

# WINGRA WATERSHED NEWS

Promoting a healthy Lake Wingra through an active watershed community

## FALL 2025

Oaks are among the most ecologically valuable trees in the Lake Wingra ecosystem. This past year, their acorns have nourished countless organisms. Now, their bronze leaves blanket the ground, protecting the soil and slowly releasing life-sustaining nutrients. Oak leaves break down slowly, creating a lasting litter layer that shelters the unseen organisms regulating our natural world. In wild places, this slow release of nutrients supports healthy lakes. But in urban areas, when too many leaves wash into the lake through storm drains, they overload the water with nutrients, fueling summer algal blooms. It's a reminder of how complex our ecosystems are—and how our urban habits can ripple through nature's balance.



– Sarah Pabian, Executive Director



### Support Friends of Lake Wingra This Season

As the year wraps up, please consider a gift to Friends of Lake Wingra. Your donation—no matter the size—helps protect our beloved lake through education, community action, and clean water initiatives.

Every drop counts, and so does every Friend. Stay engaged, join our events, and help keep Lake Wingra healthy for generations to come.

**Online donations:**  
[lakewingra.org/donate](http://lakewingra.org/donate)

**Mail donations:**  
Friends of Lake Wingra  
PO Box 45071  
Madison, WI 53744

## The Lake Wingra Loop – a Valuable Community Resource

By Maddie Smith, Board Member and Sarah Pabian, Executive Director

The inaugural Lake Wingra Community Bike Ride was a huge success! Nearly 100 riders joined us on Sunday, Sept. 28 – exploring the 6.5-mile Lake Wingra Loop, enjoying the beautiful weather, and learning what makes this lake so special. Sunshine, ice cream, lake views, and local stories – what more could you ask for?

Special thanks to Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and District 13

Alder Tag Evers for helping kick things off. Our volunteer experts at the stops were super engaging and so many participants came away knowing something new about Lake Wingra. Jess Miller, Madison resident and first-time Lake Wingra looper, said “I had a great time learning about the history and nature around Madison’s smallest – but by no means less interesting – lake”.  
*(Continue on page 6)*



Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and District 13 Alder Tag Evers kicking off the event. Photo by Maddie Smith

# Color and Clarity of Lake Wingra 2025

By Adrianna Gorsky, Board Member

Over the summer, Lake Wingra experienced a wide range of water clarity and color. From super clear to super murky and even white!

## Whiting Event

Back in late May, you might have noticed the lake turn a milky color. The white, chalky-looking substance was most likely from a “whiting event”.



*Milky white waters of Lake Wingra captured during a possible rare whiting event on May 31, 2025. Photo by Lisa Grueneberg*

This is a natural occurring phenomenon when calcium carbonate precipitates, or becomes solid in the water. It typically happens in hard-water lakes, like Lake Wingra, during the warmer months when conditions favor calcium carbonate formation. Photosynthetic organisms such as algae increase the water’s pH, which causes calcium carbonate to settle out and create a white, chalky appearance.

This natural process is not pollution but part of how some lake ecosystems work. To distinguish whittings from pollution, a simple vinegar test on the white particles can

confirm the presence of calcium carbonate by producing fizzing bubbles.

Over time, the particles settle to the bottom of the lake, forming deposits of soft rock called marl. Whiting events offer a visible reminder of the complex natural processes at work in the lake.

## Water Clarity

You might have noticed dramatic differences in water clarity this summer on Lake Wingra.

Our Chair, Lisa Grueneberg, samples water quality every summer for Clean Lakes Alliance at the deepest point. Every week, she lowers a Secchi disk, limnology’s oldest tool, into the water until the plate-sized, black and white disk disappears. We then use that depth as a marker for water clarity. This year she recorded a Secchi disk depth of 10.5 feet on May 29 and only 1 foot on August 5! That is a dramatic difference, although not completely unusual for summer patterns of water clarity. *(Continue on page 7)*



*Using a secchi disk to measure the extremely clear Lake Wingra water observed on May 29, 2025. Photo by Lisa Grueneberg*



## Welcome New Board Members!

In June we elected 5 new board members, we switched a few board member positions and we said good-bye to 2 board members. Thanks to Elizabeth Grace Huddleston and Toni Tiemann for all their hard work on the board! Our new board members are:

