

Thumb Land Conservancy NEWS

March 17, 2020

2020 First Quarter Executive Board Meeting Canceled

Because of the COVID-19 virus situation, we are erring on the side of caution and canceling the in-person version of our first quarter executive board meeting, scheduled for this Saturday, March 21. Instead, we will conduct our meeting by e-mail and phone. This is not open to the general membership, but anyone is free to submit comments any time. We are still planning our spring and summer stewardship along with other projects.

Blue Water Indigenous Alliance Port Huron Meeting Saturday, March 14



The Thumb Land Conservancy attended the Blue Water Indigenous Alliance Port Huron meeting this past Saturday afternoon at the Port Huron Museum. We were represented by TLC Board Member Kay Cumbow and TLC Executive Director Bill Collins. Kay brought a rice dish for the potluck and gifted a book to the BWIAPH entitled, *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People*, on behalf of the TLC. In turn, they gave us each a BWIAPH bumper sticker with their logo shown above, and bottles of Ziibimijwang maple syrup produced by the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa (Waganakising Odawak). Among other topics, we discussed TLC properties, projects, our knowledge of local Native American sites, our experiences in land protection, and how we can work together.

After the meeting, we joined the group to visit the unmarked home site of Chief John Riley on the property of the Federal Building and Community Foundation of Saint Clair County at the southwest corner of Military Street and Water Street along the Black River in Port

Huron. In the traditional Native American way, we each prayed and scattered tobacco on the ground under a tree on the site. Here are some interesting articles about John Riley: <https://theliteratequilter.blogspot.com/2014/01/the-bible-of-john-riley-indian-chief.html>
<https://www.thetimesherald.com/story/news/2019/08/30/museum-displaying-john-riley-bible-honor-19th-century-indian-chief/2154701001/>
https://www.cmich.edu/library/clarke/ResearchResources/Native_American_Material/Excerpts_from_the_Michigan_Pioneer_and_Historical_Collections/Documents/farrand,_mrs_b_c_pg430-439.pdf (start on page 434)

After that, we drove up to Ode Zibi in Burtchville, along the Burtch Creek near the Sanilac County line. "Ode Zibi" means "Heart River" in the Anishinaabe language, referring to the Saint Clair River and Lake Saint Clair. This site will serve the BWIAPH as a Community Learning Center, which BWIAPH is now developing. A teepee has been set up and a wigwam is now under construction. Ode Zibi will also serve as a kayak and canoe launch, providing a very scenic paddle to Lake Huron only about 3,000 feet downstream.



Burtch Creek at Ode Zibi.



Scots Pine trees at Ode Zibi.



Birch bark attached to a wigwam frame at Ode Zibi.



The teepee at Ode Zibi.



Shelley Glombowski, Joshua Whiting, Kay Cumbow, and Shiloh at Ode Zibi. They are standing in front of what looks very much like a Native American trail marker tree, but it's probably not more than about 60 years old.



Birch Creek at Lake Huron, a great opportunity for canoeing and kayaking. It looks like the Pinnebog River here. Upstream of this, two creeks come together – Burtch Creek and Birch Creek.



Birch Creek outlet at Lake Huron.

The BWIAPH is a non-profit community-based organization focused on restoring, reviving, and sustaining local Indigenous culture and community in the Blue Water Area. They want to educate the community to provide a healthy, meaningful, and prosperous future for all. As part of this revitalization, the BWIAPH plans to establish Indigenous Education and Culture Centers in Port Huron and Algonac, near the former sites of the Black River and Swan Creek Bands of Ojibwe. The TLC hopes to work with the BWIAPH as our missions and interests overlap. To learn more about the BWIAPH and Ode Zibi, see their web site at: <https://bwiaph.org/>.

TLC Saginaw Bay Trip Lakeplain Prairie, Fish Point State Wildlife Area Wisner Township, Tuscola County

This past Thursday, TLC member Bob Haas and I made a trip up to the Saginaw Bay. Bob is retired from the Fisheries Division of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and is the author of a comprehensive summary of the Black River in Sanilac and Saint Clair Counties entitled, *Black River Assessment*, published in 2009 and available at this link:

http://www.michigandnr.com/PUBLICATIONS/PDFS/ifr/ifrlibra/special/reports/sr51/sr51_text.pdf

Since 2016, Bob has also conducted butterfly surveys on two routes in the Port Huron State Game Area as part of a larger North American effort. Anyone can start a butterfly monitoring route and the information collected is very important for butterfly protection. For more information, see the Michigan Butterfly Network web site at: <https://michiganbutterfly.org/>

The main purpose of our trip was to visit a lakeplain prairie at the northwest corner of Bradford Road and Black Road in Wisner Township, Tuscola County. Bob was particularly interested in seeing the prairie as it relates to butterfly habitat and would like to return in the summer to conduct a survey. The roughly 10-acre prairie is part of the Fish Point State Wildlife Area, and one of the better remaining examples of lakeplain prairie along the Saginaw Bay, normally full of Marsh Blazing-star – *Liatris spicata*, Riddell's Goldenrod - *Solidago riddellii*, Cordgrass – *Spartina pectinata*, Mountain Mint - *Pycnanthemum virginianum*, and other species characteristic of the plant community. Our new Loznak Sanctuary in Marysville also contains Riddell's Goldenrod and Mountain Mint, part of a remnant lakeplain prairie along the Saint Clair River. For a description of lakeplain wet prairie, see the Michigan Natural Features Inventory web site at:

<https://mnfi.anr.msu.edu/communities/description/10672/lakeplain-wet-prairie>

I carefully collected seed from the Bradford Road site and other lakeplain prairie along Saginaw Bay for 3 years as part of a wetland restoration project northwest of Bay City along the Kawkawlin River. TLC President Cheryl Collins and TLC Board Member Dan Rhein also helped collect seed. Long story short, the seed remained unused, so Bob Haas and I returned some of it to where it came from. This was my reason for planning a trip up there.

