

UPPER THAMES RIVER  
CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

*fyi*

October 2020



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### Fall Family Nature Series

Now, more than ever, people are looking for safe, family-friendly outdoor activities. UTRCA Community Education staff have recognized this need in our community and are excited to launch the UTRCA Fall Family Nature Series!

Throughout the fall, UTRCA staff are offering free, family-friendly programs at our parks and local Environmentally Significant Areas. Group sizes are limited, with event registration required online through Eventbrite.

The [first event at the Sifton Bog ESA](#) was a big hit, filling on the first day. Other events include a hike at Westminster Ponds ESA, Family Campfires, Colour Hikes, and more! If you're interested in bringing your family out to one of our Fall Family Nature Series Events, check the [UTRCA website](#) or social media.

Contact: Karlee Flear, Community Education Supervisor

### Clean Water Program

The [Clean Water Program \(CWP\)](#) was launched in 2001 as a partnership between local municipalities and area Conservation Authorities. The program offers financial incentives to encourage landowners in the watershed to implement projects aimed at improving local water quality, soil health, and the overall environment.

Project applications are reviewed by a committee drawn from the various contributing municipalities and local agricultural organizations. Local CAs provide technical assistance and administer the program.



*A cover crop, such as this cereal rye grass planted into corn stubble, helps to protect the soil from damaging spring runoff and improve soil health.*



At a recent meeting, the committee reviewed 70 project applications. More than 4,000 projects have been funded since 2001, representing \$11 million in project value! A new CWP funding category is aimed at encouraging landowners in the Thames River watershed to [plant cover crops](#) after harvest.

Contact: Craig Merkley, Conservation Services Specialist

### Fall Programs at Fanshawe Environmental Education Centre

Over the course of September and October, homeschool groups and community clubs are visiting Fanshawe Conservation Area to take part in [environmental education programs](#) led by Community Education staff. While this fall looks very different due to Ontario schools putting a pause on regular field trips, education staff are excited to welcome some new and returning groups to the park.

To ensure the programs are delivered in a safe and responsible format, staff have modified the



existing programs and developed a Standard Operating Procedure and guidelines for education groups and the public to follow while attending UTRCA programs and events. The fall education programs have been a great success, and we look forward to more to come!

Contact: Karlee Flear, Community Education Supervisor

### This Story is the Pits (and Mounds)

In 2005, UTRCA staff and the Friends of Dingman Creek began working with local landowners, Chris and Andrew Brown, on their property in the headwaters of the Dingman Creek watershed. At the time, the UTRCA was testing an innovative pits and mounds approach to site restoration. Chris and Andrew were excited to try this technique on their lands.

Pits and mounds are natural features that develop in a forest when large trees are uprooted and fall. The root mass and attached soil pull out of the ground, leaving behind a cavity, or pit, and creating a large mound. The pits hold water and are vernal pools for amphibians during this critical life stage, and the mounds provide varied topography for different plant species to help increase biodiversity.



A bulldozer was used to create the pits and mounds.

On the Brown property, UTRCA staff and partners worked with a blank canvas, so to speak, of retired agriculture land. Bulldozers were used to excavate and move soil to create the pits and mounds. Once the soil settled, local school groups were brought in to plant the mounds with a variety of native tree and shrub species.





Chris and Andrew Brown in the naturalized field.

Today, this project is a big success. Oaks, tulip trees, pines, shrubs, and wildflowers have made this site home, along with diverse wildlife and insect populations.

Contact: Julie Welker, Community Partnerships Specialist

### Wildwood Nature School

After several years of consideration and planning, Wildwood Education staff have launched [Wildwood Nature School!](#) With the support and generous assistance of Wildwood Conservation Area staff, a new area called the Spruce Grove has been developed for this exciting program.

Nature School participants learn and grow in nature through play and exploration. Every trip is an adventure, starting with grounding participants in their surroundings and a reminder of nature awareness routines and best practices for spending time outside.



There are planned options for activities, but what actually happens is child-directed and depends on the day. This may include stories, play, exploration, journaling, sit spots, shelter building, hiking, using tools, and more. Another gathering to share reflections and plan for the next outing concludes each visit.

Programs offered for individual registration include Falcons & Fledglings (participants aged 2-6 years old with an adult), Hawks (4-8 years), and Ospreys (9-13 years).



The programs were all met with great success when registration opened, resulting in the addition of another session for Falcons & Fledglings. We've also received several inquiries about wait lists and future programming. Wildwood Education staff are collecting information from interested people and planning for winter and spring sessions.

Contact: Maranda MacKean, Community Education Specialist

### Cade Tract Tallgrass Prairie

The Cade Tract was donated to the UTRCA in 2016 by [Barnby Cade and his family](#), who wanted to see the land stewarded for conservation. UTRCA staff developed a management plan for the 32-hectare property, located in Perth South.





