

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh
2023 Annual Report

Board of Directors

Charles Lee, President
John Sullivan, Treasurer
Nancy Heerens-Knudson, Secretary
Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins
Karen Acker
Ralph Knudson
Sue Knopf

February 1, 2024

The ***Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh*** is a 501 (c) 3 private, non-profit organization, incorporated in 2013 with the State of Wisconsin. Its **mission** is to preserve, protect, and enhance the La Crosse River Marsh and serve the community through action, advocacy, and education.

Membership in *Friends of the Marsh* is by household and is lifetime. There are no annual renewals. At this writing we have 212 household memberships. We welcomed seventeen new households in 2023.

Friends of the Marsh can accomplish nothing without the help of volunteers. Over the course of many work outings we had the help of 136 volunteers who contributed a total of 732 hours of work.

The Board of Directors delivered its first annual report to the membership for the year 2015 in February 2016. In March of 2016, the Board completed a five-year strategic plan, which included five goals. This plan was introduced at our annual member meeting in February 2017. In subsequent annual meetings, Board members have highlighted the major activities and events of the previous year using the goals included in the plan as the basic outline for discussion. The annual report to members this year uses the same format: since 2021 using a revised five-year strategic plan. Here are the most significant activities and events of 2023 arranged according to the five goals included in the ***La Crosse River Marsh Strategic Plan, 2021-2025***.

2021-2025 Strategic Plan - Goals

1. **Protection and Coordination:** To protect the La Crosse River Marsh and its riparian boundaries; help direct and guide habitat management; expand wetland

acres; secure the highest available level of wetland protection; oppose further development of the marsh and adverse land use changes; through partnerships enhance La Crosse River watershed services.

2. **Vegetation Restoration and Management:** To protect, enhance and restore native vegetation in the La Crosse River Marsh and its riparian boundaries to ensure a healthy marsh ecosystem, including planting, grass cutting and brushing, and invasive plant management.
3. **Hydrology and Water Quality Management:** Maintain and enhance the La Crosse River's connectivity with the La Crosse Marsh, to ensure a healthy functioning floodplain. To reduce nutrient, sediment and other pollutant loads into the La Crosse River Marsh through watershed level and local pollutant control measures. Work with local, state, and federal agencies to find opportunities for water level management and storm water management.
4. **Safety:** To develop a healthy, safe recreation environment. Identify opportunities to improve trail safety and, through education, promote the considerate use of trails by all users.
5. **Education:** To offer educational programs about the value of wetlands, the history, hydrology, and the flora and fauna of the La Crosse River Marsh, and to emphasize the unique place this marsh holds in the life of our community. We wish to be a catalyst for continuing and expanding educational programming in the marsh, and we wish to promote the La Crosse River Marsh as one of the finest urban wetlands in the state and region.

2023 Annual Report

Protection and Coordination

Habitat

- February 18-20, 2023, in partnership with WisCorps, volunteers participated in the Cornell University Ornithology Lab and Audubon Society **Great Backyard Bird Count**, a world-wide citizen science assessment of bird populations. (See Attachment #1)
- *Friends* has compiled **phenological** data for the past six years, charting the arrival/appearance of spring. (See Attachment #2)
- **Frog and Toad Chorus Survey** With volunteers, and in

partnership with WisCorps, we conducted three (April - June) frog and toad chorus surveys throughout the southern portion of the marsh. Amphibians are a key indicator of wetland well-being.
(See Attachment #3)

Blanchard's Cricket Frogs were identified in the western portion of the marsh for the second year in a row. Cricket Frogs are listed as endangered in Wisconsin. Use the link below to access our web site and at the top of the screen click on "Blog" for more information about Cricket Frogs.
www.friendsofthelacrosserivermarsh.com

- A pair of **Trumpeter Swans** successfully nested in the marsh this summer. One of the two cygnets was raised successfully through the summer, only to die late in the summer. This is the second successful Trumpeter Swan nesting documented in the marsh.
- Two bald eagles returned to the nest, visible from the south bank of the marsh, again this year and successfully hatched two eggs. Two additional bald eagle nests were reported in or near the marsh this year, a very positive development.

