

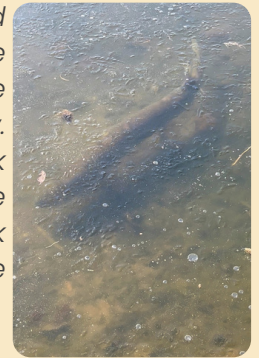
# WINGRA WATERSHED NEWS

Promoting a healthy Lake Wingra through an active watershed community

## SPRING 2026

This winter, our social media video of a musky beneath Lake Wingra's ice reached over 700,000 views—far beyond our usual audience. Watching it spread gave me pause. It made me wonder: who are we speaking to, and who could we be reaching? While that question brings some uncertainty, it also opens up opportunity. There is real potential to connect more people to the ideas at the heart of our work—topics like phosphorus, chloride, lake ecology, and how we all experience and care for lakes. It's a reminder that while Friends of Lake Wingra is rooted in place, our work can resonate more broadly. We can stay grounded in our core values while remaining open to a wider, more diverse community.

— Sarah Pabian, Executive Director



### Yellow Iris: an invasive species in Lake Wingra

By Sarah Kraszewski, Board Member

Yellow Irises are relatively new invasive species to Lake Wingra and with your help, we'd like to map their population around the lake to inform future action.

#### Background

Yellow iris (*Iris pseudoacorus*) is a non-woody perennial plant that is native to Eurasia and can escape from water gardens and ponds into natural environments in Wisconsin. This species can spread into forests, lakes, streams, ponds, and (continue on page 4)

### Planting the Future: Rain Gardens in Our Schools

By David H. Thompson, Advisor to the Board

Rain gardens are a powerful, practical way to improve school environments while protecting local waterways like Lake Wingra. Across the watershed, these gardens are more than landscaping—they are multi-functional spaces that address stormwater challenges, enhance school grounds, and create meaningful educational opportunities.

Schools are especially well-suited for rain gardens. Their campuses include large areas of impervious surface—roofs, sidewalks, paved playgrounds and parking lots—that prevent water from soaking into the ground. As a result, rainwater runs off quickly, carrying pollutants into nearby lakes and streams. This runoff is (continue on page 6)



Rain gardens are shallow depressions that hold rain water and allow it to infiltrate deep underground. Photo by David H. Thompson

# Citizen Science Opportunities Around the Lake Wingra Watershed

Citizen science is a powerful way to engage the community while gathering valuable information about the health of the Lake Wingra watershed. In the past, Friends of Lake Wingra coordinated projects such as water sampling and frog monitoring. While those specific efforts have gradually phased out, many citizen science opportunities are still active in and around the watershed.



Lisa Grueneberg collects water quality data at the deepest part of Lake Wingra for Clean Lakes Alliance. Photo by Lisa Grueneberg

## Water quality monitoring by the Clean Lakes Alliance

by Lisa Grueneberg, Chair of FOLW and CLA volunteer

From Memorial Day to Labor Day, a dedicated team of volunteers heads out to Lake Wingra to track the health of the lake. At two near-shore sites and three locations in the middle of the lake, they carefully monitor conditions, building a detailed picture of how the lake changes throughout the summer.

Organized by the Clean Lakes Alliance (CLA), this effort focuses primarily on water clarity—but it

doesn't stop there. In the lake's deepest point, a volunteer also measures dissolved oxygen levels and temperature at multiple depths, revealing what's happening beneath the surface. All of this valuable data is uploaded to the Wisconsin DNR's SWIMS database, where it becomes part of a long-term record dating back to 1980—giving anyone the chance to explore trends and better understand Lake Wingra over time.

More information about water quality monitoring with the CLA: <https://www.cleanlakesalliance.org/monitoring/>

More information about SWIMS: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/SurfaceWater/SWIMS>

## Citizen science at the UW–Madison Arboretum

by Annie Isenbarger, Citizen Science Coordinator, UW Arboretum

Citizen science is well established at the University of Wisconsin–Madison Arboretum, with projects focusing on water quality, monarch butterflies, dragonflies, birds, migration and seasons, fungal diversity, and more. The Arboretum also partners with state and federal agencies, academic institutions, and nonprofit groups on programs related to our mission and research priorities. These collaborations broaden opportunities and increase learning, scientific discovery, and conservation impact. (*continue on page 7*)



## Become a Board Member!

With the ice melting on Lake Wingra and Sandhill Cranes returning, signs of spring are all around the watershed—and we're growing, too.