- Ann Kinsley, Secretary
- Amy Callies
- Brett Jones
- Sarah Kraszewski
- Maddie Smith

Returning board members and their positions include:

- Lisa Grueneberg, Chair
- Ben Becker, Vice-chair
- Peter Gascoyne, Treasurer
- Doe Han
- Adrianna Gorsky
- David Ortiz
- Emmy Kriehn

To learn more about our wonderful board members, check out their bios at [lakewingra.org](http://lakewingra.org)



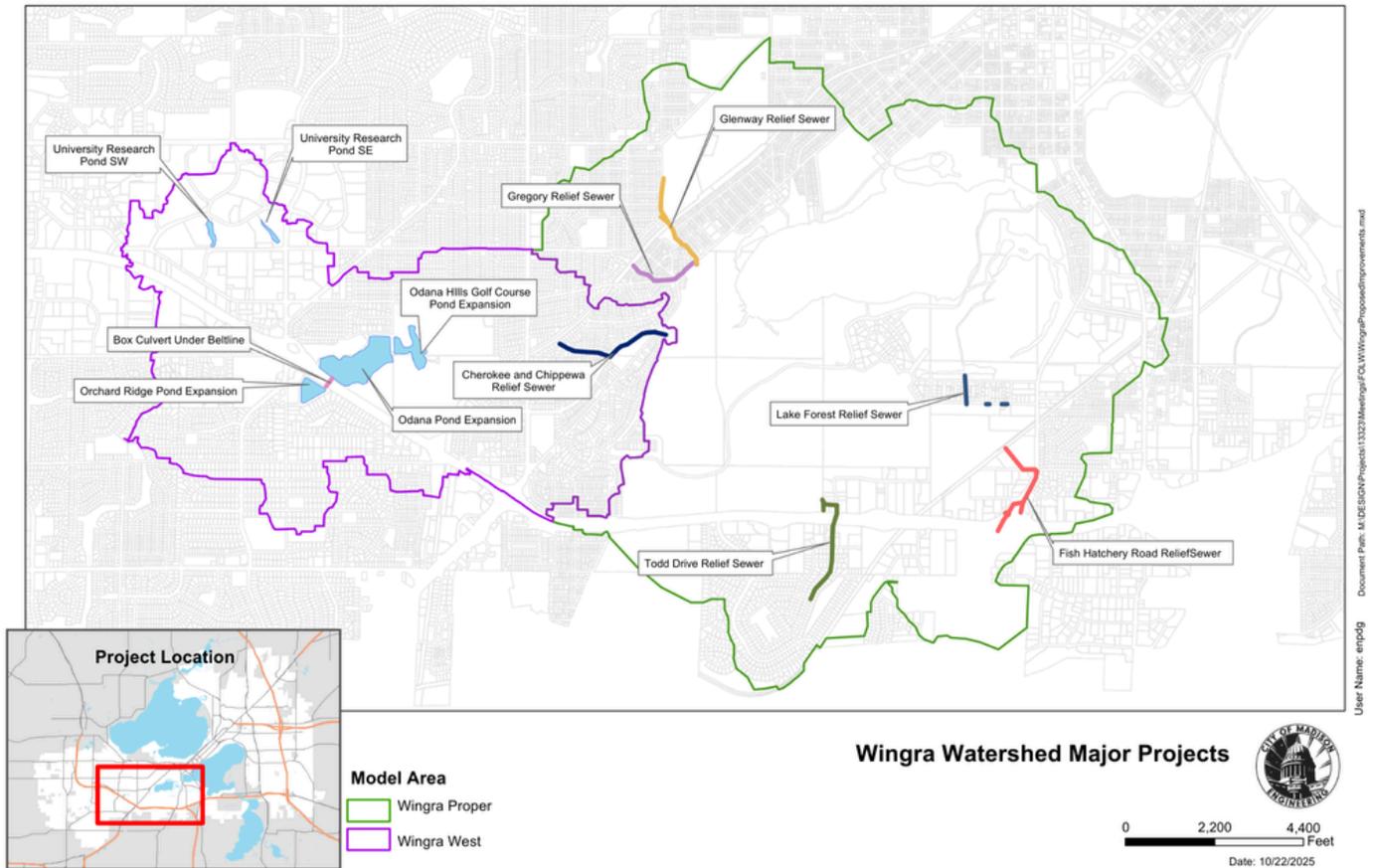
# What's Been Happening Since Spring?

