



Watershed Watch Newsletter



February 2026 / Vol 23

EVEN IN WINTER, THE WATERSHED IS MOVING

February sits right in the heart of winter. The days are still short, the mornings are cold, and the landscape is shaped by snow and ice. But there is also a quiet sense of movement in this time of year, a reminder that while winter still has its grip, spring is not far off. It is a season for paying attention to what is happening beneath the surface, in our lakes, rivers, forests, and communities, and for appreciating the role winter plays in the health of our watershed.

In this month's issue of Watershed Watch, we highlight work that continues even in the coldest months, and planning that is already shaping the seasons ahead. You will read about a fish habitat enhancement project on Lake Scugog that is moving forward under winter conditions, strengthening spawning habitat and setting the stage for healthier fisheries. We also explore the growing role of Kawartha Conservation's Innovation Hub, which is expanding professional training opportunities and building practical skills that support better environmental outcomes across Ontario.

With spring in mind, we are also sharing details about two important opportunities for the months ahead. Our 2026 Water Fund is now available to help landowners and community groups turn good ideas into real, on-the-ground improvements for water and habitat. And with the deadline approaching, this issue includes a reminder that there is still time to order trees and shrubs through our annual Seedling Sale, a simple and affordable way to make a lasting investment in your property and the watershed.

Winter is not just a pause. It is a season of preparation, planning, and quiet progress. As February gives way to March and we begin to look ahead to another busy field season, we hope you take some time to enjoy the beauty of winter, and to see how the work happening now helps set the foundation for a healthier watershed in the months ahead.

With gratitude,
The Kawartha Conservation Team

KAWARTHA CONSERVATION LEADS FISH HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT ON LAKE SCUGOG

Kawartha Conservation is leading a collaborative, community-supported project to restore and enhance critical fish spawning habitat on Lake Scugog, marking an important step forward for aquatic ecosystem health and creating a practical model for future lake restoration projects across the watershed.

The Lake Scugog Fish Spawning Shoals Enhancement Project will improve three historically important spawning shoals by expanding them outward into the lake over sand using new cobble substrate. The project will enhance approximately 757 square metres (about 8,150 square feet) of spawning habitat along 157 metres (about 515 feet) of shoreline across five properties.

“This project is a great example of how science, community commitment, and partnership can come together to deliver real benefits for lake health,” said Nancy Aspden, Director of Integrated Watershed Management at Kawartha Conservation. “By enhancing these shoals, we are strengthening fish habitat today and also creating a proven approach that can be applied to other lakes across our watershed.”

The work will involve placing cobble adjacent to existing shoals, rather than disturbing them. This approach will expand available spawning habitat without impacting known shoals, increase the number of protective crevices where fish eggs can safely develop, reduce the risk of shoals being left high and dry during periods of low water, and improve spawning conditions for species such as walleye and smallmouth bass.

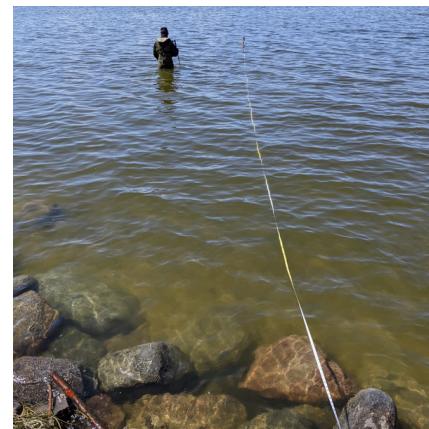
For the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, the restoration of walleye habitat carries both ecological and cultural importance.

“Ogaa (walleye) shoals are vital habitats where the fish spawn each spring and ensure sustainable populations. As a key predator, healthy Ogaa populations help maintain the balance of the aquatic food web. A traditional food of the Anishinabe, Ogaa are put towards many different cultural uses,” said Chief Kelly LaRocca of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. “The Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation is grateful for the valued partnerships that have promoted the restoration of Ogaa habitats in our Treaty lands.”

The project is expected to be carried out in late February, when ice and winter conditions allow the work to be completed efficiently and with minimal environmental disturbance.

