Watershed Watch Newsletter

Signs of the Season, Stories from the Watershed

As August settles into the Kawartha watershed, signs of summer are everywhere - from families exploring sun-dappled trails to the quiet trickle of creeks navigating parched landscapes. But beneath the beauty lies a complex and ever-changing relationship between people, land, and water.

This month, we shine a spotlight on five remarkable but often overlooked creeks - Emily, Fleetwood, Hawkers, Janetville, and Jennings - and their vital role in supporting agriculture, biodiversity, and flood resilience. In our second installment of the Watershed Series, we explore how these tributaries are helping shape the health and future of our lakes and communities.

Meanwhile, our Conservation Lands team continues their tireless work behind the scenes, clearing storm debris, repairing infrastructure, and making sure each visitor's experience is safe, welcoming, and inspiring. Their summer is a story of sweat equity, stewardship, and the power of persistence.

But not all stories this summer have been welcome ones. Reports of dead fish in Sturgeon Lake and the growing threat of drought across the region serve as stark reminders that our watershed is vulnerable. Fish die-offs, while often natural, highlight the delicate balance of our aquatic ecosystems. And with rainfall levels falling below normal in many areas, we're reminded that even in the land of lakes, water is a finite resource.

From the resilience of small streams to the dedication of field crews and the importance of water conservation, this month's stories paint a picture of a watershed in motion - challenged, changing, and cared for.

Stay connected. Stay informed. And most of all, stay engaged with the land and water that sustain us all.

With gratitude for your continued support,

The Kawartha Conservation Team

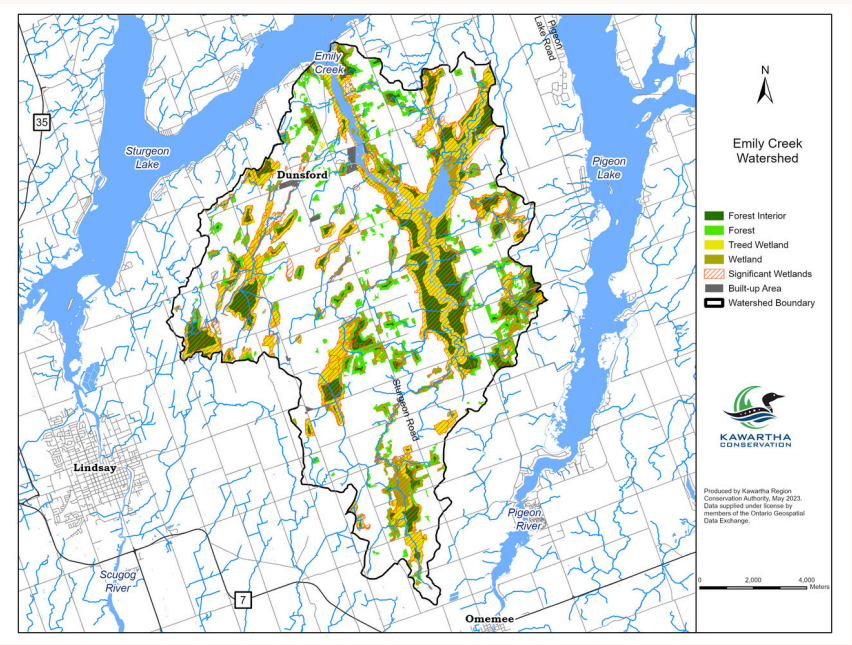
STREAMS OF INFLUENCE: HOW FIVE WATERWAYS POWER THE KAWARTHA WATERSHED

They may not boast the size of Balsam or Cameron Lake, but the creeks profiled in this month's Watershed Watch flow with quiet importance through the farms, forests, and fields of the Kawartha Conservation watershed.

In the second installment of our five-part series exploring the 27 subwatersheds across our region, we turn our attention to five less-celebrated but deeply significant systems: Emily Creek, Fleetwood Creek, Hawkers Creek, Janetville Creek, and Jennings Creek.

These waterways cut through rolling countryside and wetlands, pass by hamlets and farmland, and quietly sustain biodiversity, groundwater recharge, and flood resilience. They tell a powerful story of how water connects land and people, ecology and economy.

"These are working landscapes as much as natural ones," said Nancy Aspden, Director of Integrated Watershed Management at Kawartha Conservation. "These creeks support agriculture, wildlife, groundwater recharge, and community resilience. They're essential to the environmental and economic fabric of the Kawartha Lakes and Durham Region."



Emily Creek Watershed

WHERE WATER MEETS THE LAND

Emily Creek, the largest of the five, drains into Sturgeon Lake and is one of Kawartha Conservation's most agriculturally influenced subwatersheds, spanning approximately 140 km^2.