We are seeking 3–5 new board members to join our organization and help represent the diversity of our urban watershed. Our goal is to build on the organization's long-standing commitment to scientific integrity, collaboration, and passion for Lake Wingra, while supporting and advising our Executive Director.

As we expand, we aim to strengthen the board's diversity of perspectives, including lived experience, historical and traditional knowledge, community and neighborhood connections, and professional skills.

To ensure our board reflects the watershed's diverse community, ideal candidates are residents of the watershed or have direct ties through work or recreation. Find more information at: [lakewingra.org/join-our-board](http://lakewingra.org/join-our-board)

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## The Sandhill Cranes of Wingra Park: Keeping Wildlife Wild

By Sarah Pabian, Executive Director and Ryan Michalesko, Senior Communications & Marketing Specialist, International Crane Foundation

Last summer, thousands of people flocked to Wingra Park—to paddle across the lake, picnic with friends, attend community events, and enjoy the outdoors. But for many visitors, the highlight wasn't on the water—it was a pair of unusually “friendly” Sandhill Cranes raising their chick right in the heart of the park.



*Cranes can be seen walking through the neighborhood, without concern for nearby people or pets. Photo by Sarah Pabian*

The cranes became local celebrities. They strolled through First Friday crowds as if they belonged there, circled the edges of busy soccer fields like attentive referees, and posed—seemingly willingly—for countless photos and videos. For many, it felt like a rare and magical connection with wildlife.

But beneath that charm was cause for concern.

Wild animals that grow too comfortable around people face real risks. These cranes were frequently seen crossing busy streets without hesitation and feeding on spilled bird seed in nearby neighborhoods. Behavior like this can put them in danger—

making them more vulnerable to vehicle strikes, conflicts with pets, or even aggression if they begin to associate humans with food. Feeding wildlife, even unintentionally, can also disrupt their natural diet and alter important survival behaviors.

“The recovery of the Sandhill Crane population from near extinction is a true conservation success story,” said Anne Lacy, Vice President of North America Programs at the International Crane Foundation. “It also means that cranes and humans are closer neighbors than ever before. As beautiful and inspiring as they are, the cranes are still wild birds.”

Some observers recognized the warning signs right away. Among them was Darcy Kind, a biologist with the Wisconsin DNR, who raised concerns and reached out to the International Crane Foundation. Together, they



*Cranes often cross Monroe Street to access bird feeders at nearby houses. Photo by Sarah Pabian*



*Cranes raising their chick on the shore of Wingra Park. Photo by Sarah Pabian*

emphasized the need for community awareness to help protect these iconic birds.

Here's how we can all help keep Sandhill Cranes wild—and safe:

- Don't feed the cranes. They are skilled foragers and do best on a natural diet. Feeding wildlife can harm their health and behavior.
- Prevent accidental feeding. Clean up food waste, tidy areas under bird feeders, choose low-spill feeders, and pause feeding if cranes start gathering beneath them.
- Keep a respectful distance. Enjoy observing cranes, but give them space to remain wild.

Sandhill Cranes are among the most beloved and recognizable wildlife around Lake Wingra. By making a few small changes, we can ensure they remain a safe and thriving part of our community—wild, wary, and exactly where they belong.



## What's Been Happening Since Fall?

By Sarah Pabian, Executive Director

The past six months have been a steadier season—one focused on strengthening our organization and laying the groundwork for a busy spring and summer. Along the way, we've accomplished a great deal:

