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New Weekly Blog!

The UTRCA has started a new weekly blog on its website to share projects, announcements, and other watershed news. The first article is about the [cover crop research being carried out in the upper Medway watershed](#) and includes an interview with Mike Yeo, a local farmer.

We welcome suggestions! If you have a story idea, please get in touch!

Contact: [Emily Chandler](#), Communications & Research Assistant

Gizzard Shad in the Thames

The stay at home orders and physical distancing that are now part of daily life mean more and more people have been enjoying the City of London's trail network along the Thames River. With so many eyes on the river, it's not surprising that calls and emails started coming in to UTRCA staff this winter when larger than usual numbers of Gizzard Shad were sighted in the city.

- [See Gizzard Shad video](#) and [photos](#)

In mid-November, people started seeing huge schools of fish moving about in the Thames, from Springbank Park all the way upstream to Fanshawe Dam. As the river got colder in



December, the schools stopped roaming the river and settled around a handful of sites, where they became even more obvious to trail users. Calls, emails, and social media posts increased as people wondered what these fish were and why they were there.

The fish are [Gizzard Shad](#), a member of the herring family. Their name comes from a strongly muscled part of their digestive system, the gizzard, which allows them to effectively crush and digest plant matter. The species is native to Ontario and can be found in the Thames River throughout the year. Here in the Great Lakes basin, juvenile Gizzard Shad are an important food source for many game fish species including Muskie, Northern Pike, Walleye, and Bass.

Every fall, schools of Gizzard Shad move north up the Thames River, some coming as far as London. The fish are not very cold hardy and are at the northern edge of their population range here in Ontario. They seek out warm spots, which are often found in urban centres, to improve their odds of surviving the winter.

Once temperatures in the Thames River began to drop, the shad searched out warmer water, such as the outlets of wastewater treatment plants and sites where the underground storm sewer network outlets above ground. As thousands of fish have remained at these sites, many Londoners have made a habit of taking a weekly walk to go see if the fish are still there.



Thousands of Gizzard Shad have gathered at outlets where warmer water is entering the Thames River.

As we moved into February, the cold winter temperatures finally set in with an extended cold snap. Temperatures in the Thames River have dropped below 1°C and ice is starting to form in the river. The cold temperatures, in combination with [**Viral Hemorrhagic Septicemia \(VHS\)**](#), which is an endemic disease in the shad population of this area, have resulted in the winter's first reported Gizzard Shad die-off.

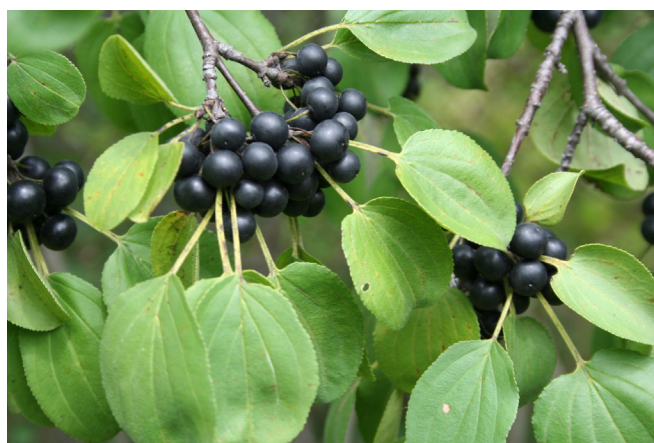
A die-off occurs most years near the end of the winter and is a natural part of the shad life cycle in this part of their range. The largest and healthiest fish will survive the winter and make their way back towards Lake St. Clair once the Thames River warms back up. There they will spawn in the late spring and into the summer, producing a new generation of Gizzard Shad that may one day overwinter in the City of London.

To see more photos and videos of the Gizzard Shad and other aquatic species in the UTRCA watershed, check out [**@UTRCAaquaticbio**](#) on Twitter and [**Instagram**](#).