Coordination

- *Friends of the Marsh*, represented by Chuck Lee, Karen Acker and John Sullivan served as local stakeholder consultants to Parks, Recreation and Forestry and SmithGroup, Inc. the environmental engineering firm under contract to the city for the long-range "La Crosse River Marsh Restoration Project." We have advocated for continued funding of the project through the city Capital Improvement Projects annual budget.

The project is now entering its fourth year. We anticipate significant trail engineering, design, and construction along the Grand Crossing and Cottonwood trails to enhance water flow under these trails and trail-surface improvements, beginning early in 2025.

- *Friends* board members continue to monitor deliberations concerning **remediation options for the lead contamination** in the east cell of the marsh and **PAH contamination** along the south and eastern bank of the marsh. Currently, regarding both mitigation methods and cost, there has been no news on either issue for months.

- Presently, Xcel Energy is working along both the Veterans' Trail and the Asfoor Trail, replacing a power line west of the Asfoor Trail with new structures, and removing an old line running east-west from Copeland Ave. to Lang Dr. A relocated line is being installed parallel to Lang Dr. *Friends* consulted with both Xcel and Parks, Recreation, and Forestry on this project.

- **River Point District Wetland Restoration**

Friends of the Marsh and the City Parks, Recreation, and Forestry department are cooperating to restore the twenty-acre wetland and floodplain forest north of Riverside Park, separating the park from River Point District residential and commercial development. We have received the final report from a consultant on vegetation zones, restoration, and management of this natural area. *Friends* and Parks will split the cost of this survey and report.

- *Friends of the Marsh* approved a "Memorandum of Understanding" with the city Parks, Recreation, and Forestry department again this year. The document outlines the basic relationship between our organization and the city and will be reviewed annually. We also approved a "Land Use Agreement" with WDNR. A five-year agreement, this document gives us permission to plant trees, shrubs, and perennials on WDNR owned land in the marsh.

2. Vegetation Restoration and Management

- **Native Shrubs and Trees**

We planted about 30 floodplain trees this year, mainly silver maple, eastern cottonwood, American elm, sycamore and a few swamp white oak. Almost all were planted out along the La Crosse River. We planted 13 native shrubs along the trails.

- **Perennial Plantings**

About 150 plants, including but not limited to common and marsh milkweed, butterfly weed, purple prairie clover, joe pye weed, white wild indigo, prairie coreopsis, button blazing star, boneset, brown eyed susan, cardinal flower, dense blazing star, fox sedge and golden alexanders were planted along the Cottonwood and Grand Crossing Trails.

- **Buckthorn Removal**

Volunteers gathered fourteen times this summer and fall

to cut and treat buckthorn along the Cottonwood and Grand Crossing trails, focusing especially on the area at the intersection of these two trails and two restoration sites along the Cottonwood Trail. Removing invasive buckthorn from along trails opens up viewsheds across the marsh and makes room for native grasses, perennials trees and shrubs. We welcomed a WisCorps crew to the marsh for one week in July for buckthorn removal at the Cottonwood / Grand Crossing site.

- **Trailside Tree and Shrub Trimming**

Volunteers helped maintain the Cottonwood and Grand Crossing trails, trimming overhanging branches and cutting back thick edge vegetation. We had ten of these work outings.

3. Hydrology and Water Quality

- **Water Quality**

John Sullivan monitored water quality at seven locations in the southern portion of the marsh on a bi-weekly basis. This is an ongoing task designed to characterize the general water quality conditions in the marsh. John's report, "Water Quality Monitoring in the La Crosse Marsh December 2017 – December 2022" can be found on both our Facebook and web pages. (See attachment #4, below, for report recommendations.)

