the honest answer is, it depends on what you want to do. If your perfect day is swimming or running a fast boat, weeds can be frustrating. If you like fishing, paddling, hunting, or watching wildlife, they are often part of what makes the lake so rich and alive.

The 2025 Aquatic Plant Survey suggests that about 17 percent of Lake Scugog is relatively weed-free, mostly in deeper areas and along the windward side of the lake. Those are the places better suited to swimming and higher-speed boating.

What about just removing the weeds or making the lake deeper?

Those ideas come up a lot, and they come with a very large price tag. The now-cancelled Lake Scugog Enhancement Project looked at both options for a small area of Port Perry Bay. Removing weeds from just 2 hectares was estimated at about \$200,000. Dredging 3.3 hectares was estimated at about \$2 million, and that did not include dewatering or disposal.

Scale that up to the full 68 square kilometres of the lake and you are looking, very roughly, at hundreds of millions of dollars for harvesting or several billion dollars for dredging just one metre. And that still does not include permits, transportation, and disposal. More importantly, it also would not change the fundamental nature of the lake. It would still be shallow, sunny, and nutrient-rich. The plants would come back.

So why is Lake Scugog so weedy?

Because it is exactly what it was created to be, a shallow, productive, living system full of water, light, and nutrients. The weeds are not a sign that something is wrong. They are a sign that life is happening.

That may not match everyone's idea of a perfect lake. But for fish, wildlife, and the long-term health of the ecosystem, Lake Scugog's 'underwater greenhouse' is doing exactly what it is supposed to do.



WORKING THE LAND, PROTECTING THE WATER IN THE TALBOT RIVER WATERSHED

The Talbot River does not draw much attention as it winds through the rural landscape northeast of Lake Simcoe. It passes quietly through farmland, wetlands and small communities before eventually flowing into Mitchell Lake, Canal Lake and onward into the Lake Simcoe watershed.

But the health of the river matters far beyond its banks.

Over the past several years, Kawartha Conservation has been working with agricultural landowners through the Talbot River Healthy Environment Initiative, a stewardship program focused on improving water quality in the Upper Talbot River Subwatershed through practical, on-the-ground environmental projects.

The watershed spans approximately 295 square kilometres and is made up largely of agricultural land, with beef and dairy farming common throughout the area. Previous monitoring identified phosphorus as a significant concern within the watershed, particularly during spring runoff and summer months when elevated levels can contribute to excessive aquatic plant growth and algae blooms.

To better understand conditions across the watershed, Kawartha Conservation staff collect water samples from participating properties between April and October each year. Sampling includes monitoring physical and chemical indicators such as temperature, dissolved oxygen, turbidity, phosphorus, nitrates and E. coli.

In 2025, staff collected 171 water samples from seven properties across 22 monitoring sites as part of the initiative.

The findings reflected a challenging year for local waterways.

Spring flooding risks, late-summer drought conditions and even a forest fire within the study area all contributed to environmental stress across the watershed. Monitoring showed that high turbidity and phosphorus levels continued to impact water quality at several locations, while low water levels and warmer temperatures contributed to reduced dissolved oxygen in waterways during the summer months.

One site was also selected for Microbial Source Tracking, a pilot project used to better understand sources of fecal contamination entering local waterways. Results indicated elevated contamination levels during wet weather events, with cattle identified as the dominant source. Samples collected during dry weather conditions were below detection limits.

For Kawartha Conservation stewardship staff, the results highlight the importance of long-term stewardship work and collaborative solutions with local landowners.



Native plant species ready to be planted at a site along the Talbot River.

“This initiative is about working directly with landowners to support projects that benefit both the environment and agricultural operations,” said Julia Derue, Stewardship Technician with Kawartha Conservation. “The people who live and work on the land understand these properties better than anyone, and their willingness to be part of the solution is what makes projects like this possible.”

That work is already taking shape across the watershed.

Earlier this spring, Kawartha Conservation partnered with the Kawartha Farm School to complete a large-scale riparian planting and windbreak project. Nearly 1,000 native trees, shrubs and perennials were planted along a stream corridor and surrounding pond areas to help stabilize soils, reduce erosion, improve biodiversity and support water filtration. Approximately 45 volunteers, including students, staff and family members, participated in the planting day.