Contact: [*Michelle Fletcher*](#), Aquatic Biologist

Stratford Energy and Environment Committee working with UTRCA to address invasive species

The UTRCA and the City of Stratford's Energy and Environment Committee have been working to protect the TJ Dolan area from invasive species that are threatening its unique ecology. Most recently, UTRCA staff carried out a first round of targeted herbicide treatment on the east side of TJ Dolan to control European Buckthorn. Last year, staff treated buckthorn on the west side. It is hoped that the mature buckthorn will be largely under control by the end of 2021. In the past, UTRCA staff have also treated Japanese Knotweed, Phragmites, Periwinkle, and Poison Ivy in the TJ Dolan.



European Buckthorn thrives in a variety of habitats, forming dense thickets that crowd and shade out native plants.

Many approaches to controlling invasive plant species have been tried over the past decade. The most effective techniques are herbicide injection and targeted, specific herbicide application. The herbicides are approved for use by Health Canada and carefully applied by licensed applicators on staff at the UTRCA, following best management practices approved by the Ontario Invasive Plant Council and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

The increasing prevalence of invasive species is another impact of climate change and it's important we try to tackle them before they take over natural areas such as the TJ Dolan.

Contact: [Craig Merkley](#), Conservation Services Specialist

Virtual Hike

Community Living London approached UTRCA Community Education staff in the fall of 2020, hoping to arrange several hikes that our staff would lead in local nature areas for their participants. With the ever-changing COVID restrictions, it was decided that a virtual hike would be the best way for participants to safely enjoy a nature experience and learn some more about their surroundings.

With the expertise of our Marketing Specialist, Steve Sauder, two education staff went to the Medway Valley Heritage Forest Environmentally Significant Area and filmed a 15 minute hike. Stops were made along the way to describe and inform about some of the flora and fauna.

- [See the Virtual Hike](#)



A few weeks later, education staff met the participants on a Zoom call to introduce themselves and explain how the virtual hike would proceed. After the hike was completed, we met back on the Zoom call to show a short slide presentation to add to the experience and motivate some curiosity and questions. One person wanted to know more about the trees we saw during the hike; someone else was quite excited about the woodpecker we encountered; and another participant was curious about coyotes in the Medway Valley.

Eighteen happy hikers participated in the virtual activity. We had an excellent time with everyone and it was great to be able to be with them, even if it was virtually! We plan on connecting with this group several more times in the next few months to bring them a nature experience, either virtually or in-person.

Contact: [Kim Gilbert](#), Community Education Technician (Fanshawe)

Virtual River Safety Program

This month, UTRCA Community Education staff launched a virtual version of our River Safety program! For the past 23 years, UTRCA staff have visited grade two classrooms throughout the Upper Thames River watershed to lead this important program, which teaches students how to stay safe near rivers and streams.

Staff developed the River Safety program after a potentially fatal accident occurred at Springbank Dam in London. In 1996, three grade eight students on a school field trip were swept over the dam when they made some poor safety decisions. A subsequent study to determine how to minimize public hazards around water identified the need for river safety education. In response, UTRCA Community Education staff developed the River Safety education program.

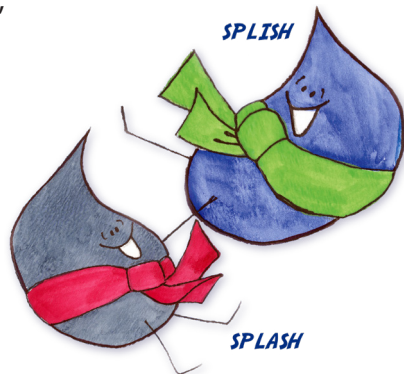
The program is traditionally one hour of engaging and interactive in-class activities, specifically designed for grade two students. Staff focus on this age group because research indicates that they are especially vulnerable. Students are taught the dangers of high water

levels, slippery banks, and fast-flowing water, as well as other water hazards throughout the UTRCA watershed. Community Education staff also build the students' awareness around the hazards of reservoirs, irrigation ponds, swimming pools, and natural bodies of water including rivers and streams. Students learn about the dangers associated with ice-covered water surfaces. The River Safety program meets the grade two curriculum expectations in science (Water) and health (Safety).