- **Water Levels**

Since 2015, water levels in the marsh have revealed moderate to high seasonal fluctuations and a general increase in water levels over these years. Water levels were dramatically lower the last two years, compared with recent years, reflecting the overall lack of rain our region has received, with the exception of a very dramatic flood last spring, the third highest on record. Exceptional snowfall followed by rain in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota account for the dramatic spring flood. (See attachment #5 below)

- **Culvert Maintenance**

Two box culverts under the Cottonwood Trail and two steel culverts under the Grand Crossing Trail are blocked by sediment and years of neglect. One box culvert under the Cottonwood Trail is open and functioning well. Two steel culverts under the Grand Crossing Trail are kept open by frequent maintenance. Water flow under both trails will be addressed soon as part of the marsh restoration project.

4. Safety

Trail Improvement

- The annual marsh trail clean-up took place in conjunction with the Earth Fair celebration in April. Ninety volunteers including UWL students, members of organizations, family groups, and individuals joined this community event.
- In October twenty volunteers, including members of UWL athletic teams came out to volunteer and clean up the marsh banks on the east and west sides of Lang Drive, always a collecting spot for trash.
- The *Friends* board is aware of a number of conflicts that have occurred on our "dual" use trails, between bicyclists and pedestrians. We have surveyed how other cities in our region handle this, discussed it, and have proposed signage to Parks, Recreation, and Forestry to address the problem. We are planning a trail use survey for 2024.

5. Education

Programs

Enviro-Wednesdays -- January 4: Steve Simpson, "Essays to my Daughter."

Enviro-Wednesdays -- February 1: *Friends of the Marsh Annual Meeting*. Jessica Stanton, "The Decline of North American Avifauna"

Aldo Leopold Day -- Monday Feb, 27 at 7 p.m., the D.B. Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership lecture series presented a Facebook-streamed talk by UW-Madison Prof. Lauren Ritters titled "Why do birds sing?"

The Friends of the Marsh held a family-friendly hike in the marsh at 11 a.m. March 4. The theme was Aldo Leopold's "Marshland Elegy," from *A Sand County Almanac*.

EnviroWednesdays -- March 1: Tim Acklin, "Forward Together."

EnviroWednesdays -- April 5: Diana Elena Marie Sanchez Thundercloud, "La Madre Tierra/Pachamama/Mother Earth."

EnviroWednesdays -- May 3: Kati Thompson, "Forest Bathing."

EnviroWednesdays -- June 7: John Sullivan, "Water Quality Observations from the Seat of a Canoe."

EnviroWednesdays -- July 5: Nicole DeMarb-McKenzie and Ty Trotter, "Waterfowl Banding."

"Frog & Toad Chorus Training" -- July 18: Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins and Karen Acker, The Nature Place

EnviroWednesdays -- August 2: Jen Bailey, "Climate Resiliency Guide."

EnviroWednesdays -- September 6: Danielle Hudson, "Ground Nesting Bees."

EnviroWednesdays -- November 2: Tim Acklin, "Forward La Crosse"

EnviroWednesdays -- October 4: Paul Napieralla, "Marsh Wildlife."

EnviroWednesdays -- November 1: John Sullivan, "Water Quality in the La Crosse River Marsh."

EnviroWednesdays -- December 6: Erica Black and Vicki Miller, "Driftless Area Bio-Blitz."

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh Financial Statement - December 31, 2023

Balance December 31, 2023	17, 529.95
Income - 2023	
Donations	4,904.74
Memberships	850.00
Check Return (DNR)	1.00
Insurance credit	8.00
	Sub-total 5,763.74
Expenses - 2023	
Karen's Classroom repair	314.30
Herbicide & Basal Oil	82.00
Nursery plants	350.00
Insurance	300.00
Wix Web Fee	432.00
Marketing	232.95
Post Office Box	166.00
PayPal Fees	24.71
Bank Fees	60.00
	Sub-total 1,961.96
Balance	21,331.73**
State Bank Balance 12/31/2023	21,331.73
Encumbrance for Prairie Nursery Consulting	(5,000.00)
<u>Available Cash</u>	<u>16,331.73</u>

****Volunteer Hours -- Dollar Equivalent**

Mission Related (Habitat improvement, Water quality/Water level measurement, Trail improvement, Programing and other physical and biological activities)

136 Volunteers

732 Hours

@ \$29.97 / hr 21,938

(IRS rate for value of volunteer hours
in Wisconsin in 2023)

Attachment #1

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is a joint project of the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) and the [National Audubon Society](#) with partner [Bird Studies Canada](#) and is made possible in part by founding sponsor [Wild Birds Unlimited](#).