The [2018 Cade Tract Management Plan](#)

recommended naturalizing the property's three hay fields to increase wildlife habitat. Tallgrass prairie, which is an endangered vegetation community in Canada, was chosen as a good match for the dry, gravelly soils. This habitat is important for grassland birds, such as the provincially threatened Bobolink, which has been seen on the property, and insect pollinators, especially in the critical late summer period.

Site preparation to kill off the existing hay began in spring 2019. It takes about 1.5 years to get the fields clean enough to plant native prairie seeds into it. In September 2020, members of the Cade family were on hand to watch as 14 acres were planted. Funding was provided by Nature London, a private funder, and the UTRCA.

The following tallgrass species were planted:

- Native Grasses: Big Bluestem, Virginia Wild Rye, Switch Grass, Little Bluestem, and Indian Grass, with oats as a cover crop.



- Native Wildflowers: Lanceleaf Coreopsis, Tall Coreopsis, Tall Sunflower, Sweet Ox-eye, Great Blue Lobelia, Smooth Beardtongue, Hairy Beardtongue, Virginia Mountain Mint, Grey-headed Coneflower, Black-eyed Susan, and Culver's Root.

While tallgrass prairie plants can grow to be more than 2 metres tall, the property's lovely sightlines between the fields and down to the creek valley will be maintained.

*Contact: Jay Ebel, Forestry Technician, or Karen Pugh, Resources Specialist*

### Lake Victoria Shoreline Project

During the final days of last winter, the UTRCA's Conservation Services group tackled a very large shoreline erosion control project along the banks of Lake Victoria (Avon River) in Stratford. The project involved placing 700' of cap rock backed with filter cloth (*below left*), to stabilize the bank and prevent erosion of the trail around the lake.



The project included several unique features to increase accessibility to the lake and add variety. These features included two wooden crib step areas and several creative stone placement ideas.

Funding for the project came from the City of Stratford and other local contributions.

*Contact: Craig Merkley, Conservation Services Specialist*







*A landowner picks up her tree.*

### **“Tree Power” Celebrates 10th Anniversary**

As the saying goes, “better late than never.” On October 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, London homeowners were finally able to pick up their new Tree Power Program trees, which they had ordered online in March. Tree pick up normally takes place in April, but was postponed due to COVID-19 and health and safety concerns.

This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this very successful partnership between London Hydro and the UTRCA. Tree Power brings trees to London homeowners with the goal of planting more native shade trees to help reduce energy consumption in the Forest City. With 600 trees sold annually, this year saw the 6,000<sup>th</sup> tree planted through the program! This year’s species were Bur Oak, Northern Hackberry, Sugar Maple, Sycamore, Tulip, and Yellow Birch.

As in previous years, a great crew of UTRCA staff and family volunteers stepped forward to help homeowners pick up their trees in a safe and timely manner. Homeowners were very respectful of our COVID-19 procedures and everything went smoothly.

Homeowners who had participated in the program in previous years were pleasantly surprised to see that their trees were larger than usual, as delaying the pick up until fall resulted in an extra season’s growth.

A new partnership will launch in 2021, thanks to this program’s success. Festival Hydro (Stratford) will sponsor the planting of 300 native shade trees under a similar format. Stay tuned for details!  
*Contact: John Enright, Forester*

### **Camp Kee-Mo-Kee Stairway**

Over the past many years, UTRCA staff have been involved with various projects at Camp Kee-Mo-Kee, which is located just west of Komoka. This children’s camp includes steep valley slopes along a beautiful, wooded stretch of Oxbow Creek. Camp directors have worked with UTRCA staff on several occasions to address erosion issues, forest management opportunities, and other planning and regulations concerns.

Over the past year, the camp inquired about creating safer access for campers down the steep valley slope to the banks of the creek, where the children participate in educational programming. UTRCA Lands and Facilities staff, who have extensive experience in trail development, worked with Conservation Services staff to create a plan that included a preferred pathway route.



Staff constructed and installed a 13 step staircase made up of timber crib. The stairs will stabilize and protect the steepest section of the path and the lower creek bank area, and will also serve as an amphitheatre. A wooden railing and other measures are being considered for 2021 to complete the project.

*Contact: Brandon Williamson, Lands Management Technician*





**Another Stream of Dreams Completed!**

On the evening of Wednesday, October 14<sup>th</sup>, Caradoc Public School's [Stream of Dreams](#) fish mural was finally installed on the school yard fence! UTRCA staff were joined by school staff and parent volunteers to install the 460 fish.

The school's in-class Stream of Dreams program took place in February 2020 but, due to the pandemic, we postponed the installation of the Dream Fish.



