



Spring Tree Planting Season will be Busy!

UTRCA forestry staff have seen tremendous interest in our [2021 tree planting programs](#). Between the many recent site calls carried out by staff, ongoing landowner interest, and the plantings carried over from 2020 due to the pandemic, we may have reached our limit of available nursery stock!

To encourage tree planting, our staff have worked hard to secure opportunities for watershed landowners to offset some of the cost associated with most tree planting projects. As a result, many private land and community projects receive cost-sharing through funding from our local Clean Water Program, Forests Ontario grants, Ontario Power Generation, or West Perth Healthy Forests.

The projects planned for this spring include watercourse buffers, windbreaks, and naturalizing highly erodible and sensitive lands. These efforts will all help us reach our target of



establishing 1000 ha of natural vegetative cover in the upper Thames River watershed by 2032.

In time, the trees that are planted this spring will enhance the environment and everyone's quality of life by increasing wildlife habitat, protecting streams, controlling soil erosion, and improving water quality. We're looking forward to the perfect spring planting conditions!

Contact: [John Enright](#), Forester

Sharing Christmas with the Animals

Every year, Wildwood Community Education staff look forward to offering Christmas programming in late November and early December. Due to COVID-19, we were unable to offer the program as usual in 2020.

Many of our preschool and primary classes book a year in advance, often immediately following their last visit. While no one could have predicted a global pandemic and the program cancellation was unavoidable, everyone was disappointed.



Story time in the Spruce Grove.

Rebecca Bomasuit, Director of the Avon Cooperative Nursery School in Stratford, wrote in an email, “You know what I just thought of: I’m worried that it isn’t going to feel like Christmas without hearing Vanni’s story first! It’s such a perfect way to start the holiday season for not only the children, but for [staff] as well! We love your program!”

Rebecca’s email motivated us to pivot and we were able to offer our Christmas program in a family and pandemic friendly format. Using our new Nature School area, called the Spruce Grove, we offered pre-registered families a chance to help Santa share Christmas with the wildlife by feeding the birds, finding food and shelter for the animals, and sharing a story by the outdoor fire. The weather was perfect and the atmosphere was magical!

Over the Christmas break, Rebecca sent us another email to book dates for December 2021. She also wrote that, “We had a few families attend the program you ran and it had rave reviews!” COVID-19 may have just inspired a new tradition at Wildwood.

Contact: [Maranda MacKean](#), Community Education Specialist

Research Studies on UTRCA Lands

Every year, UTRCA staff are approached by researchers, usually from local universities or provincial/ federal agencies, seeking permission to conduct field work on our lands and/or to partner with us. Having public lands available for environmental research greatly aids students, scientists, and researchers with their work.

Researchers, in turn, share their findings with us.

Here are a few examples of the type of research we’ve partnered in or permitted on our properties recently:

- Terrestrial arthropod (insect) monitoring at Wildwood Conservation Area (CA) by the University of Guelph’s Centre of Biodiversity Genomics;
- Several tree disease studies at our large CAs in cooperation with UTRCA staff, including work on Emerald Ash Borer with the Canadian Forestry Service, Oak Wilt Disease, Asian Longhorn Beetle with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Beech Leaf Disease with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR), and Butternut Canker with the Forest Gene Conservation Association;
- Black Duck banding at Wildwood CA by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS);
- Black-legged Tick surveys at Embro CA by the University of Guelph and the Public Health Agency of Canada;
- DNA research on Western Chorus Frogs at a few of our properties by CWS;



UTRCA is working with the FGCA to preserve the endangered native butternut. The species is threatened by butternut canker, a fungal disease.

- Wood Poppy research at Fanshawe CA by WSP Environmental Consultants;
- Drinking water treatment research using powdered activated carbon to remove cyanotoxins from blue green algae at UTRCA reservoirs, by the University of Waterloo;
- Echo-sounding to provide bathymetry of Fanshawe Reservoir bottom by the University of Waterloo in collaboration with Environment and Climate Change Canada;
- Bog Fern inventories at Ellice Swamp by MNRF.

The full project list is quite long and doesn't include research that we initiate. These research partnerships benefit us all in our understanding of the natural world.

Contact: [Cathy Quinlan](#), Terrestrial Biologist

GREEN Leaders Initiative Goes Virtual!

In January 2021, Brad Hertner (Community Partnership Specialist) and Julie Read (acting Fanshawe Community Education Supervisor) launched a new, virtual version of the GREEN Leaders Initiative. The UTRCA has been bringing this exciting environmental education and civic engagement program to grade 7 and 8 students for more than five years.

The GREEN Leaders Initiative is an innovative community action and problem solving process, developed by Earth Force. More than 300,000 students from across North America have participated in the program. Our Community Education and Partnerships staff are able to offer this leadership opportunity to students in the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) thanks to generous funding provided by the TVDSB and Start.ca internet company.

For the 2020-2021 school year, 17 classes are participating in GREEN Leaders. The students will go through a six-step process that takes them from identifying local environmental issues through to implementing a sustainable solution in their community.

The program is place-based, inquiry-based, and gives students opportunities to engage with community partners from various fields such as government, not-for-profit, and

business. The GREEN Leaders Initiative has been intentionally designed to develop students' global competency skills and to encourage the development of youth voices in the community.

Due to the pandemic, this year's GREEN Leaders Initiative program has gone virtual. Julie and Brad are meeting students in virtual classroom visits on a biweekly basis, and designing curriculum-based lesson plans and activities for students to complete in between visits.

In June, all the participating classes will be brought together virtually for a GREEN Leaders Student Summit. Students will be able to share their community actions, communicate what they learned during the program, and celebrate their successes with their peers.

