



Short Ears, Long Tales

Courte Oreilles Lakes Association

Consider the Milkweed

Allison Slavick
Contributing Writer

To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering.

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. – Aldo Leopold

The great Wisconsin naturalist Aldo Leopold wrote those words in his classic *Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949 and in which he laid out his landmark land ethic and philosophy. If you take literally the first quote, it might refer to the home repair you've attempted on your lawnmower, that most unnatural of objects. Metaphorically, though, it takes on greater meaning in relation to the intelligence of humans and our right and wrong actions. It might also relate to integrity – both our own and that of wholeness of the forests and lakeshores of northern Wisconsin.

Wisconsin is home to [twelve milkweeds](#), similar in appearance in a model of speciation – the process by which new species form in the course of evolution. Not really weeds in the sense that they are "nuisance" plants in a garden, they are native plants that are important cogs in our biotic communities. All twelve milkweeds have the Latin genus name *Asclepias*, derived from the name *Asklepios* – the Greek god of healing and medicine – as some milkweeds have medicinal properties.

In northern Wisconsin, Pokeweed, *Asclepias exaltata*, with its wonderful Latin name ("think highly of this plant, in all its glory!") is a tall woodland milkweed that might go unnoticed. Butterfly weed (*A. tuberosa*) – again, not a weed at all – is so beautiful, with brilliant orange flowers, it is planted in gardens. You may see it as an escapee along roads or fields or in restored prairies.



Butterfly weed, a milkweed with oranges flower at the lower right, is commonly planted in gardens. Photo by Allison Slavick.

The milkweed that is most familiar to all is the common milkweed, *A. syriaca*. "Syriaca" of course means Syrian, and the naturalist Carl Linnaeus made a mistake in naming the plant when he thought the specimen at hand was from Syria. The Swamp milkweed may be seen along the shore of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little LCO. It's another beauty, with erect, rose-colored flowers. As cogs in nature, the natural history of these two milkweeds is fascinating. Likely co-evolving with monarch butterflies, the common and swamp milkweeds are monarchs' important food source, and the milkweeds' extensive range across the United States is another cog that contributes to the long migration and geographic range of monarchs.



Swamp milkweed typically blooms in July. Photo by Allison Slavick.



Swamp milkweed has upright seed pods called follicles. Photo by Allison Slavick.

The complex flower structure of milkweeds has been compared to orchids. The unusual way they are pollinated (not by monarch butterflies) is amazing, as is the way the plants' medicinal properties aid in protection of the monarch. Milkweeds contain chemical compounds called glycosides, which are akin to the compounds that are used to treat heart disease. Butterfly larvae absorb the chemical when they eat milkweed leaves, causing toxicity to predators in the larvae and adult butterflies. Birds have *learned* not to eat the larvae and butterflies and they pass that information on to offspring via the genes of survivors. That is evolution, a process that may take tens of thousands of years.



Milkweeds are important to the survival, migration, and range of monarch butterflies. Photo by Allison Slavick.



The larval stage of the monarch butterfly depends on milkweed leaves for food. Photo by Allison Slavick.

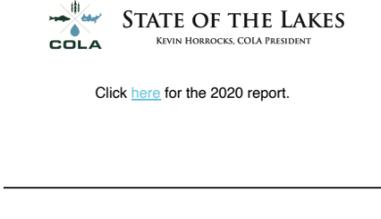
These co-adaptations are another cog in the complex spinning wheel of nature. What about the big picture? Does the swamp milkweed, a plant that evolved thousands of years ago, help protect our lakeshores? Plants found in the littoral zone – the area where shore meets water – help prevent erosion caused by wind and waves. They function as mini-water treatment plants by filtering nitrogen and phosphorus, an ancient adaptive salute to the modern-day Clean Water Act of 1972. Emerging plants like the swamp milkweed provide habitats and food for insects and microbes important to life cycles of fish and all the other creatures found in a lake.

When Aldo Leopold wrote about saving every cog and wheel he was writing about conservation, foreshadowing the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The quote further from *A Sand County Almanac* is worth passing further:

The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: What good is it? If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the order of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts?