- **Seasonal Donations:** Nearly \$13,000 raised during the holiday giving season—thank you to everyone who contributed!
- **Water & Winter Salt Workshop:** Co-hosted with the UW Arboretum during Winter Salt Week.
- **Go Outside Grant:** Awarded by the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin to support watershed science classes in local elementary schools.
- **Plant Dane Donation:** Received 134 plant donations from community members through Plant Dane to expand the rain garden at Thoreau Elementary. Thanks to everyone who donated!
- **Field of Interest Grant:** Awarded by the Madison Community Foundation to finish updating our educational kiosks.
- **Committee Restructuring:** Created new board committees that invite and encourage community participation.
- **Winter Salt Working Group:** Launched to reduce salt use and monitor lake conditions.
- **Rain Garden Group:** Formed to support installation, maintenance, and education efforts.
- **Legislative Engagement:** Testified at a Senate hearing on SB 1019, regarding winter salt use and liability.
- **Canvassed with WI Salt Wise:** To promote smart winter salt application on Monroe Street.
- **Board Advisors:** Reconnected with past board members to serve as advisors.
- **Lake Wingra Community Bike Ride:** Planning is underway for September 26.
- **Social Media Growth:** Expanded outreach across platforms including Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn.
- **Partnerships:** Strengthened collaborations with key community partners.
- **Enjoying the Lake:** Took time to get outside and enjoy winter activities on and around the lake, staying connected to the place that inspires our work.



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**Continued from page 1,  
Kraszewski**

various wetland types including bogs, swamps, and marshes. Other names for this plant include yellow flag iris, European yellow iris, and pale-yellow iris.

I first reported this plant to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) above the dam and along the northeast shore of Lake Wingra in 2017, which the WDNR reports as the first observations in Lake Wingra. Since that time, I have observed the spread of isolated clumps along the Lake Wingra shoreline, into the adjacent marshes, and into wetlands of the UW Arboretum including Wingra Woods by the skunk cabbage bridge.

### **Ecological Threat**

Dense clumps and mats of yellow iris can trap sediment and may alter how water is distributed and moves through waterbodies and wetlands. Yellow iris can outcompete native aquatic plants that contribute to plant species diversity and wildlife food and habitat. This plant is not a food source as all parts of the plant are poisonous.

Yellow iris is classified as a Restricted species on the WDNR Invasive Species Rule (Wis. Admin. Code NR 40), which indicates that the species is already established in the state and causes or has the potential to cause significant harm to the environment, the economy, or human health. The Invasive Species Rule makes it illegal to transport, transfer, or introduce the listed species without a permit.



*Yellow irises observed near Skunk Cabbage Bridge in the UW Arboretum. There are no yellow-colored irises that are native to Lake Wingra, so they are easy to identify while flowering. Photo by Sarah Kraszewski.*

### **Spread**

This plant spreads by seed and vegetatively by rhizome fragments. Each fruiting capsule may have over 100 seeds. Seeds have a hard outer casing with a small air space underneath, which allows the seeds to float and spread from the parent plant. The plant can form dense clumps or floating mats.

### **Identification**

This plant has broad, sword-shaped leaves that grow upright. Leaves are green with a blue-grey tint. Flowers grow on 3-4 feet tall stems that are usually as tall or taller than the leaves. The flowers are yellow, ranging from very bright yellow to cream. There are three upright petals and three downward pointing petal-like sepals that may have streaks of other colors. Flowering is observed in our region from May-June. After blooming, seed capsules are formed that are 6-angled and 2-4 inches long.

This plant is challenging to distinguish from our native blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*) and other ornamental irises that are not invasive and could be confused with other wetland plants when it is not flowering. The best time to identify this plant is when the yellow flowers are present.

### **Reporting**

Please report observations of yellow iris in the Lake Wingra Watershed in 2026 using the link below. Please take a photo of the plants and an overview photo of the area you saw the plants to submit with your form.

We will collect your observations to inform the WDNR and landowners such as the UW Arboretum and City of Madison Parks Department. Our goal is to work with these groups to create a management plan and act while the populations are at a level that can still be controlled.

**Report observations of Yellow Iris in the Lake Wingra Watershed and find links for more information at:**

**[lakewingra.org/yellow-iris](http://lakewingra.org/yellow-iris)**



**Continued from Page 1, Thompson**

the single largest contributor to pollution in Lake Wingra. Rain gardens help capture and absorb that water, reducing flooding and improving water quality.

In addition to managing runoff, many schools have unused turf areas that can be transformed into attractive, functional gardens. Campuses often struggle with drainage issues such as standing water, muddy fields, and icy patches in winter. Rain gardens can alleviate these problems while beautifying the landscape. They also provide valuable hands-on learning opportunities, allowing students to engage with ecology and see environmental solutions in action.

The benefits extend even further. Research shows that green spaces around schools improve student health, focus, and academic performance. Vegetation helps filter air pollutants, reducing exposure to particles that can affect respiratory health and cognitive development. By replacing muddy or dusty areas with thriving plantings, rain gardens also improve air quality and create more welcoming outdoor environments. In this way, green infrastructure becomes an essential part of a healthy learning environment—not just an aesthetic addition.