By Sarah Pabian, Executive Director

It's been a busy six months for Friends of Lake Wingra! Here's a look at what we've accomplished:

- **Lake Wingra Clean-Up:** We partnered with Wingra Boats for a community clean-up event.
- **Nature Hikes:** Executive Director Sarah Pabian led three spring hikes focused on birds, native plants, and watershed management.
- **Youth Education:** We taught watershed science to Thoreau Elementary 5th graders in May and rain garden lessons to 4th graders in October—helping students explore their connection to Lake Wingra.
- **Community Outreach:** We hosted tables at six local events, including Wingra Park's First Fridays, the Good Neighbor Gathering, and the Monroe Street Festival, featuring hands-on activities and our new Lake Wingra Trivia Wheel.
- **City Resolution:** Working with Alder Tag Evers, we helped pass a City of Madison resolution encouraging policies and practices that protect Lake Wingra and support the Lake Wingra Community Bike Ride. This resolution paves the way for future work, including permanent Lake Wingra Loop signage.
- **Restoration Efforts:** In partnership with the UW Arboretum, we co-hosted an Ecological Restoration Work Party at the Wingra Oak Savanna.
- **Updated Kiosks:** Three kiosks—at Glenwood Children's Park, Wingra Park, and Vilas Park—now feature updated Lake Wingra Loop maps and watershed information.
- **Leaf-Free Streets:** This fall, we launched a Leaf-Free Street initiative, encouraging residents to keep streets leaf-free through social media, Adopt-a-Block efforts, and yard sign distribution.
- **Social Media Growth:** We've expanded our online presence with regular posts on Lake Wingra ecology, events, and community initiatives.
- **Lake Wingra Community Bike Ride:** See article above for details.
- **Partnership Development:** We strengthened our partnerships with the City of Madison and local community organizations.





Map of the Lake Wingra Watershed divided into the Wingra West and the Wingra Proper Watershed study areas. Current and proposed storm sewer work projects and detention pond expansions are highlighted and labeled.

## Update: Wingra West and Wingra Proper Watershed Studies

By Phil Gaebler, City of Madison Engineering

Since the 2018 flood, the City of Madison Engineering Department has been developing computer models to predict current flood risks and evaluate the benefits of proposed improvements.

The Wingra West Watershed Study (see map above) was completed in 2022. The Wingra Proper Watershed Study, which includes the remainder of the watershed, is expected to be finalized in early 2026. Together, these studies will give the City a comprehensive understanding of flood risk in the Lake Wingra Watershed and a plan for reducing it.

Each study includes maps, technical details, and cost estimates that help prioritize and implement projects citywide. The Engineering Division has also combined data from all completed watershed studies to create an interactive flood risk map for the 1% storm (6.6 inches in 24 hours). Reports and map can be found on the City of Madison Engineering website.

The two Wingra watershed studies identify 12 major projects—a mix of larger storm pipes and expanded detention basins—representing a \$65.7 million investment. These will be paired with local sewer upgrades as streets are reconstructed.

Citywide, over \$340 million in improvements are proposed to meet flood reduction goals:

- No buildings flooded in the 1% storm (6.6 inches in 24 hours)
- Streets passable in the 4% storm (5.0 inches in 24 hours)
- Storm sewers sized for the 10% storm (4.1 inches in 24 hours)

The first project from the watershed studies—a culvert under the Southwest Commuter Path connecting Waite Circle to Chippewa Court—is already complete. The second, a large box culvert under Nakoma Road at Cherokee Drive and Manitou (Continue on page 5)

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## Introducing the Salt Wise Star Program: Safer Surfaces, Cleaner Water

By Allison Madison, Program Manager, Wisconsin Salt Wise

Winter in Wisconsin brings plenty of snow and ice—and with it, a lot of salt. While road salt helps keep surfaces safe, too much of it can cause serious, long-term problems. Excess salt damages pavement, landscaping, and vehicles—and once it's washed away, it doesn't disappear. It



*Sweeping up excess salt applied to sidewalks.*

flows into our storm drains, streams, and groundwater, where it builds up over time.