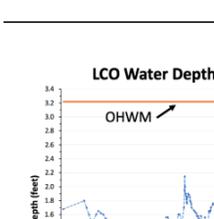
We've learned – sometimes the hard way – that native shoreline plants are not useless. If you have swamp milkweed along your shore you are lucky. If not, see if you can find it on your next paddle around the lake. Its blooming period is over, but you might find a few remaining rosy flowers that will help you spot it among tall sedges right at the water's edge. It has upright seed pods (called follicles) like the common milkweed you see along roads, but they're a little more slender. Like the common milkweed, the pod breaks open in the fall to release silky floss, each tuft called a coma, that carries the seeds in the wind. If you can find dry follicles in the fall, collect them and disperse the seeds by hand along your own shoreline. You'll be rewarded next year by a beautiful native plant that is worth considering.

Addendum: The Wisconsin Monarch Collaborative organizes volunteers to plant milkweed and wildflowers to help reverse the 80% decline over the past 20 years in the population of monarchs that breed and migrate through Wisconsin and 15 other states.



STATE OF THE LAKES
KEVIN HORROCKS, COLA PRESIDENT

Click [here](#) for the 2020 report.



Allison Slavick is a nature lover who bicycles, skis, and picks berries near her home on Crystal Lake in southern Bayfield County.

Questions, comments, or suggestions for future articles may be sent to her at allison.slavick@gmail.com.

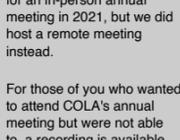
Issue #49 August 29, 2021

[View this email in your browser](#)

COLA NEEDS YOUR ONGOING SUPPORT

Please consider a tax-deductible donation today!

DONATE



COLA was not quite ready for an in-person annual meeting in 2021, but we did host a remote meeting instead.

For those of you who wanted to attend COLA's annual meeting but were not able to, a recording is available through the link below.

If requested, the passcode is **7yg+b611**.

COLA ANNUAL MEETING VIDEO

WDNR ADDS ALMOST 100 NEW BODIES OF WATER TO IMPAIRED LIST

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources recently declared 92 bodies of water as "impaired," underscoring the state's continued issues with water quality even as the WDNR says water is getting cleaner throughout the state.

[More information.](#)



EURASIAN WATER MILFOIL MEETS THE ECO-BEAST

Eurasian water milfoil has exploded in both big and little LCO. EWM has been called "curly-leaf pondweed on steroids," and 2021 shows why. From just a few scattered spots in little LCO last year, EWM has spread to more than 50 acres this year. And it's happening in big LCO as well. The Eco-Beast, the Tribal LCO Conservation D, and many COLA volunteers have been hard at work in both lakes.

[More about what's happening](#) and how important volunteers are if we want to control EWM on LCO.

Thanks to so many COLA supporters who made the Eco-Beast a reality for LCO.

WISCALM ASSESSMENT AND GUIDANCE UPDATED FOR LAC COURTE OREILLES

Wisconsin's Consolidated Assessment and Listing Methodology (WisCALM), from the WDNR, provides guidance on assessment of water-quality data against surface water-quality standards and for Clean Water Act reporting on surface water-quality status and trends.

The 2020 LCO water quality assessment based upon the WisCALM protocol is [now available](#).



2020 Water Quality - Lac Courte Oreilles
Chlorophyll a (Chl a) 2.4 ug/L
Total Phosphorus (TP) 14.4 ug/L

2021 NATURAL HISTORY FIELD TRIPS

Two natural history field trips are scheduled for September. These trips are planned for the general public, courtesy of the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College's Extension Program.

Saturday September 18th: Hawk Ridge from 10:00 a.m. until approximately 5:30 p.m.

If birds of prey fascinate you, then you and your binoculars will want to join us at Hawk Ridge by Duluth as we observe these remarkable birds during the best time of day at the very peak of their migration. Most raptors prefer not to cross large bodies of water, so they get funneled around Lake Superior at this point. Twenty species of raptors and vultures occur there, including the rare peregrine falcon and gyrfalcon ... A naturalist will be on site to help answer questions.