The headwaters of Emily Creek - and many of our other subwatersheds - begin in highly modified areas, such as farm fields, rural developments, and road networks. As they flow downstream, they gradually transition into more natural creek environments before draining into our lakes. This is in contrast to many urban or GTA streams, which often start in relatively undeveloped headwaters and become increasingly urbanized as they flow downstream.

That nutrient shift has real-world consequences: elevated phosphorus can lead to algae blooms, degraded aquatic habitats, and reduced recreational value downstream.

“That’s why our monitoring is so important,” said Tregunno. “By identifying where and how water quality changes, we can work with landowners and partners to implement solutions like vegetative buffer strips and wetland restoration.”

To the south, Fleetwood Creek offers a sharp contrast. This 93 km² subwatershed, much of it forested and relatively undisturbed, includes the Fleetwood Creek Natural Area—co-managed by Kawartha Conservation and the Ontario Heritage Trust.

“Fleetwood is a jewel,” said Aspden. “It contains some of the highest-quality coldwater streams in the region, provides habitat for sensitive species like brook trout, and plays a crucial role in regional groundwater recharge.”

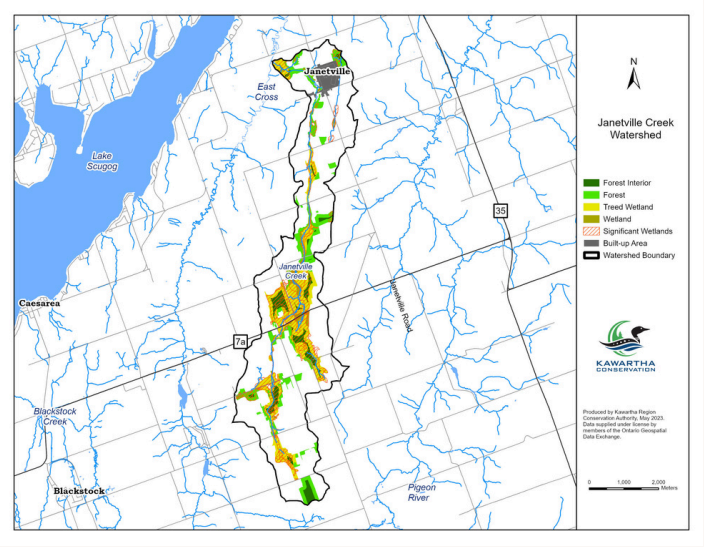
Emily Creek

STREAMS AS CLIMATE RESILIENCE TOOLS

Further north, Hawkers Creek winds through a predominantly rural and agricultural landscape. Though small, approximately 53 km², its role in groundwater recharge and flood mitigation is outsized.

“These smaller tributaries are often the first line of defense when it comes to managing stormwater,” said Tregunno. “They collect rainfall and snowmelt, recharge aquifers, and support baseflows for downstream systems.”

To the south, Janetville Creek, just under 60 km², follows a similar story. As land use intensifies, particularly in areas of expanding agriculture or development, phosphorus levels rise, underscoring the need for consistent monitoring and proactive land stewardship.



Janetville Creek Watershed

Janetville Creek

“These headwater systems may be modest in size, but their importance cannot be overstated,” said Tregunno. “They help us understand how landscapes respond to change.”

Finally, Jennings Creek offers a more urbanized example. Winding through Lindsay before joining the Scugog River, Jennings is both a neighborhood fixture and an important natural corridor.

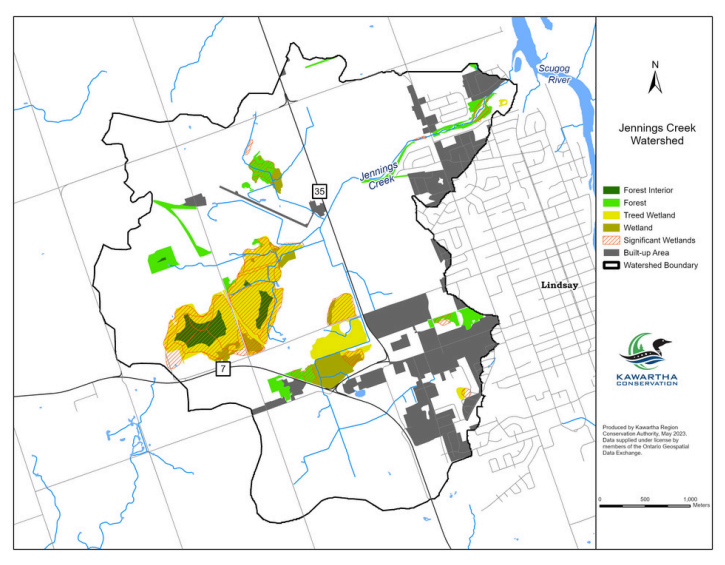
“Jennings is a subwatershed we monitor closely,” said Tregunno. “Its proximity to urban development makes it a case study in how to manage erosion, runoff, and sedimentation in growing communities.”