A world-wide citizen science project, the GBBC is a vehicle for monitoring the extent, health, and movement of bird species and populations in this age of climate change. For full details, see www.birdcount.org.

For the last five years, the *Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh* and WisCorps have hosted the GBBC in our “backyard,” the La Crosse River Marsh. As in previous years, volunteers gathered and spread out along the edges of the marsh and the marsh trails to record what they saw. That count, including numbers and species, was later entered into the Cornell University Lab of Ornithology “Bird Count” database.

GBBC List

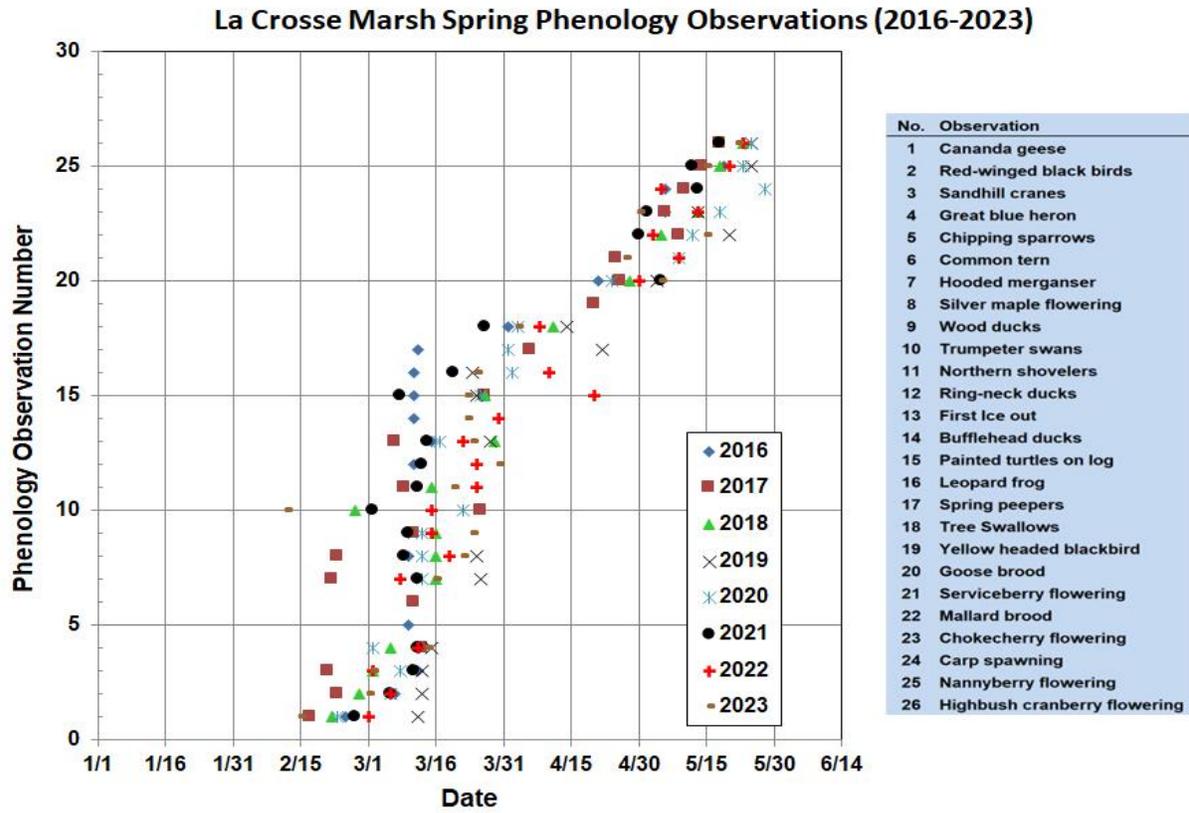
Feb., 2023

La Crosse River Marsh

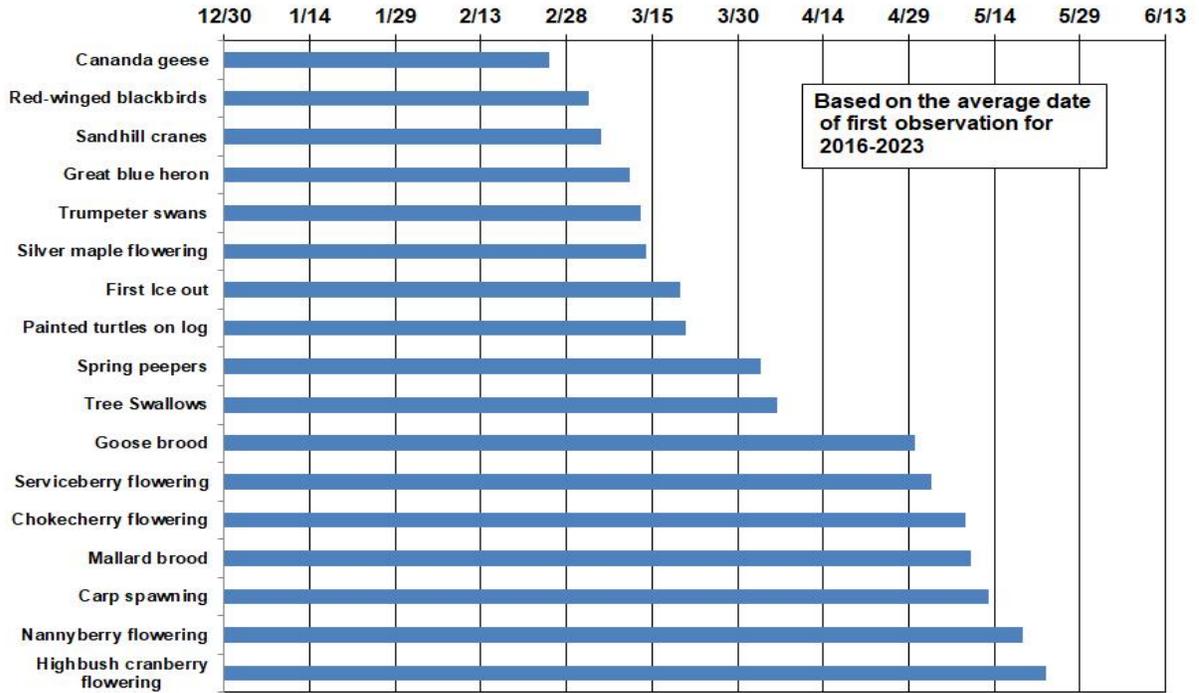
Northern Cardinal	11
Dark-eyed Junco	10
Mourning Dove	5
American Crow	5
Downy Woodpecker	6
Hairy Woodpecker	1
House Finch	1
Black-capped Chickadee	29
House Sparrow	36
European Starling	5
Bald Eagle	11
Nuthatch	7
Robin	55
Red Tailed Hawk	1
Trumpeter Swan	6
Mallards	15
Red Bellied Woodpecker	4
Canada Goose	8
Turkey Vulture	1
Cedar Wax Wing	13
Gold Finch	1

For a full world-wide report on the 2023 GBBC, go to:
<https://www.birdcount.org/2023-final-results>