“Kawartha Conservation is leading the design and ecological planning to ensure this project delivers real, long-term benefits for aquatic life in Lake Scugog,” said Brett Tregunno, Aquatic Biologist with Kawartha Conservation. “Functioning fish spawning habitat is one of the foundations of a healthy lake, and this project directly supports the lake’s ecological resilience.”

The project is being delivered in collaboration with the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, Scugog Lake Stewards, the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters Foundation, all of whom have provided direct funding support. Additional funding is being provided through Hydro One, Durham Region’s Implementation Science program, and four private shoreline landowners are partnering to make the project possible. Green Side Up Environmental Services has been retained as the contractor.



Water Quality Specialist, Tanner Liang, conducting shoal survey.

Rob Messervey, President of Scugog Lake Stewards, said the project reflects what community-driven stewardship can accomplish.

“The Scugog Lake Stewards are excited to be a funding partner in this Spawning Shoal Enhancement Project on Lake Scugog. This work will bring immediate as well as long-term benefits to the fisheries in the lake and establishes a proven approach and precedent for future fisheries enhancement work in Lake Scugog and other lakes in the region. Congratulations to Kawartha Conservation and other partners and residents in bringing this project to fruition.”

While this project builds on the broader momentum of the Lake Scugog Enhancement Project, it stands as a distinct, community-driven initiative focused on fish habitat restoration.

Beyond the immediate ecological benefits, the project also serves a broader purpose.

“One of the important outcomes here is that we are establishing a clear, repeatable workflow for how shoal restoration projects can move from concept to approval to construction,” Tregunno added. “By working through regulatory processes and demonstrating what is possible, this project helps open the door for more habitat restoration work on Lake Scugog and other lakes in the Kawartha watershed.”

Kawartha Conservation views this initiative as a blueprint for future lake restoration efforts, showing how strong science, local partnerships, and community investment can work together to protect and improve the health of local waterways.

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters Foundation says projects like this are exactly what community-based conservation should look like.

“We are excited to see the tangible progress towards restoring fish habitat on Lake Scugog. Conservation of fish and wildlife is a central mandate of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters since our inception. Projects such as this achieve conservation outcomes that contribute to long-term fisheries management and at the same time provide habitat benefits for other aquatic wildlife,” said OFAH Foundation Chair Maya Basdeo. “OFAH Foundation’s Community Conservation Fund supports community groups delivering on-the-ground conservation work and providing outdoor education experiences, and we are proud to have supported Kawartha Conservation in this project in 2026.”

As an Ontario based company with a long history of supporting local communities, Hydro One says the Lake Scugog Fish Spawning Shoals Enhancement Project demonstrates the value of strong local partnerships that benefit future generations.

“From critical fish habitat on Lake Scugog to Kawartha’s electricity system, every investment we make in Ontario communities is focused on helping future generations grow and prosper,” said Craig Prewett, Director, Strategic Projects, Hydro One. “This work is possible due to the long-term collaboration with the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation and Kawartha Conservation. Together, we are creating meaningful and lasting impacts in the places where we live and grow.”

“This is a good news story for Lake Scugog,” added Aspden. “It is about protecting fish, strengthening the ecosystem, and leaving the lake in better shape for future generations.”



Aquatic Biologist Brett Tregunno and Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation Councilor Jeff Forbes, completing a shoal survey on Scugog Lake.

INNOVATION HUB EXPANDS PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Professionals working in environmental management, land use planning, and on-site services will have new opportunities this year to strengthen their skills through a series of specialized training courses offered by Kawartha Conservation's Innovation Hub, a growing centre for applied professional education that attracts participants from across Ontario and beyond.

The Innovation Hub has built a reputation for delivering practical, field-tested training that supports better decision-making, stronger environmental protection, and consistent standards across the province. This spring's lineup includes three of its most in-demand offerings: Ontario Building Code Part 8 training: On-site Sewage Systems Exam Preparation, and Ontario Benthos Biomonitoring Network (OBBN) Certification.

“These courses are about building real, practical capacity in the people who are doing the work on the ground every day,” said Nancy Aspden, Director of Integrated Watershed Management at Kawartha Conservation. “We regularly see people travel significant distances to attend, because they know the training is relevant, current, and grounded in real-world experience.”