WATERSHEDS IN MOTION

Taken together, these five creeks are reminders that watersheds are living systems - shaped by rainfall, land use, and community decisions.

“We often think about lakes as our most iconic natural features,” said Aspden. “But it’s the creeks, the connectors, the filters, the lifelines, that make the watershed function. They carry the stories of the land.”

As Kawartha Conservation continues to monitor, restore, and protect these watercourses, one message rings clear - small streams matter. By understanding them, we understand ourselves, and our responsibility to the place we call home.



Jennings Creek Watershed

Jennings Creek

COMING IN SEPTEMBER:

In Part 3 of our watershed series, we’ll journey through more of the vital tributaries that feed our rivers and lakes - supporting nature, communities, and the future of our watershed.

BEYOND THE TRAILS: THE SUMMER GRIND OF KEEPING NATURE WILD AND WELCOMING

By mid-morning, the sun is already high, the bugs are buzzing, and the workday for Kawartha Conservation's Conservation Lands team is well underway. But long before the first family walks the boardwalk or a jogger hits the trails, a different kind of foot traffic is shaping the visitor experience.

From repairing boardwalks to clearing fallen trees and mowing overgrown paths, the behind-the-scenes work of maintaining the region's conservation areas is as constant as it is invisible.

"We want people to experience nature at its best," says Melissa Creasy-Alexander, Coordinator, Conservation Lands. "But that means we have to stay ahead of the wear and tear that comes with heavy use, weather damage, and the changing seasons."

Ken Reid Marsh Boardwalk repairs.

CLEANING UP FROM THE STORM

This year, the spring ice storm brought an extra level of urgency, and challenge. The April storm tore through forests, snapping limbs, toppling trees, and leaving large sections of trail systems blocked or hazardous.

"We've been clearing debris for weeks," says Freddie Caveen, Conservation Areas Technician. "Some areas were completely inaccessible. You're out there with chainsaws and brush cutters trying to open up the trail, but also making sure you're not doing further damage to the environment."

The cleanup isn't just about clearing a path. It's about making sure trails are safe for visitors, no hanging branches overhead, no unstable trees ready to fall with the next strong wind.

"Even now, we're still discovering damage in areas we couldn't reach earlier in the season," adds Jackson Boyes, also a Conservation Areas Technician. "It's been all hands on deck."

Devastation caused the ice storm in March.

PUNCHEONS, PAINT, AND PERSISTENCE

Beyond storm recovery, the team has been hard at work with routine - but essential - maintenance. That includes repairing aging boardwalks, repainting faded railings, redesigning and replacing worn wayfinding markers, and inspecting puncheons - simple raised wooden walkways - in low-lying or muddy trail sections to improve accessibility and protect sensitive areas.

“Puncheons are one of those small but mighty features,” says Boyes. “They let people keep walking where it would otherwise be too wet or damaged, and they help prevent trail widening and erosion.”

The summer also means high traffic, and with it comes increased demand for maintenance; grass cutting, garbage collection, outhouse upkeep, and monitoring trail conditions daily.

“There’s no off-season in the summer,” says Caveen. “We’ve got visitors every day, and we want each person to feel like they’re the first one to discover the trail - clean, clear, and welcoming.”

Puncheon replacement.

A LABOUR OF LOVE

For Creasy-Alexander and her team, the work is part stewardship, part strategy, and part sweat equity. Whether they’re unloading lumber to repair a walkway, mowing endless grass, or responding to reports of downed trees, the goal is the same - keep conservation areas both natural and navigable.

“We do it because we care,” she says. “These spaces matter to the community. People come here to connect with nature, to find peace, to recharge, and we want them to have the best possible experience.”
And for the technicians in the field, there’s pride in that too.

“You see someone stop and take a photo of a turtle on the trail or a family having lunch enjoying nature, and you know you had a part in making that happen,” says Caveen. “That’s what keeps you going, even when the mosquitoes are winning.”

DEAD FISH SIGHTINGS IN STURGEON LAKE RAISE CONCERNS - BUT EXPERTS SAY IT'S NOT UNUSUAL

As summer temperatures rise across the Kawartha Lakes region, residents around Sturgeon Lake have noticed a troubling - and often foul-smelling - phenomenon: dead fish floating near docks or washing up along the shoreline.

The sightings, widely reported on local social media pages and community forums, have sparked concern among cottagers and year-round residents. While the scenes may be alarming, experts say fish die-offs are not uncommon during the warmer months and are often the result of natural environmental factors.

"Fish die-offs can happen for a variety of reasons, particularly in the summer," said Nancy Aspden, Director of Integrated Watershed Management at Kawartha Conservation. "It's something that occurs in many lakes and rivers across Ontario."

