

Battle lines drawn to get 'alien' weed out of county

By Emma Dill

A slim, green-stemmed giant is invading the wetlands and ditches of Manitowoc County and wreaking havoc on its native inhabitants.

Phragmites—pronounced as phrag-my-tees—are sometimes mistaken for the common reed with their green stems and tassel-like brown tops, but instead of benefitting its ecosystem, the tall, dense invasive grass chokes out native plants and forces animals to relocate.

“Phragmites occupies the same habitat that cattails do, a wetland habitat,” said Tom Ward, invasive species coordinator for the Manitowoc County Lakes Association. “It totally displaces cattails.”

Cattails play an essential, albeit unglamorous, role in wetlands and marshes by supplying animals with winter shelter, food and building supplies.

“See how they constructed (the nest) just in those stiff plants?” Ward said, pointing to a photo of a nest supported by two cattail stems and filled with tiny blackbirds.

“Well, they can’t do that in phragmites because each one is a little teeny stem without any leaves to support it.

“From an ecological standpoint, we will lose a lot of habitat for our native birds and insects and all of the above.”

Cattails are also a major source of food for muskrats and muskrats are a food source for mink. When phragmites overtake cattails

the natural food sources and food chains are disrupted.

Jim Knicklebine, executive director at Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve near Two Rivers, listed about 10 species of birds that would be displaced with the introduction of phragmites.

One study on the East Coast identified 24 bird species in a wetland area before phragmites appeared. After phragmites, only four remained, he said.

Phragmites are a concern in Manitowoc County because of the large area of Lake Michigan shoreline and wetlands. The county has approximately 50,637 acres of wetlands, making up 13 percent of its total land area, according to a state Department of Natural

Resources survey.

The potential wildlife impact of phragmites is huge, but the species impacts humans, too.

First, the 8- to 10-foot-tall grasses create a visual obstacle for motorists, blocking the view of road right-of-ways. Phragmites also obstruct views for residents living beside lakes, ponds and forests.

Phragmites are also very flammable.

“It’s a kind of plant that stores a lot of oil in its stems and it catches fire. It poses a great hazard that way,” Knicklebine said.

“I mean if we were to get a grass fire going in that material it would be a massive fire because No. 1 it’s tall and dry,” Ward added.



Giant Invader

Invasive phragmites tower over the head of Steve Lenzner as he stands on his property along Sinawa Road south of Valders. The weed is capable of taking over wetlands and other lands and there is a push in Manitowoc County to eradicate the invasive plant.

—Journal Photo

Phragmites is an invasive grass from the Middle East. Its shoots grow so closely together that soldiers hid in clumps of phragmites during the Iraq War, Ward said.

Phragmites traveled in the hold of a ship to the East Coast, and shipping contamination brought the grass into Green Bay.

“Then it got introduced into Manitowoc County when I-43 was built,” in 1981, Ward said.

The contractor who built the Manitowoc stretch of I-43 was responsible for the highway from Manitowoc to Green Bay.

When construction crews transferred equipment south from Green Bay to Manitowoc, pieces of phragmites roots came, too.

Greg Fronk of Two Rivers noticed patches of phragmites on his property about 30 years ago. Although at the time, he had no idea what the plant was, “I knew you couldn’t kill it,” he said.

The patches on his land continued to grow until they surrounded each of the four ponds on Fronk’s property.

“Total, I probably have five acres of (phragmites) out of 40,” he said. “It has inundated

everything. It’s like an invading alien—you can’t kill it.”

Fronk began to attack the “alien” plant last year with help from Lakeshore Natural Resource Partnership. With funding from the Environmental Protection Agency, LNRP has contacted homeowners who have phragmites on their property, offering to spray them with a wetland-safe herbicide.

A countywide mapping project helped identify which properties contain the invasive plant so the owners could be contacted, and local town governments are helping spread the word, too.

Spraying takes place in September or October, a time when phragmites are intaking nutrients from the ground to prepare for winter. This helps ensure that the herbicide reaches the plants.

Because phragmite shoots grow so closely together, the herbicide typically does not reach native plants growing below. Young trees with shallow roots, however, can fall victim to the spray, Fronk said.

Phragmites require an herbicide spray for two consecutive years in order to kill all sprouts.

“You have to kill any plant

that’s in that colony,” Ward said, “because one or two plants will still feed that (root) system underground and it’ll start all over again.”

Ward, too, is working on the LNRP project, educating property owners about phragmites and encouraging them to treat the plants.

Last winter, the project mapped the areas of the county with phragmites and this spring they sent out permission slips to homeowners to spray.