This year, with restrictions on classroom visits due to COVID-19, staff have launched a new virtual version of the River Safety program. The Fanshawe Community Education staff's virtual program consists of a curriculum-based Teacher's Guide and an engaging "Staying Safe" slideshow for students, that teaches them how to be safe near rivers and streams. An online version of the story, "The Journey of Splish and Splash," can be read aloud by teachers, and an interactive "Matching Game"

tests students' knowledge and their retention of the program information. Other program components are a virtual Activity Booklet that teachers can print out for their students to complete or students can complete on devices; a "Flooding on the Thames River" slideshow that demonstrates the intensity of the flood that occurred on the Thames in February 2018; and a list of additional resources for teachers.

The Wildwood Community Education staff's virtual River Safety program consists of an interactive Google presentation designed to be used by teachers, with teachers, or independently by students. Education staff can be heard narrating "The Journey of Splish and Splash" along with the pictures from the book. Students learn "What is a Watershed?" through a voice recorded presentation then play a game



of memory to help identify and remember the parts of a watershed. Students can look at a series of pictures accompanied by voice recorded sentences to make important decisions about situations around water in an activity called "Safe or Unsafe." To conclude, a virtual version of pages of the Activity Booklet is included.

This year, Community Education staff will also be sending out a newly created interactive story map once students have completed the program. The story map will help students make direct connections to various features of our watershed and build on what they learned while completing the River Safety program.

The UTRCA has received a very enthusiastic response from schools for this year's virtual River Safety program and some new schools have signed up. The 2021 program has been booked for more than 2500 grade two students throughout our watershed. Although we are happy we can still reach students this year, staff are very much looking forward to a time when they can return to schools to teach this important and engaging program directly to students.

Many thanks go to our generous community funders for their continued sponsorship and support of the River Safety program: Arva and District Optimist Club, Bryanston-Birr Optimist Club, Byron Optimist Club, Highbury Pet Hospital, and London Oakridge Acres Optimist Club! Contact: [Julie Read](#), Community Education Supervisor (Fanshawe), and [Maranda MacKean](#), Community Education Specialist (Wildwood)

Another Accessibility and Restoration Project completed along Lake Victoria

UTRCA staff have completed another section of shoreline improvement on the north shore of Lake Victoria, in Stratford. This year's project includes an accessible canoe/kayak launch for paddlers, and extends an accessible trail along the water's edge with areas for trail users to appreciate the vista. Improved erosion protection is another important component of the project.

[See project photos](#)



The accessible canoe/kayak launch and erosion control are constructed of a timber cribwall with underwater rock shoals.

The project builds on previous work around Lake Victoria, including south shore protection projects in 2018 and 2020, and cribwalls installed along the north shore in 2017 and 2019.



Staff and contractors with the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority worked to complete construction on a number of shoreline improvements along Lake Victoria's north shore in Stratford Friday morning. Improvements include making a 60-metre stretch of the city's north-shore pathway more accessible, constructing wooden cribbing and reinforcing the shoreline with rocks to prevent further erosion, and building a kayak and canoe launch closer to the water to make it easier to get in and out from shore. Galen Simmons/The Beacon Herald/Postmedia Network

The following project partners contributed funding and/or in-kind donations:

- Avon River Environmental Association
- City of Stratford
- City of Stratford Energy and Environment Committee
- The Green Hair Spa
- Rotary Club of Stratford
- UTRCA

Contact: [Craig Merkley](#), Conservation Services Specialist

On the Agenda

The next UTRCA Board of Directors meeting will be the Annual General Meeting, held virtually on February 18, 2021.

- Review and Approval of the Factual Certificate
 - 2021 Draft Budget & Municipal Feedback
 - 2021 Capital Water and Erosion Control Infrastructure Projects
 - Section 28 Status Report
 - *Conservation Authorities Act* Proclamations
 - 2021 Service Award Recognition
 - UTRCA Administrative By-Law Review Deferral
 - Presentation: 5 Years of Source Protection Plan Implementation - What We've Accomplished and Where We're Going
 - Presentation: Recognition of Dr. Doug Bocking
- Please visit the "Board Agendas & Minutes" page at www.thamesriver.on.ca for draft agendas, audio/video recordings, and approved minutes.
- Contact: [Michelle Viglianti](#), Administrative Assistant