Common causes include disease outbreaks, sudden drops in oxygen levels, water temperature fluctuations, and stress related to spawning. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) notes that in some cases, the cause may be linked to toxins or other naturally occurring changes in water conditions.

Kawartha Conservation, which does not track fish populations in local lakes, is encouraging residents to report any die-offs directly to the Ministry of Natural Resources by calling 1-800-387-7011. Reporting helps provincial experts monitor disease trends, assess ecological impacts, and support long-term fish population health.

Additional information about fish and wildlife health, and how to report dead animals found on your property, is available on the Ontario government's website: Fish and wildlife health | Ontario.ca

If residents suspect a fish die-off may be linked to pollution or a chemical spill, they are urged to contact the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks' Spills Action Centre at **1-800-268-6060.**

Illegal activity related to fish and wildlife can also be reported confidentially to the MNRF TIPS line at **1-877-TIPS-MNR (847-7667).**

While unsettling, these incidents are not necessarily a sign of a larger problem - but staying vigilant and reporting concerns remains key to protecting the health of local ecosystems.

Dead Carp.

WHEN THE RAIN DOESN'T COME: UNDERSTANDING LOW WATER AND DROUGHT IN THE KAWARTHA WATERSHED

In a region so often defined by its rivers, lakes, and wetlands, it's easy to forget how quickly the balance can tip from abundance to scarcity.

As summer deepens across the Kawartha watershed, attention is turning not to flood risk, a subject that has dominated headlines in the past, but to something quieter, more insidious, and equally disruptive - drought.

Low water isn't always obvious. Unlike a flood that surges through streets and ditches, drought creeps in through absence. It takes hold in the shallow trickle of a once-healthy stream, in the browning of pastures, and in the growing tension between human demand and natural supply.

"We often think of this area as water-rich, and for the most part, it is," said Nancy Aspden, Director of Integrated Watershed Management at Kawartha Conservation. "But that richness is not guaranteed. Our watershed spans a large and varied geography, and rainfall can vary significantly from one part to another. That means while one area may seem fine, another may be quietly slipping into a water shortage."

The Kawartha Conservation jurisdiction includes hundreds of lakes, rivers, and wetlands spread across more than 2,500 square kilometres. Monitoring water levels across such a vast and varied landscape is no small task.

DEFINING DROUGHT: A MEASURED APPROACH

Drought isn't simply a lack of rain for a few days. In Ontario, it's tracked through the Low Water Response Program, a provincial framework that helps conservation authorities determine when and how to respond to dry conditions.

Kawartha Conservation measures both precipitation levels and streamflow indicators over one, three, and 18-month periods. If rainfall totals drop below 80% of normal, or if streamflow levels fall below 70% of their historical averages, a Level I low water condition is declared. That designation escalates to Level II or III as conditions worsen.

"It's a science-based process," said Nathan Rajevski, Watershed Resources Technician. "We use a network of rain gauges, stream gauges, and climate data to assess the real-time condition of the watershed. The goal is to be proactive, to raise awareness before a crisis hits."

Example of a rain gauge.

WHY IT MATTERS: THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Low water affects more than just recreational boaters and thirsty lawns. For farmers, it can mean poor crop yields and dry pastures. For municipal systems, it may stress drinking water supplies or trigger voluntary conservation efforts. For the environment, drought places immense pressure on aquatic ecosystems.

“Reduced streamflow means less oxygen in the water and higher temperatures,” said Aspden. “That’s a lethal combination for fish and other aquatic life. Wetlands begin to shrink, and with them, the habitat they provide for birds, amphibians, and countless other species.”

In recent years, climate variability has made predicting these conditions more difficult. Intense storms can dump heavy rainfall in a matter of hours, but if they’re followed by weeks of dry heat, the ground may remain parched.

“It's not just how much rain falls, but when and how it falls,” Rajevski explained. “We can get a month’s worth of rain in one day, but if it runs off quickly or doesn’t replenish groundwater, we’re still in trouble.”

A CALL FOR WATER STEWARDSHIP

While drought is largely beyond human control, its impacts can be mitigated through awareness and action. Kawartha Conservation encourages residents to conserve water during low water advisories, by reducing non-essential use, avoiding lawn watering, and using rain barrels to collect water for gardens.

Landowners and farmers are also urged to consider long-term strategies like planting drought-resistant crops, maintaining natural buffers along waterways, and protecting wetlands, which act as natural sponges during dry periods.

“Water conservation isn’t just for times of crisis,” said Aspden. “It’s a mindset we need to build into everyday life, especially as climate extremes become more frequent.”

As Kawartha Conservation continues to monitor conditions this summer, the message is clear: Even in the land of lakes, water is a finite resource. And when the rain doesn’t come, we all have a role to play in keeping the watershed resilient.

Rain barrel’s are fantastic tools for rain collection and subsequent use for watering lawns, gardens, etc.

For more information on how Kawartha Conservation can help.

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