“We’re in a position right now in Manitowoc County where there’s small colonies of phragmites. We don’t want to wait until any invasive reaches a point of having occupied the whole landscape. You can’t control it then. You have to act when it’s in its early stages,” Ward said. “We’re at a point with phragmites that we have an opportunity.”

Next week, the Journal takes a look at aquatic invasive species in the county.



Keeping It Clean

Steve Meidl (left) of the Pigeon Lake Association talks with fisherman Travis Schwarz of Chilton in an effort to keep invasive

weeds and other species from spreading among lakes. Volunteer inspectors help educate boaters about the problems posed by invasive species. —Journal Photo

Foreign invader latches onto lakes

Milfoil makes itself at home right where it's least wanted in area waters

By Emma Dill

This is the second of a two-part series on invasive species in Manitowoc County.

For boaters, kayakers and lakefront homeowners in Manitowoc County, Eurasian watermilfoil is a weed that just keeps coming back, and it's annoyingly persistent.

"It's kind of like dandelions, you know. You never really get rid of dandelions," said Steve Meidl, a director with the Pigeon Lake Association in rural Valders.

Manitowoc County lakes have struggled to evict Eurasian watermilfoil, an aquatic invasive species, or at least manage its spread.

Eurasian watermilfoil was first spotted around the perimeters of Pigeon Lake in 2006.

Milfoil, a weed, sinks its roots into the lake bottom and can grow up to 33 feet in length.

"It just keeps growing really, really tall and all of a sudden it mats onto the surface but it keeps growing," Meidl said.

"Like a vine," added Gus Gospodarek, Pigeon Lake Association president.

Boat motors and kayaks cannot pass through the matted milfoil. Neither can swimmers.

"You definitely can't swim in it," said Tom Ward, president of the Manitowoc County Lakes Association. "You can get entrapped, for that matter, when it grows into this solid mass."

Milfoil also begins growing in early spring, getting a head start on native plants and stealing their space and sunlight.

Milfoil does provide a place for small fish to hide, but this could cause the decline of larger fish populations like perch or bluegill that depend on smaller fish for food, Ward said.

The Pigeon Lake Association responded by spot treating about four acres of milfoil.

They kept treating in 2010 and again in 2012 but realized the isolated treatments weren't working.

In 2017, the association, working with biologists and the Department of Natural Resources, decided to treat the whole lake by releasing chemicals in various locations and allowing them to spread. The association and Town of Liberty paid for the comprehensive treatment with a \$21,000 grant from the Department of Natural Resources.

At the same time, the association received another grant to develop a lake management plan that addresses invasive species, among other things.

This spring, DNR officials determined that the milfoil was gone from Pigeon Lake, for now.

"It will come back. It just never goes away," Gospodarek said.

"It's been introduced to the lake, and now we have to manage it," Meidl added.

Just east of Pigeon Lake, English Lake has had a more challenging battle with the weed.

English Lake caretakers discovered their milfoil a few years after Pigeon Lake did, said Carol Entringer, former president of the English Lake Management and Protection Rehab District.

"The whole exterior shoreline was getting spotty areas of milfoil," she said.

When they began to spot treat the weed "it didn't really do a whole lot of good," Entringer said.

The district brought in out-of-state aquatics experts to determine what the problem was.

"During that time period, we found out that we didn't have the basic Eurasian watermilfoil, ours had gone into a hybrid...which didn't respond to the chemicals that we thought would work with the milfoil," Entringer said.

"A hybrid is a Frankenstein," Ward said. "It's crossed with a native northern milfoil."

To battle the hybrid, a chemical company developed a mixture it thought would work.

"It did pretty good for the first year, almost three years," Entringer said, "and then it started coming back again."

The district brought in snorkelers to manually pull out milfoil where it formed the densest patches.

A year later they hired a company to suck up the milfoil.

"It's like a huge vacuum cleaner, an underwater vacuum cleaner, and it goes on a pontoon boat...and they take scuba divers and they go down in the water and they suck with these machines," En-

tringer said. "We took several trailer loads of milfoil out of the lake doing that."

Although the underwater cleaning helped reduce milfoil for a while, the plants have only grown back.

So, the residents of English Lake have taken a new approach.

"The last three years, we've kind of just sat back and said, 'Let's just see what happens if we don't do anything,'" Entringer said.

In 2016, without any chemicals or manual harvesting, the plants began to rot at the end of June.

"You know how your grass dries up? Well, that's what these plants were doing. They just kind of were disintegrating, falling apart," Entringer said. "It pretty much disappeared by around the Fourth of July."

The milfoil has consistently rotted and disintegrated into the lake for the past three years, something that baffles consultants and biologists.

"They can't explain it, don't know why it's doing it," En-

Extra! Extra!

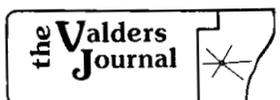
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