Friends Feted with Conservation Award

In February, the Friends of the Shiawassee River was selected to receive one of five inaugural Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy Osprey Awards for conservation excellence. The award was presented to Friends Board Member and paddling enthusiast Phil Hathaway, in recognition of the Shiawassee River Recreational Access Program, in which five canoe launches and landings were installed on the Shiawassee River.

The project was completed with a $13,200 matching grant from the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network. The funding enabled the Friends to construct five canoe access points along the Shiawassee River in public parks and at a site on the property of DeVries Nature Conservancy.

The award also recognized a talented project-planning group, innovative design and strategic placement of the canoe access points, generous volunteers, and efficient use of the SBWIN grant award. The budget-minded effort completed five access points with grant funding that anticipated the construction of only two.

The project committee’s next goal is to upgrade one of two launch sites in the Village of Byron. There currently are no access improvements at either site, no directional signs, and parking is undefined. A successful outcome in Byron will complement the work of the Shiawassee River Keepers, an organization that promotes paddling on the upper Shiawassee River between Holly and Argentine.

Beyond Fishing: Shiawassee River Sparks the Imagination

By guest columnist Mike Goergen

Every morning I look out the back windows of my home and gaze upon the Shiawassee River. What a marvelous site! It captured the imagination of Writer James Oliver Curwood and also has captured mine. The Shiawassee River not only provides habitat for a number of species, and recreation for canoeing enthusiasts and fishermen, but stimulates the imaginations of many.

When my brother-in-law Bud visits my home, he always brings his fishing pole and gear. He will cast out from the riverbank on my property, hoping to catch a nice smallmouth bass. When Bud is successful, which is often, he measures the fish and promptly throws it back. This experience inspires him to wax long and loudly about the fish he has caught in the Shiawassee River, other rivers and lakes, and what it took to catch them. I listen and enjoy his stories. However, I am not a fisherman, so am not inspired to grab a pole and drop a line into the river. Indeed, during the 23 years I've lived on

Continued on page 3
Spring on the Shiawassee: Musings of a “River Liver”

By Guest Columnist Paula Alexander

My late husband and I became “River Livers” 15 years ago in April. Watching the river flow through beautiful Michigan seasons is a great pastime. When it’s chilly, the west view from the picture window is most comfortable. It’s been chilly. The textures of the branches, limbs, trunks and twigs are just starting to give way to the springy greens of new leaves and buds.

Izzy the pup and I explore the river close up, albeit in very different ways. She smells; I look. Taking her for a daily walk gets the endorphins moving, holds weight gain at bay, and helps promote a positive attitude. Nature nurtures and heals. Izzy is on a leash, and sometimes it drags behind her. The other day, her leash flew in the air when she spotted two amorous Canada geese and took chase. She followed them into the river, which was just below flood stage, the waters brown and swirling. “Izzy, COME!” I commanded, demanded, and begged as I began to take off my shoes to head in. Her attention returned to the moment instead of the chase (what would she have done had she caught them?) and she doggy paddled to the edge and up onto the shore. Catastrophe was averted. And possibly, the Canada goose population was temporarily held at bay.

I marvel at the human desire to categorize and name everything. The other day, Izzy and I stood beneath a still-leafless tree. The rat-a-tat of a woodpecker caused us to pause. Ah ha! There it is. Was it a hairy? A downy? It is hard to determine when the birds are alone. I wonder what kind of tree it is, remembering the late Owosso High School Biology Teacher, Bruce Wilson, walking through the park identifying trees while I took photographs. We took our show on the road to garden clubs. I learned a lot from Bruce and love having his book on my shelf. Owosso High School graduates still talk about Mr. Wilson’s assignment to collect different kinds of leaves. He could tell who procrastinated because they had leaves from just outside the school. Although I wasn’t a high school student of his, he commanded my respect and I called him Mr. Wilson. “Please, Paula. Call me Bruce,” he said. I paused. “Well Bruce, it’s a little like wearing your underwear backwards. I can do it but it won’t be comfortable.”

As our feet amble along the banks of the Shiawassee River, so do thoughts. I let nature nurture, feeling fortunate to have this resource accessible to so many. It’s important to remember that and respect it.
Paddling the river in Shiawassee County is a delight for recreation lovers of all skill levels. The river includes riffle zones (tiny waves and churning in the water caused by a rocky shoal or sandbar) as well as twists and turns. A supportive current boosts paddlers for most of the 41 miles.