The Ontario Building Code Part 8 Training: On-site Sewage Systems Exam Preparation course is a comprehensive, technically focused program designed to give participants a strong working understanding of the regulatory framework governing on-site sewage systems, including approvals, inspections, and compliance requirements. The course is widely used by building officials, inspectors, and practitioners who work with septic systems and private servicing across both rural and urban settings.



Example of a septic tank installation.

While the course is designed to prepare participants to successfully write the provincial certification exam, the exam itself is completed separately through the province. This training provides the technical foundation candidates need by reviewing core concepts, regulatory requirements, and real-world scenarios they are likely to encounter, while reinforcing best practices for system design, installation, inspection, and long-term maintenance.

“These systems are critical infrastructure, even if they are out of sight,” Aspden said. “A well-designed and well-maintained system protects groundwater, surface water, and public health. Training like this helps ensure that the people responsible for them are confident, competent, and consistent in their work.”

The Innovation Hub is also offering OBBN Certification, a specialized program focused on benthic biomonitoring, the study of aquatic insects and organisms that serve as indicators of water quality and ecosystem health. Participants learn standardized field and laboratory methods used across Ontario to assess stream health and contribute to long-term monitoring programs.

“Biomonitoring gives us an early warning system for changes in watershed health,” Aspden said. “By training more practitioners in consistent, recognized methods, we strengthen the quality of data being collected and improve our ability to understand what’s happening in our rivers and streams over time.”

Together, the courses reflect Kawartha Conservation’s broader approach to watershed management, one that combines regulation, science, and education to support both environmental protection and responsible development. The Innovation Hub was created to bridge the gap between policy and practice, offering training that is grounded in real-world conditions and professional realities.

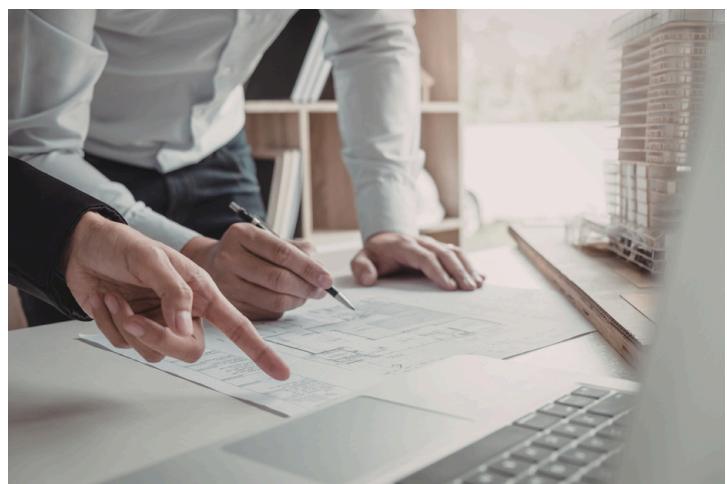
“These programs are not theoretical,” Aspden said. “They are designed around the actual challenges people face in the field. That’s why they continue to be so well attended and so well regarded.”

Participants routinely include municipal staff, conservation authority professionals, private sector practitioners, consultants, and environmental technicians from across Ontario. In addition to technical learning, the sessions also provide opportunities for cross-sector networking and shared problem-solving.

Registration details and course schedules are available through Kawartha Conservation’s Event Calendar on the website at www.kawarthaconservation.com. With demand for these programs continuing to grow, early registration is encouraged.

For Kawartha Conservation, the continued growth of the Innovation Hub represents an investment not just in professional development, but in better environmental outcomes province-wide.

“When we invest in people’s skills and knowledge, we are also investing in stronger protection for water, ecosystems, and communities,” Aspden said. “That’s what this is really about.”



WATER FUND 2026 NOW AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECTS ACROSS THE WATERSHED

Landowners, community groups, and organizations across the Kawartha Conservation watershed, including Kawartha Lakes and Durham Region, have a new opportunity to access funding support for environmental projects through the 2026 Water Fund.