Schools also serve as community hubs. A rain garden on school grounds reaches beyond students to engage parents, teachers, and neighbors, helping build awareness of watershed protection.

Local examples highlight this impact. At Thoreau Elementary School, a rain garden was installed to address severe erosion caused by runoff into Nakoma Park. With help from community partners, the project stabilized the slope and added a beautiful natural feature. At Toki Middle School, a large rain garden transformed a chronically flooded parking area—nicknamed “Lake Toki”—into a functional and attractive space.

Students helped plant and decorate the garden, and it is now used in classroom learning. These successes point to an important lesson: rain gardens thrive when they have long-term support. When key champions



*Installation of the lower rain garden at Thoreau Elementary School. Photo by David H. Thompson*

move on, gardens lose visibility and maintenance. Building partnerships with school staff, parent groups, and community organizations—and including clear signage—helps ensure these spaces are cared for over time.

There is also an opportunity to expand impact through larger projects. While small gardens solve localized issues, schools generate large volumes of runoff that require bigger solutions. By partnering with the City of Madison, schools can help initiate larger rain gardens near parking lots and other high-runoff areas. With collaboration and planning, these projects can provide lasting benefits for both schools and Lake Wingra.

With strong partnerships and ongoing care, rain gardens can transform school grounds into healthier, more resilient places to learn and grow.



*Signs at rain gardens, like this one at Thoreau Elementary, ensure that they are cared for in the future.*

**Want to help with our rain garden efforts?**

- Join the Lake Wingra Rain Garden Group: information at [lakewingra.org/rain-gardens](http://lakewingra.org/rain-gardens)
- Donate to support our rain garden efforts: [lakewingra.org/donate](http://lakewingra.org/donate)
- Show up to rain garden work days: see [lakewingra.org/events](http://lakewingra.org/events) for dates and time



**Continued from page 2,  
Isenbarger**

In the past, Friends of Lake Wingra volunteers have helped to monitor chloride levels in the springs surrounding the lake. This monitoring is still occurring through the Arboretum.

An upcoming opportunity to get involved with citizen science at the Arboretum and in the Lake Wingra watershed:

### **Odonata Monitoring Walks**

Join a monthly monitoring walk to learn more about dragonflies and damselflies, identify species, and collect data for the Arboretum's dragonfly and damselfly (Odonata) monitoring project.

Please bring binoculars if you have them and meet at the Arboretum Visitor Center.



*Odonata walk at the UW Arboretum. Photo by Annie Isenbarger*

Dragonflies and damsels prefer sunny, warm weather, so walks may be canceled if the weather is rainy or cool.

Walks take place monthly on Wednesdays from 1 to 2:30 p.m. The dates for the 2026 walks are 6/17, 7/15, 8/19, and 9/2.

To learn more about getting involved in other projects at the Arboretum, email Annie Isenbarger, Citizen Science Coordinator, at [citizenscience@arboretum.wisc.edu](mailto:citizenscience@arboretum.wisc.edu) or visit the Arboretum website: [arboretum.wisc.edu/get-involved/citizen-science](http://arboretum.wisc.edu/get-involved/citizen-science).

## **Interested in helping start up a citizen science project through Friends of Lake Wingra?**

**Let us know at: [info@lakewingra.org](mailto:info@lakewingra.org)**

## **Upcoming Events:**

### **Rain Garden Work Days:**

- May 9, 10 am - 12 pm, Odana Hills Golf Course
- May 17, 9:30 am - 12 pm, Thoreau Elementary School

### **Salt Wise Policy Summit:**

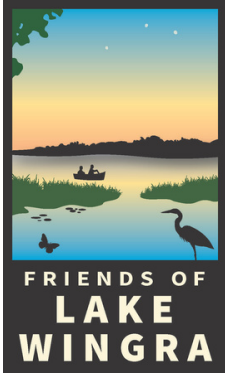
- July 21, 9 am - 3 pm, WI State Capital

### **Lake Wingra Community Bike Ride:**

- Saturday, September 26
- More details to come

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





Friends of Lake Wingra  
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**SPRING 2026**

Promoting a healthy Lake Wingra through an active watershed community.

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