


Wetlands specialist visits the area for talks, walks

WAS HELD ON APRIL 13

 HOPE MCLEOD

hmcleod@ashlanddailypress.net

 04.10.17

Wetlands have historically played a vital role in the health of community watersheds. However, many have been destroyed by clear-cutting, road-building and agricultural expansion.

The good news is there's an expert in Wisconsin who has dedicated his life to wetlands preservation and restoration, Tracy Hames, Executive Director of Wisconsin Wetlands Association, and he's coming to the area to share his wetlands wisdom on Thursday and Friday.

As part of the Friends of the North Pikes Creek Wetlands winter lecture series, Hames has been invited to give a talk, "Wetlands and Wildlife in Northern Wisconsin" at 7 p.m. on April 13 at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center. This event is sponsored by FNPCW and co-sponsored by the Bad River Watershed Association and the Chequamegon Audubon Society.

"Since he's going to be up here, we thought we'd take advantage of his time," said FNPCW Director Kathy Wendling. Besides the talk, FNPCW organized a walk along North Pike's Creek with Hames at 10 a.m. on Friday, but for members only of the sponsoring organizations. However, FNPCW member Colleen Lee has organized a public walk with Hames along the Washburn Walking Trail at 3 p.m. on Thursday. The walk begins at Cafe Coco, 146 W Bayfield Street in Washburn.

Most people perceive wetlands as places of refuge and sustenance for wildlife. There's more to this story.

"Everyone understands that wetlands are important for frogs, ducks and pretty flowers," Hames said. "But that's not enough to really motivate people to do the wetlands work we need to have done in Wisconsin."

The work he's referring to is wetlands preservation and restoration to help mitigate problems communities face from destructive water events, such as what happened on July 11, 2016, when 11 inches of rain deluged the northland in less than 12 hours. Hames, who spent 22 years as a Waterfowl and Wetlands Biologist for the Yakama Indian Nation in eastern Washington, has discovered there is much that humans can do to prevent such disasters. For the last five years he's been motivated to help communities in Wisconsin revive their wetlands.

Raised in Arden Hills, Minn., Hames obtained a B.A. in Biology and Environmental Studies from Macalester College in 1984, and an M.S. in Natural Resources from the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point in 1990. In 1989 he moved to Washington to help build one of the largest agricultural-based wetland restoration and management projects in the Pacific Northwest. Located amid two of the most important steelhead-producing watersheds in the Yakima River Basin, his efforts made use of the cultures and traditions of the Yakama people, agricultural

management (including surface and groundwater irrigation), and science-based restoration techniques.

As a result, he developed an integrated approach to land and water use that benefits tribal culture, fish and wildlife habitat, and a vibrant agricultural landscape. Hames returned to the Midwest in 2012 to join WWA.

"We're a non-profit organization that works throughout the state, literally helping people in communities care for wetlands," he said. "We do a lot of outreach and education and help folks get the understanding and the connections they need to protect, restore and care for wetlands in their communities."

Since 2012, Hames has made several trips to Iron, Bayfield and Ashland counties to lead tours and offer advice. In 2012, Wendling invited him to walk the wetlands bordering North Pikes Creek – 280 acres of privately-owned boreal forest, beaver ponds, and creek shoreline she and citizens of the Town of Russell hoped to protect.

"When he came up and walked it he said, 'Yes, this is a great place. You should go forward with it,'" Wendling said. "He was real helpful and made comments on grant applications."

Wendling and her team raised enough funds for the Bayfield Regional Conservancy to purchase this parcel in 2014, thus preserving it in perpetuity.

Last summer Hames made a trip north following the July storm.

"I happened to be up there about four days after that rain event for some other tours that I was doing," he said. "Driving around—where I could drive, because most of the roads were shut down—it was really obvious to me that where the big washouts occurred, and where they didn't occur, there was a story."

Looking upstream from the big washouts, he observed that these occurred where wetlands had been removed in the late 1800s when the entire region was clear-cut. Clear-cutting causes erosion, scouring, and down-cutting of rivers. Hames explained that following that era, some

areas in Iron, Ashland and Bayfield Counties returned to forest and regenerated wetlands. However, much land was converted to agriculture and drainage ditches were built to remove wetlands.

"The importance of wetlands is when you get a rain event like this, rainwater has a place to collect," he said. "If you remove wetlands and put drainage ditches in, all that water goes right off the land, right down into the rivers and flushes quickly downstream. This increases the flashiness of floods."

Many washouts occurred at big road crossings, which Hames said are basically giant culverts.

"When you get a big flood of water coming down your creek or your river all at once and it hits those culverts, they plug up with dirt," he said.

In some places the water rose 30 feet and slushed over the roads in July. Conversely, in areas where wetlands were firmly established, such as the Penokee Hills and some areas in the Bad River Watershed, there was very little damage.

"I went up into those forested areas in Iron County four days after the event, where I was giving a tour, and all the wetlands that are normally full of water in the spring that dry up in the summer were chock full of water," he said. "There were beaver dams and you could see that all that rain got held in these wetlands."

This was true in the Bibon Swamp and North Pikes Creek. As a result, the tributaries in those places were undisturbed and the roads intact.

After visiting the area, Hames wrote (and was awarded) a grant from the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program to pursue the telling of this story.

"We're going to be spending this summer and part of the fall working with folks up north, putting the story of that rain event together," said Hames who will give a presentation sometime in 2018.

Meanwhile, check out his talk at NGLVC on Thursday and take one of the Walks on the Wild Side, as they are being called, organized by FNPCW members. Also, there's one last lecture in the FNPCW winter series: "Loon – Symbol of the North," at 7 p.m. on April 19, presented by Erica LeMoine, Loon Watch coordinator at the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, which is sponsored by CAS and co-sponsored by FNPCW.

To learn more about FNPCW go to: <http://www.northpikescreek.org/>.

For more information on WWA go to: Wisconsin Wetlands Association.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A beaver pond at the headwaters of North Pikes Creek Wetlands. The Friends of North Pikes Creek Wetlands is sponsoring a lecture with Tracy Hames, Executive Director of Wisconsin Wetlands Association at 7 p.m., April 13 at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center.