I recommend that beginners attempt paddling when the river levels are between 2.5 feet and 4.5 feet, which is a common depth in spring, most of summer, and early fall when precipitation is more frequent. Be sure to check the United States Geological Service river gauge in Owosso prior to an outing, to ensure navigability and compatibility for skill levels. The gauge can be viewed online by visiting http://waterdata.usgs.gov/mi/nwis/nwis. Select Current Conditions, then hover over the map of Michigan and click on Shiawassee County.

To simplify use of the newly constructed canoe access points, signs on the river inform paddlers of an approaching landing and its distance from the sign. Paddlers can “parallel park” and step onto the access point ramps. When a current is involved, I prefer to pass a landing, turn around and then park in an upstream position. In high-water conditions (river level above 5 feet), the concrete sections of the landings are immersed but the gravel drive on the ramp operates effectively.

The landing at the former Shiatown Dam will be disrupted the next few years due to ongoing deconstruction of the dam and river restoration efforts. Eventually, this section of the river will likely become a very popular run for paddling enthusiasts, as it appears the river drops naturally for a considerable stretch. The site can still be used by either starting below the dam or ending a safe distance above the dam as signs indicate.

Paddlers will soon be able to refer to the Friends website (currently under construction) to learn more about the 11 canoe access points in Shiawassee County.

The Shiawassee River provides habitat for a lot more than fish. These other species, particularly those that live on land, are the ones in which I am most interested. For instance, lately I have been thinking about beaver activity in our Shiawassee River. As I said, I have never actually seen a beaver, but I have viewed suspected beaver activity along the banks of the Shiawassee River.

At first, I thought the nearly chopped down trees were the work of overzealous boy scouts. Then, reality dawned on me. I knew it had to be a beaver or two that gnawed on those trees. Isn't it nice to know the Shiawassee River is clean enough to entice beavers to stop by for lunch?

This got me thinking about beaver activity in our Shiawassee River. As I said, I have never actually seen a beaver, but I have viewed suspected beaver activity along the banks of the Shiawassee River. I observed this activity a couple of years ago while jogging along the James Miner Trail between Corunna and Owosso.

the Shiawassee River, I have not done any fishing.

You may wonder about my interest in the river, if I don't even fish in it. The truth is that the Shiawassee River provides habitat for a lot more than fish. These other species, particularly those that live on land, are the ones in which I am most interested. For instance, lately I have been thinking about beavers. I have never seen a beaver in the Shiawassee River or any other body of water. But, I read that beavers are making a comeback in the Detroit and Rouge Rivers. This seems to verify a success for the environment, because beavers cannot tolerate pollution. "This is one piece of evidence," says John Hartig of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, regarding the latest beaver sighting. "But if you add in the return of lake sturgeon, the return of lake whitefish, the return of walleye, the return of bald eagles, peregrine falcons, osprey, beaver, wild celery, it's one of the most dramatic ecological recovery stories in North America." (John Gallager, Detroit Free Press).

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Take Action! Become a Member or Volunteer

“Choosing to save a river is more often an act of passion than of careful calculation. You make the choice because the river has touched your life in an intimate and irreversible way, because you are unwilling to accept its loss.”

—David Bolling, *How to Save a River: Handbook for Citizen Action*

Members of the Friends of the Shiawassee River are more than just financial donors. For them, the river has struck a chord; it has personal value. FOSR members want to claim their places as environmental stewards and support efforts to care for, share, and help the community enjoy this vital resource. FOSR members are the backbone of our organization. They provide the financial and volunteer assistance that helps sustain our organization, and are key promoters of our efforts.

The newly formed Membership and Outreach Committee is hard at work implementing several programs designed to expand our member base and provide new benefits for current members. We will be offering discounts on area retailers’ products and services, introducing new member-exclusive events, and stepping out into the community to share our successes.

If you are not currently a member of Friends of the Shiawassee River, this is an exciting time to join. We have introduced new membership levels that make it easier than ever to become a Friend! If you already are a member and would like to become more involved, there are a number of opportunities. Decide what role you’ll take to benefit the Shiawassee River; and be sure to tell a friend! To learn more, send an email to info@shiawasseeriver.org, or call (989) 723-9062.

Sincerely,

Mike Goergen
FOSR Board Member
Membership Committee Chairperson