Attachment #2

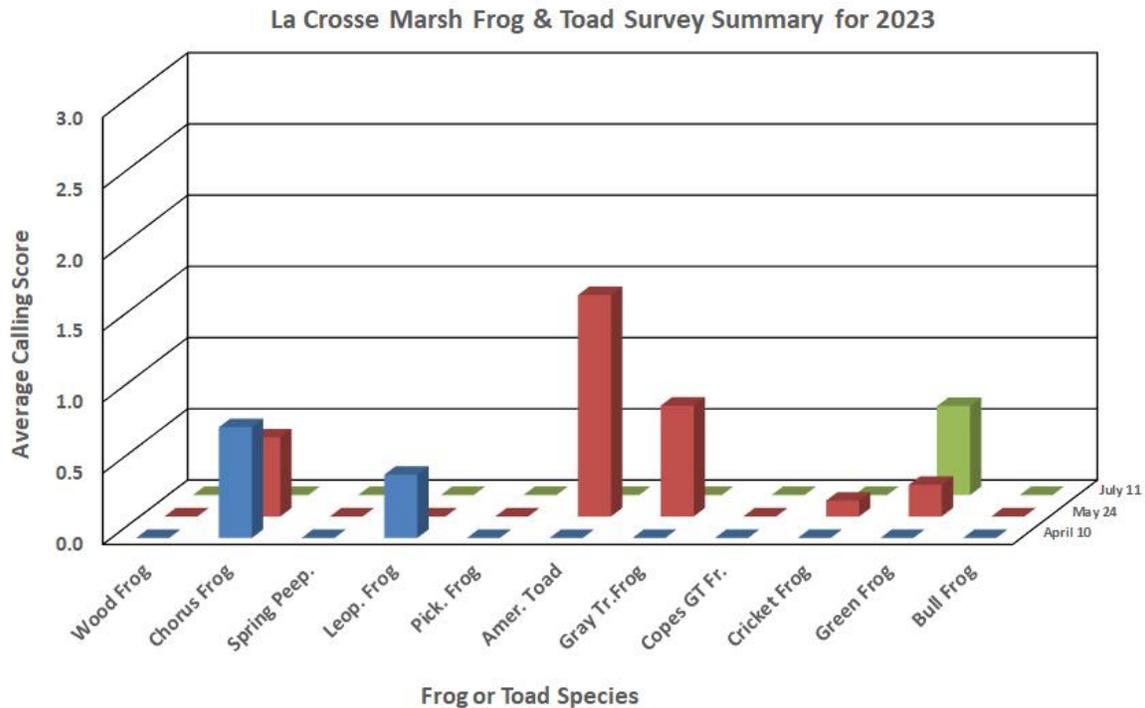


Spring Phenology in the La Crosse Marsh



Attachment #3

Especially noteworthy this year is the official observation of Blanchard's Cricket Frogs, an endangered species in Wisconsin, during an official survey.



Average score based on 9 sites on 3 dates

Attachment #4

Water Quality Report Recommendations:

1. Conduct summer (June-August) monitoring of nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations in the marsh over two to three years to define nutrient concentrations, evaluate nutrient impacts, and develop target concentrations.

2. Evaluate area stormwater programs especially as they relate to surface water discharges to the La Crosse Marsh. This would include an identification of the stormwater drainage area influencing the marsh and the evaluation and enhancement of efforts to reduce nutrient contributions to the marsh from stormwater inflows. Support and promote watershed-level nutrient reductions for nitrogen and phosphorus.
3. Conduct winter (January-March) chloride monitoring in the marsh over several years to evaluate the impacts of road salt runoff and establish a baseline for assessing management practices aimed at reducing road salt runoff.
4. Additional wetland assessment surveys are recommended to further evaluate the biological and physical integrity of the marsh. In particular, the use of floristic quality assessment surveys should be explored and implemented where appropriate to further evaluate the marsh's condition and overall health.

A summary report for the last five years can be accessed on both our Facebook Page and Web Page.

Attachment #5

**Water Levels in the East Cell of the La Crosse Marsh
October 2015 to November 2023**