In Madison, salt (chloride) levels are rising in the city's municipal drinking water wells, and Lake Wingra is officially considered "impaired" due to high chloride levels. The concentration of salt has become toxic to some of our native freshwater organisms, degrading the health of our beloved lake.

The good news? We can stay safe in winter and protect our water. Smart salting – using the right amount at the right time – reduces damage, costs, and pollution while keeping roads and sidewalks safe.

To help promote these best practices, Wisconsin Salt Wise has launched the Salt Wise Star recognition program. This program highlights winter maintenance companies that commit to using industry best practices.

Friends of Lake Wingra is proud to support the Salt Wise Star program and encourages businesses, contractors, and community members to get involved. Everyone has a role to play. Driving cautiously and staying off roads during storms helps snow crews work efficiently. At home, shovel early and salt only if needed.

Learn more and find recognized contractors at [wisaltwise.com](http://wisaltwise.com)

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### **Continued from page 4, Gaebler**

Way, is currently under construction and coordinated with other road improvements to minimize traffic disruptions.

As shown in the figure on page 4, many large projects remain. They will take decades to complete, involve significant costs, and may affect commutes, trees, and neighborhood aesthetics. The City will hold public information meetings for each project to share plans and gather feedback. The modeling tools allow engineers to test alternatives and understand how changes affect overall flood risk.

A common question is whether these flood-reduction projects will impact water quality in Lake

Wingra. Because most pollutants enter the lake during smaller storms (under 2 inches), impacts are expected to be minimal. The City will evaluate treatment ponds to ensure sediment remains captured and will add stormwater-quality improvements—like rain gardens or catch basins—where practical.

The City of Madison is dedicated to reducing flood risk throughout the city and focused on capturing as much pollution as possible as stormwater flows into our lakes.

Lake Wingra is a special ecological oasis and a great place to connect with nature. Through thoughtful engineering, proper maintenance or our system and resident engagement, we can limit the

urban impacts on Lake Wingra. A lake is really defined by its watershed and for lake Wingra the cumulative impacts of Madisonians will determine the future of the lake.

For online links to the watershed studies and interactive map, please see the online version of this article at: [lakewingra.org](http://lakewingra.org)



*A segment of the 6' by 14' box culvert being installed under Nakoma Road. Photo by Sarah Pabian*

**Continued from Page 1, Smith**

Free ice cream and fun prizes made it even more exciting and we loved hearing so many riders say, “do this again next year!”

Didn't make it to the community bike ride? You can explore the Lake Wingra Loop anytime at your own pace. Check out the Lake Wingra Loop [Online Story Map](#) linked from our website: [lakewingra.org](http://lakewingra.org).

The Story Map highlights points of interest - from Native Ho-Chunk heritage sites and historic park developments to the ecological challenges and community stewardship that shape the lake today.

The Lake Wingra Loop Story Map is a product of a collaboration between the Friends of Lake Wingra, City of Madison Engineering, District 13 Alder Tag Evers, the UW Arboretum and representatives of the



Participants enjoying educational tables and ice cream at Wingra Park. Photo by Sarah Pabian



Map of the Lake Wingra Loop with points of interest highlighted in the online Story Map.

neighborhoods surrounding Lake Wingra. Detailed descriptions of the sites around the lake were vetted by the group and the larger community, including Bill Quackenbush, Ho-Chunk Tribal Historic Preservation Officer.

But even beyond this event, the Lake Wingra Loop stands as a remarkable community resource.

Every year, the Wingra loop becomes part of the course for about 7 major athletic events, including the Madison Mini Marathon, the Zoo's "Run Wild", and the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers' "Freeze for Food" event. In 2025, there were over 10,000 participants in these events. Not to mention, dozens of

local walking, running, and cycling groups that use the route for their outings throughout the year.

It's not just a scenic ride—it's part of daily life for many. Residents use the loop to commute, exercise, and spend time outdoors. Kate, a local mother of two, runs the loop weekly as a way to connect with friends. For kids, it's often a rite of passage: Piper, a 4th grader, proudly remembers biking the entire loop for the first time with her little sister. Sammy, a 5th grader, says, "I love doing that loop with my dad". Addie, a 6th grader, recalls taking four hours to make it all the way around—stopping to hike trails and visit the zoo and parks.