As with all of the Great Lakes, the water is way up in the Saginaw Bay. Because the land along the bay is so flat, it doesn't take much of a water rise to make large areas inland a lot wetter. This is the natural cycle of increasing and decreasing wetness which has maintained lakeplain prairie along the Great Lakes for thousands of years. The big ditches draining to the Saginaw Bay are all quite full now, with water nearly at the top of some banks. Upon arrival, Bradford Road before us was nearly flooded out and a big farm field to the east is now a roughly 30-acre shallow lake, having been reclaimed by the bay.



View southeast of Bradford Road and the reclaimed farm field.

More impressively, to our east on the higher ground of the farm field were hundreds of Tundra Swans. A rough estimate was nearly 2,000, covering the field like snow. The swans rested there for the day before crossing Saginaw Bay in the evening. How far they would fly that night is uncertain but there are large marshes and feeding grounds on the other side of Saginaw Bay at Nayanquing Point State Wildlife Area between Linwood and Pinconning, Wigwam Bay State Wildlife Area between Arenac and Au Gres, and Tawas Lake at Tawas where there is Wild Rice.



Bob Haas watching the distant Tundra Swans. They were too far away for me to get a good photo.

If all goes well, the TLC will have the opportunity to work with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources on much needed stewardship to restore the lakeplain prairie on the Bradford Road site. It is diminished from what it was about 8 years ago when I first observed it, due largely to the spread of invasive Glossy Buckthorn and other shrubs. The prairie really needs to burn, which it doesn't appear to have for many years. The MDNR agrees but they cannot authorize other groups to conduct burning. The TLC may help later this summer with cutting shrubs and trees. Another problem for the lakeplain prairie is the increasing water level of Saginaw Bay. While it is part of the natural cycle, there is not enough natural land to allow the prairie vegetation to move to higher ground in response. It's too hemmed in on the south by farm fields. As a result, most of the ground within the Bradford Road site is becoming too wet to support the native prairie species. Instead, invasive Reed – *Phragmites australis* subspecies *australis*, and cat-tail patches are expanding. It became apparent that one benefit of having collected seed from this prairie is that we were able to move it to slightly higher ground. But of course, the success of moving the seed depends on how much of it will germinate, and the higher ground is increasingly covered by shrubs and trees. The one prairie species that appears to be

temporarily benefiting from the higher water is Cordgrass, which is usually favored by slightly wetter conditions. But it is a matter of time before buckthorn, reed, and cat-tail dominates without management of this site.



Bob Haas spreading lakeplain prairie seed.



Bob's walking route in yellow. Bradford Road runs north-south and Black Road runs east from Bradford just north of our starting point. The lakeplain prairie is the lighter open area within the triangular parcel. Most of the land north of Bob's walking route is now too wet to maintain prairie and increasingly covered by cat-tail and reed. The prairie is surrounded by wooded shrub thicket of ash, elm, dogwood, and buckthorn, encroaching more each year on all sides. To the northwest is a beach ridge, covered mostly by oak, which parallels Saginaw Bay. Almost all of the area between the beach ridge and open water of the bay, in the upper left of the photo, is densely covered by reed. Thank you to the farmers who own the land south of the prairie for giving us permission to walk the field. It saved us a lot of work while carrying bags of seed.

After we left the Bradford Road prairie, Bob and I went a few miles east to look at another prairie area along King Road and drove out to the bay on a newly improved access trail through the Fish Point State Wildlife Area. Although Saginaw Bay is up, there is still a lot of reed cover, so much that it is still not possible to see open water beyond the near shore area. While enjoying this nice access point, we saw a nesting pair of Bald Eagles.



Saginaw Bay at the King Road access point in the Fish Point State Wildlife Area.

We then headed northwest to the Kawkawlin River to look at the wetland restoration I was working on until early last year. Located in an approximately 100-acre lakeplain prairie that was recently farmed, shallow ground water was almost 3 feet below the surface in 2017. Water now covers about half of the restoration area and was full of ducks. The 4-acre restoration area is now mostly too wet to maintain lakeplain prairie.



Wetland restoration area south of the Kawkawlin River near Saginaw Bay.

From here we headed a few miles north to take a look at Tobico Marsh and the Saginaw Bay at Bay City State Park. Here, the bay has eliminated almost all of the reed cover along the shoreline and surface water extends into the park so far that the MDNR has closed a large parking area and put up snow fencing, apparently to discourage people from entering.



View out to Saginaw Bay at Bay City State Park.

On our way back home, we stopped at a farm field as the sun was setting. Another large flock of Tundra Swans, perhaps a thousand or more, seemed about to depart for their evening flight over Saginaw Bay. As their calls increased in a great unison, a few hundred took off. This seems to be their way of building a consensus. Taking all of this in, I fully understood the inspiration of Sibelius.



Tundra Swans in a farm field south of M-25 along Bradford Road. This photo shows less than half of the swans.

If you are interested in helping the TLC work on lakeplain prairie along Saginaw Bay, please contact us. We hope to soon announce work days for the summer and early fall.

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