Kawartha Farm School riparian planting and windbreak project.

Another major project planned for this summer involves a wetland restoration partnership with Ducks Unlimited Canada. The project will create a half-acre wetland on a property in the Upper Talbot area where persistent flooding has limited agricultural productivity for years.

Rather than continue trying to farm the wet area, the landowner chose to restore it as natural habitat.

The restored wetland will sit adjacent to an existing wetland complex and is expected to help improve water storage, filter runoff and create additional wildlife habitat throughout the property. Native riparian vegetation will be planted following excavation work later this year.

“Wetlands are incredibly important parts of a healthy watershed,” said Derue. “They help slow and store water, improve water quality and provide habitat for countless species. Projects like this show how stewardship and agriculture can work together to support long-term environmental health.”

The initiative continues to expand in 2026, with additional monitoring and stewardship projects already underway across the watershed.

For Kawartha Conservation, the work represents more than environmental restoration. It is part of a broader effort to protect the health of local lakes, rivers and wetlands while supporting the communities and agricultural operations that depend on them every day.

ROOTED IN THE FUTURE: NEARLY 16,000 SEEDLINGS PLANTED ACROSS THE KAWARTHA WATERSHED THIS SPRING

As spring settles across the Kawartha watershed, the signs of a changing season are easy to spot. Wetlands are alive with birdsong, shoreline plants are emerging, and fields and forests are turning green once again. But across rural properties throughout the region, another quiet transformation is taking root, one seedling at a time.

This spring, Kawartha Conservation worked with landowners across the City of Kawartha Lakes and Durham Region to plant 15,920 tree seedlings on 10 private properties, part of an ongoing effort to improve watershed health, strengthen local forests, and support long-term environmental resilience.

For Forestry and Landowner Services Technician Hunter Girdler, the work represents more than simply putting trees in the ground.



Forestry and Landowner Services Technician, Hunter Girdler

“Every property is different, and every landowner has their own goals,” said Girdler. “Some people want to restore marginal farmland, some are looking to improve wildlife habitat, and others are thinking long-term about erosion control, water quality, or climate resilience. Our role is to help guide that process and support them every step of the way.”

The annual spring planting season is one of Kawartha Conservation’s most visible stewardship programs, but much of the work begins months before the first shovel enters the soil. Staff work directly with landowners to assess properties, determine suitable species, develop planting plans, and coordinate delivery and implementation.

The result is a growing network of forests and natural areas that provide benefits extending well beyond property lines.

Trees help stabilize soils, reduce erosion, improve air quality, and provide important habitat for birds, pollinators, and other wildlife. In watershed systems like the Kawarthas, forests also play a critical role in protecting water quality by helping absorb rainfall, reducing runoff, and filtering pollutants before they reach rivers, lakes, and wetlands. Over time, the environmental impact becomes even more significant.

As seedlings mature, they begin storing larger amounts of carbon, helping reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and contributing to broader climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. While a newly planted forest may appear small in its early years, its long-term value can span generations.

Danielle Marcoux-Hunter, Coordinator, Stewardship at Kawartha Conservation, said partnerships with landowners remain essential to building healthier landscapes across the watershed.

“A large portion of the watershed is privately owned, which means conservation work often happens through collaboration,” said Marcoux-Hunter. “When landowners choose to plant trees or restore natural areas on their property, the environmental benefits extend far beyond their fence lines. These projects contribute to healthier forests, healthier water, and healthier communities.”



Durham East Cross Forest Conservation Area

This year’s planting efforts were also supported through the Forests Canada Tree Planting Program, helping increase local capacity for reforestation and long-term environmental stewardship.

Programs like these have become increasingly important as communities across Ontario continue adapting to changing environmental conditions, including more frequent extreme weather events, warmer temperatures, and shifting ecosystems.

For many landowners, participation also offers an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy on the landscape. “People often tell us they’re planting trees for future generations,” said Girdler. “They may never see these forests fully mature themselves, but they understand the value of creating something that will continue benefiting wildlife, water, and the environment long after today.”

As another planting season comes to a close, the work itself may be finished for now, but the growth is only beginning.



SYDNEY COMEAU – ENVIRONMENTAL FIELD TECHNICIAN

QUESTION: Where do you attend school and what are you currently taking?