**The Lake Wingra Loop is all about community, connection, education and enjoyment of our lake. Stay part of the journey:**

- [Sign up](#) for our emails to get updates on future Loop events
- [Donate](#) to support the 2026 Community Bike Ride
- Find links at [lakewingra.org](http://lakewingra.org)



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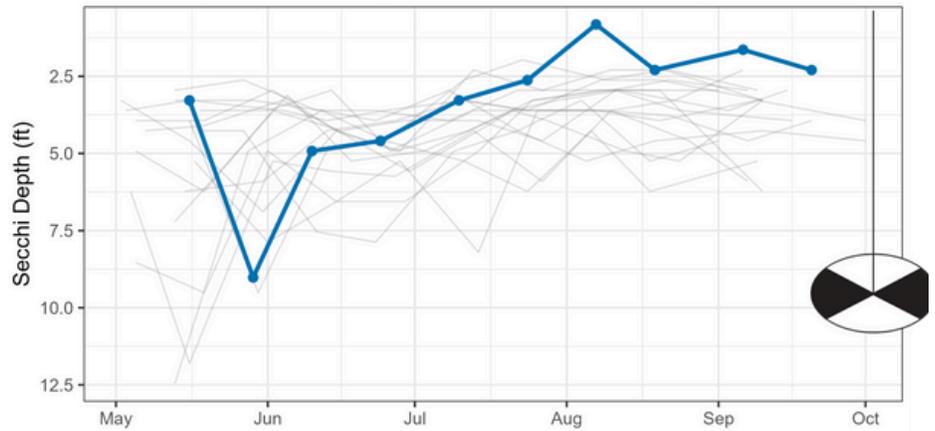
In some years, Lake Wingra can experience a “clear-water phase” in the spring/early summer, similar to the larger Madison lakes. Much of the increase in transparency during this time can be tied to some of the smallest creatures in our water- zooplankton!

In particular, large zooplankton called *Daphnia* become abundant and voraciously consume algae. By eating the algae faster than it can grow, the zooplankton effectively clear the water, increasing transparency.



Murky water observed in Lake Wingra in August. Photo by Sarah Pabian

Lake Wingra Water Clarity: 2025 vs. Previous Years (2008–2024)



Gray lines: 2008–2024 individual years; Blue: 2025

Data: North Temperate Lakes Long Term Ecological Research Program

This phase is typically quite short and is more likely to occur when we have a cooler spring, which favors zooplankton growth. As temperatures increase and nutrient levels rise, algae grow faster, outpacing what zooplankton can consume, resulting in murky water.

The North Temperate Lakes Long-Term Ecological Research program has been collecting data on Lake Wingra since 1996. As the figure above shows, we had a short clearwater phase in late May, followed by some of the murkiest water we have had since the carp removal in March 2008.

Why might this year have been particularly murky? We had a warmer and wetter than average summer, especially come August. Heavy rains wash more nutrients, such as phosphorus, into the lake, fueling algal growth and create murkier water.

Runoff remains a key driver behind these changes in water clarity, so continuing efforts to keep streets and storm drains clear, limit fertilizer use, and support green infrastructure in our neighborhoods are all important ways to protect water quality in Lake Wingra.

## Upcoming Events:

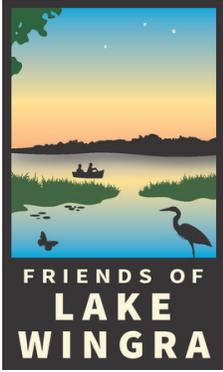
### Salt Wise Canvassing on Monroe Street:

- Thursday, November 20, 4–5 pm
- Meet at Colectivo and we'll divide up businesses to visit and deliver letters and signs to post in their windows about smart winter salt use

### Winter Springs and Chloride:

- Date and time: TBD
- Come hike with us to visit some Lake Wingra springs and learn about how winter salt use impacts Lake Wingra
- Keep an eye out for more information on our website - [lakewingra.org](http://lakewingra.org) - and in our monthly emails

Find More Events at: [lakewingra.org/events](http://lakewingra.org/events)



Friends of Lake Wingra  
PO Box 45071  
Madison, WI 53744

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