Saturday September 25th: The Blue Hills Felsenmeer from 9:00 a.m. until approximately 5:00 p.m.

Hiking the Blue Hills Felsenmeer, a State Scientific & Natural Area, is the closest thing to being in the alpine zone! Cold air emanates from the pink quartzite talus all summer long, sustaining a lichen & moss community normally found much farther north. We will hike down what is locally known as the "box canyon", a magical fern-enveloped cleft and come back up the base of the felsenmeer, which means "sea of rock" ... This hike is not recommended for people with mobility issues.

For more information, see the [August 21 news item on COLA's website](#).



COLA'S VIEW FROM THE DOCK SURVEY

The "View From Your Dock" survey last fall was a great success. Most impressive was the thought put to answering the survey's questions coupled with the emotion expressed in the comments. The full report is provided [here](#), so take a look yourself.

It's obvious that we belong to a dedicated and thoughtful community, and the Lac Courte Oreilles lakes can look forward to a bright future.

LAKE OBSERVATION FORMS

SEE ANYTHING WEIRD?

If you observe green water, algal mats on the surface or floating or dying fish - anything out of the ordinary - please take pictures and report this using COLA's [observation forms](#) immediately! COLA will alert the WDNR, the LCO Tribe, collect water samples, etc., to follow up.

Please, if you see something, do something.

Do your part to help enhance and preserve the LCO Lakes!



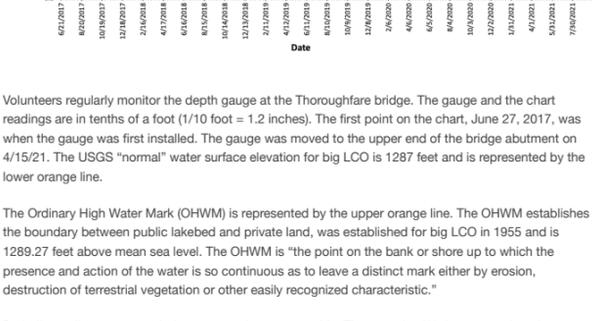
LCO NEEDS YOUR HELP

COLA is a **volunteer organization**. That means essential jobs don't get done unless someone steps up to help out. Contact communications@cola-wi.org if interested or you need more information.

Short Ears, Long Tales

[ARCHIVED ISSUES OF SHORT EARS, LONG TALES](#)

LCO Water Depth Recorded at Thoroughfare Bridge Gauge



Volunteers regularly monitor the depth gauge at the Thoroughfare bridge. The gauge and the chart readings are in tenths of a foot (1/10 foot = 1.2 inches). The first point on the chart, June 27, 2017, was when the gauge was first installed. The gauge was moved to the upper end of the bridge abutment on 4/15/21. The USGS "normal" water surface elevation for big LCO is 1287 feet and is represented by the lower orange line.

The Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM) is represented by the upper orange line. The OHWM establishes the boundary between public lakebed and private land, was established for big LCO in 1955 and is 1289.27 feet above mean sea level. The OHWM is "the point on the bank or shore up to which the presence and action of the water is so continuous as to leave a distinct mark either by erosion, destruction of terrestrial vegetation or other easily recognized characteristic."

Periodic readings are recorded as accurately as reasonable. The water itself is in perpetual motion, not only flowing downstream but rising and falling due to waves, the current in the channel, the wind which can actually push water and "stack" it toward one end of the lake or the other and the seiche effect caused by the gravitational pull of the moon and sun.

Share Tweet Forward

COLA Mission: 1) to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little Lac Courte Oreilles, their shorelands and surrounding areas, while respecting the interests of property owners and the rights of the general public; and 2) to consider, study, survey and respond to issues deemed relevant by COLA's membership.

The eNewsletter Editor can be reached at:
COLA
P.O. Box 702
Hayward, WI 54843
communications@cola-wi.org