Contact: [Julie Read](#), Community Education Supervisor (Fanshawe) (acting)

Upper Medway Update

December 2020 saw the end of one of the projects taking place in the Upper Medway subwatershed. The three year project, funded by the Canadian Agriculture Partnership, was part of the ongoing initiative to investigate the impact of cover crops on water quality.

This project was unique in that it focused on the adoption of a single best management practice (cover crops) within a defined area (the Upper Medway subwatershed). An important outcome has been the establishment of overwinter cover on 70% of the acreage in the fall of both 2019 and 2020. It is unusual to have such a high percentage of acreage with ground cover over the winter, in southwestern Ontario.



Building and maintaining long term projects is important to help us understand the impact of best management practices on water quality. Cover crop demonstrations in the Upper Medway will continue with funding from Environment and Climate Change Canada.

Check out the UTRCA website for more [information on cover crops](#).

Contact: [Tatianna Lozier](#), Agricultural Soil & Water Technician

Sensory Nature Hike for CNIB Deafblind Community Services

After a blustery weekend, the weather was calm on November 16 for London CNIB Deafblind Community Services participants and their intervenors, who came to Fanshawe CA to go for a walk and experience nature with Community Education staff.

We started off by feeding the birds at the entrance of the Tamarack Trail. We gave some tips on how to hold their hands out with seeds, and in no time we had chickadees and nuthatches flying in to snack on the sunflower seeds! We even caught a glimpse of a gorgeous Red-bellied Woodpecker.



We continued our stroll to the top of Fanshawe Dam, where we shared historical information about the dam, as well as some local natural history. Our third stop was a little further into the park. We gave each participant a bag of nature items for them to explore using their senses, focusing on smell and touch.

Before we knew it, our time had come to an end! The participants and their intervenors were

all very happy with the afternoon outing, and appreciative of their new nature knowledge.

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

ReKindle the Sparks Workshop

Since 1994, educators from conservation authority across Ontario have been gathering at ReKindle the Sparks workshops to share, learn, and connect. In recent years, a ReKindle the Sparks conference has been held every November under the umbrella of the Watershed Interpreters' Network.

Due to COVID-19, the 2020 Latornell Conference shifted to a series of webinars offered from September to December. UTRCA education staff attended several of the webinars, including:

- creating successful environmental education during a pandemic,
- including the next generation in climate change decisions,
- land-based education and reconciliation,
- the scoop on benthic invertebrates.

A Virtual Campfire provided a forum to share ideas and programs that have been adapted or created to maintain programming and meet needs in the face of COVID-19. Much of the content from the campfire was presented again at a Latornell webinar focusing on communicating through a pandemic. The webinar was offered in partnership with the Watershed Interpreters' Network and the Conservation Areas Workshop.

UTRCA staff shared a version of the River Safety program that can be delivered virtually to Grade 2 students across the watershed. Staff have used this program to bring important water safety messages into local schools for more than 20 years.

Wildwood Nature School was shared as an "Ode to COVID," which was meant to capture the struggles and successes of launching a new program during a global pandemic:

COVID, you gave us time, so much time, to research, develop, share and consult about our vision for Wildwood Nature School.

COVID, you inspired us to diversify our programming, meet current trends and

demands in our area, and be new and fresh, although we are exhausted after a busy but very successful fall session.

COVID, you challenged us to be innovative and adapt activities and routines to meet the ever changing health and safety guidelines and public expectations. Ever. Changing.

COVID, you gave us the opportunity to build our relationship with conservation area staff who helped us create the Wildwood Nature School area, take registrations, and put up with us as we openly discussed and laughed about things in the building we are all now spread across, in order to stay socially distanced. Outdoor Environmental Educators tend not to be quiet people by nature.

COVID, you brought us home! You reconnected us with our roots, our childhood connections to nature, and our sense of whimsy and wonder!

Contact: [Maranda MacKean](#), Community Education Specialist

Cribwall Construction

The UTRCA's Conservation Services team started building a set of 11 timber cribs this week at the Fanshawe CA workshop. The cribs will be part of a 60 metre section of shoreline erosion control work along the north shore of Lake Victoria in Stratford.

The project adds to another section completed three years ago. The cribbing will provide a number of benefits in addition to stopping bank erosion, including biodiversity, aquatic habitat, and improved accessibility for pedestrians and wheelchair users.

A unique feature built into the site design is a canoe/ kayak launch aimed at improving accessibility to the lake for recreational paddlers.

The project is funded by the Stratford Energy and Environment Committee and the City of



Stratford. Work should be completed this winter. The project was planned and designed by UTRCA staff in partnership with the City of Stratford.

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

On the Agenda

The next UTRCA Board of Directors meeting will be a virtual meeting on January 26, 2021.

- Section 28 Status Report
- Pittock Reservoir Incident/Ice Condition Messaging/River Safety Education
- Fanshawe Conservation Area Cottage Program
- CA Unit – additional dollars for Hydro Upgrade
- Conservation Authorities Act Update – Bill 229
- Ontario Flood Strategy Summary
- 2021 Draft Budget: Municipal Feedback to Date
- Annual Meeting Details
- 2020 Elections: Chair, Vice-Chair, Hearings Committee (3 positions), Finance & Audit Committee (2-4 positions), Source Protection Striking Committee/Committee Liaison (1 position)

Draft agendas, audio recordings, and approved minutes are posted at www.thamesriver.on.ca on the "Board Agendas & Minutes" page.

Contact: [Michelle Viglianti](#), Administrative Assistant