ANSWER: I am currently studying Ecological Restoration at Trent University.

QUESTION: What is one thing you hope to learn or gain from this experience?

ANSWER: I'm excited to get more hands-on experience with the equipment used here, and I'd really like to drive a boat since I have my boater's license.

QUESTION: If you could be any wildlife species, what would you be and why?

ANSWER: I'd be a raccoon because they are awesome!

QUESTION: Why did you choose the environmental field?

ANSWER: Well, I actually had a background in health science, but after reflecting I realized that I've always liked environmental science, I did environmental science courses in high school and really enjoyed it. I also grew up always out in nature, and I felt like choosing ecological restoration gave me the opportunity to help people indirectly.

QUESTION: If you could teach everyone one thing about the environment, what would it be?

ANSWER: I would want to teach people how to look at the environment from a different lens, to have more respect and understanding for our environment, and to see ourselves as equal to the environment rather than above.

QUESTION: What's an interesting fact about yourself that most people may not know?

ANSWER: I like to sew! I make a lot of scrunchies, tote bags, or drawstrings bags and enjoy giving them away to friends & family.

QUESTION: So far, what has been your favourite part of the job?

ANSWER: Probably lake health monitoring on Lake Dalrymple! Being out on the water was really nice, I got to wear a flotation suit for the first time, see lots of wildlife, and take some readings of the lake.

QUESTION: Do you see yourself working in environmental or conservation-related fields in the future? Why or why not?

ANSWER: Of course! It would be nice to do something related to aquatics or work with communities to ensure water quality meets healthy standards after this. I'm very passionate about water and I feel very connected to it.

QUESTION: What is an accomplishment from school, work, or volunteering that you'd like to highlight?

ANSWER: Definitely my reading course with Dr. Barbara Wall at Trent University focused on Manomin. Through that, I got to learn a lot about the lost knowledge relating to women and Manomin harvesting, which was both sad and interesting. I learned about the many negative impacts affecting Manomin, as well as learning about its sacredness. I also had the opportunity to present on the topic and contribute to reconciliation efforts. Overall, I learnt how as someone who is nonindigenous, how I can contribute to this work in a meaningful and respectful way. I'm also excited to be working towards developing an honours thesis that will likely relate to the topic.

I also had the opportunity to work as a lab assistant at Trent University alongside Sudbury Shared Harvest, where I completed chemical digests for some of their community gardens and tested for heavy metal contaminants. It was really nice to be involved in something that had a direct community impact as well.

I'd say both of these experiences have been major highlights for me.



NATALIE CAINES – AGRICULTURAL STEWARDSHIP ASSISTANT

QUESTION: What program are you currently studying, or what did you study in school?

ANSWER: Ecological Restoration – Trent University

QUESTION: What is one thing you hope to learn or gain from this experience?

ANSWER: Probably improve my field ID and explore some new species out there!

QUESTION: Why do you think conservation is important?

ANSWER: I think it is very important right now, because there is a lot of construction and infrastructure going in, so we're losing a lot of our green land. Conservation authorities are kind of the superheroes behind that, making sure that they not only connect with communities but connect them to land stewardship.

QUESTION: If you could be any wildlife species, what would you be and why?

ANSWER: Definitely a Trichoptera (benthic invertebrate species) because they make their own houses out of material that they find, and it creates a tight little cocoon.

QUESTION: If you could teach everyone one thing about the environment, what would it be?

ANSWER: Probably how deeply complex it is. We can spend years and years studying the environment and nobody would fully understand how truly unique and complex it is.

QUESTION: What is something you've learned so far, about the organization, the environment, or yourself?

ANSWER: There's a lot more background work that goes into conservation. I originally thought it was more hands on, but there's a lot of paperwork behind the work being done, and there's a lot of good people that spend a lot of time doing that paperwork to make everything happen.

QUESTION: What is one goal you hope to accomplish while working at Kawartha Conservation?

ANSWER: Learning how to restore a wetland would be pretty cool, and getting to restore a wetland from a degraded state would be amazing!

QUESTION: If your life had a soundtrack, what's one song that would definitely be on it?

ANSWER: Bob Marley – Don't worry be happy



For more information on how Kawartha Conservation can help.
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