Funding for this school's program was provided by the Thames Valley District School Board, Computech, Hillen Nursery, and the Lions Club of Mount Brydges.

Contact: Linda Smith, Community Partnerships Specialist



**Friends of Stoney Creek**

The Friends of Stoney Creek hosted a clean up and their first meeting of the 2020-2021 season on Thursday, October 8<sup>th</sup>. We met physically in a park, all seated at least 2 metres apart.

The clean up was funded by Unsmoke Canada Cleanups, which provided funding for all of the supplies, PPE, and a COVID-safe meal. The City of London supported the event by picking up the garbage afterwards. The supplies will be used for more cleanups in the future.



The Friends of Stoney Creek plan to hold their next [Community Cleanup on Saturday, October 17 at Constitution Park.](#)

Contact: Linda Smith, Community Partnerships Specialist



## Communities for Nature Fall 2020

As the pandemic continues, so does tree planting in different formats. Tree planting and physical distancing are complementary activities, benefiting the environment as well as our physical and mental health.



*Westminster Ponds ESA planting with UTRCA staff from different departments.*

This fall, 2800 native trees and shrubs of various species and sizes are being planted throughout the Upper Thames River watershed and beyond. Sites include Oneida Nation of the Thames, Tavistock, London (Westminster Ponds ESA and Whisperwood Park), Oxford County (Hodges Pond), and Middlesex Centre (Medway Creek watershed).

Thank you to the UTRCA staff, family members, and community members who are exercising safe planting protocols and helping to improve our local surroundings.

*Contact: Karen Pugh, Resources Specialist*

### **Tamarack, the deciduous conifer**

Autumn is the perfect time of year to spot Tamarack trees, as the brilliant yellow of their late autumn foliage is easy to see in the evergreen bogs, fens, and mixed swamps where they grow. Similar to deciduous trees, the leaves (needles) of a Tamarack change colour in the fall and then drop off to protect the tree from drying out in winter. However, Tamarack (*Larix laricina*) is a coniferous species, a member of the Pine Family, meaning it bears cones and has needle-like leaves. So, while it is a conifer, it behaves like a deciduous tree.



*The needles grow in tufts of 15-60.*

The Tamarack's odd-ball behaviour lies in the unique characteristics of its needles. The soft, short needles grow in tufts of 15-60 needles spread out along the branches. This arrangement means that most of the needles get plenty of sunlight and can fully engage in photosynthesis. Since the tree drops its needles in the fall, it does not have to produce a waxy cuticle to protect them from drying out in the winter, or large doses of phenolic compounds to ward off hungry winter herbivores. Finally, the tree is able to reabsorb a lot of nitrogen from its needles before they are shed, which is another savings for next year's growth.



Tamarack cones (*photo above*) are small, 1-2 cm in length, and contain seeds that are readily eaten by chipmunks, mice, and Red Crossbills. White-tailed Deer enjoy browsing on most conifers but usually ignore Tamarack.





*The Tamaracks in Sifton Bog ESA have turned golden by late autumn, in contrast to the dark green of the Black Spruce trees.*

Tamarack is native to every province and territory in Canada and to the northeastern United States. This species tolerates extremely varied climatic conditions but does best on moist, well drained soils. It requires full sun and does not tolerate urban pollution. Tamarack is uncommon in southwestern Ontario forests. In the UTRCA watershed, it is confined to the edges of bogs, such as London's Sifton Bog Environmentally Significant Area, and in cool swamps such as Dorchester and Ellice Swamps.

The word Tamarack comes from *Takmahak* or *Hackmatack*, which are Abenaki (Algonquin) words meaning "wood used for snowshoes." Many parts of the tree are used by Indigenous peoples for food, medicine, and weaving. The wood is also used for utility poles, rough lumber, and paper.

The UTRCA plants Tamarack trees in small numbers in restoration projects at suitable sites. In the past, the similar-looking European Larch (*Larix decidua*) was often planted in conifer plantations.

Contact: Cathy Quinlan, Terrestrial Ecologist

### **Citizen Science Program**

The UTRCA has obtained funding from RBC's Tech for Nature program to create a Citizen Science program. Our goal is to raise awareness of climate change and the importance of data collection and sharing in understanding local impacts.

The program will see watershed volunteers collecting and reporting information through two existing platforms: precipitation data through [CoCoRaHS \(Community Collaborative, Rain, Hail and Snow Network\)](#), and species presence data through [iNaturalist](#). The objective is to have this data displayed in real time on the UTRCA website for watershed residents to access.

Staff from several departments are working together to build a program that will enhance current monitoring efforts, fill data gaps throughout the watershed, and provide easy public access to the information.

Contact: Erin Dolmage, Community Education Technician