The Water Fund offers grants of up to \$4,000 to help residents and organizations take practical action to protect water quality, restore habitat, and strengthen the overall health of local lakes, rivers, and streams. The program supports on-the-ground projects that deliver real, measurable environmental benefits while also improving the long-term resilience of the watershed.

Projects funded through the Water Fund commonly include shoreline naturalization, erosion control, tree and shrub planting, wetland enhancement, and improvements that reduce runoff and pollution entering waterways. The program is designed to support both rural and urban projects, with a focus on practical solutions that can be implemented quickly and effectively.

“The Water Fund is really about helping people turn good ideas into real improvements on the landscape,” said Julia Derue, Stewardship Technician with Kawartha Conservation. “Many landowners want to do the right thing for their property and the environment, but cost or uncertainty can be barriers. This program helps by providing both financial support and technical guidance.”

One of the strengths of the Water Fund is its accessibility. The program is not limited to large or complex projects. Smaller, well-planned initiatives are encouraged, particularly those that reduce pollution, improve natural habitat, or help properties better manage water and erosion.

Eligible applicants include private landowners, farmers, lake associations, community groups, and organizations located within the Kawartha Conservation watershed, which includes the City of Kawartha Lakes and parts of Durham Region. Projects must be located within the watershed and demonstrate a clear benefit to water quality or ecosystem health.



Example of a past livestock exclusion fencing project.

In addition to funding, applicants can access technical advice from Kawartha Conservation staff to help refine project ideas, confirm feasibility, and ensure best practices are followed.

Over the years, the Water Fund has supported hundreds of local projects, from restored shorelines and reforested fields to improved drainage and stabilized streambanks. While each project may seem small on its own, together they represent a significant investment in the health and resilience of the watershed.

“Protecting water starts one property at a time,” Derue added. “When many people make small, smart improvements, the cumulative impact is enormous.”

The application deadline for the 2026 Water Fund is April 30, 2026.

Full program details, eligibility criteria, and application forms are available at kawarthaconservation.ca/waterfund. Residents who are unsure whether their project idea qualifies are encouraged to contact Kawartha Conservation’s Stewardship team to discuss their plans.



A project that was completed through the Water Fund on the Burnt River. The project included streambank stabilization and a large planting in partnership with Fleming College.

LAST CHANCE TO ORDER TREES THROUGH KAWARTHA CONSERVATION'S ANNUAL SEEDLING SALE

As winter begins to loosen its grip and thoughts turn toward spring, residents across the Kawartha Conservation watershed still have time to take part in one of the region's most popular and impactful environmental programs, the annual Seedling Sale.

The 2026 Seedling Sale is now in its final weeks, with orders open until March 4, 2026. The program offers an easy and affordable way for landowners, rural residents, and community groups to plant native trees and shrubs that support long-term watershed health.

This year's sale features a variety of native bareroot seedlings, sold in bundles of 25, with prices ranging from \$50 to \$100 depending on species. The selection includes well-known restoration species such as White Pine, White Spruce, and Red Oak, as well as specialty species like Highbush Cranberry, Serviceberry, and Nannyberry.

"The Seedling Sale has become something people really look forward to each year," said Danielle Marcoux-Hunter, Coordinator of Stewardship with Kawartha Conservation. "It is a simple way for landowners to start or expand planting projects that will benefit their property and the watershed for years to come."

Beyond their beauty, native trees and shrubs play an important role in protecting water quality, improving soil health, supporting wildlife, and strengthening biodiversity across the landscape.

"Not everyone has the time or space for a large-scale restoration project, but even a bundle of seedlings can make a meaningful difference," Marcoux-Hunter said. "They support pollinators and wildlife, help manage runoff, and contribute to healthier, more resilient ecosystems."

Over the years, the Seedling Sale has helped plant tens of thousands of trees across the region, from farm fields and shorelines to woodlots and rural properties. While each planting project may seem small on its own, together they add up to significant improvements for the watershed.

Seedling pickup will take place at the end of April, timed to give the young trees the best possible start once planting season begins.

Quantities are limited, and orders are filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Residents can view available species and place their order online at www.kawarthaconservation.com/seedlingsale.



Example of how the seedlings are packaged for clients to pick up.