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# VilasCounty

## LAKES AND RIVERS ASSOCIATION

PO BOX 494 • EAGLE RIVER, WI 54521-0494

VCLRA.ORG

SUMMER 2024

Celebrating 30 Years (1994—2024)

## THE President's message

We have been busy getting ready for the annual Six-County Lakes & Rivers Meeting. As is our tradition, our VCLRA annual meeting will immediately follow the event. For a number of years, we have been jointly hosting this event with our Oneida counterpart, OCLRA. This year, it will be held on Friday, July 12<sup>th</sup> and our theme is Lakes, rivers and wetlands – we are all connected!

Last year, we had a record turnout for this event, so we're hoping to do at least as well this year! The format will be similar to last year's meeting. In addition to expert briefings on timely topics and exhibits from educational, nonprofit, and government organizations, the 2024 meeting will again feature a moderated expert panel to discuss the preservation and conservation of our waterways from many perspectives, including local initiatives. Eric Olson, director of UW-Extension Lakes, will again moderate our workshop and panel.

It should be a wonderful learning event and provide a great opportunity for meaningful discussion about issues of great importance. Please plan to come and participate; the event is free and everyone is welcome. Learn more and view the meeting agenda on the next page.

I'm also pleased that this year's Six-County Meeting will include a talk on the impact of climate on our lakes and rivers. Noah Lottig, a scientist at University of Wisconsin's Trout Lake Research Station here in Vilas County will give the presentation. Climate will have significant consequences for our waters and most certainly alter the benefits they provide in Vilas County. The issue of climate change is a complex area that deserves more attention, and we plan to devote more time on this topic in the future.

Scientists have been studying changes in our Northwood's climate over time and a striking consequence of climate change is that many lakes are experiencing shorter periods of ice cover over time. It was very noticeable this past winter here in Vilas. In Madison, where scientists have been tracking the freeze and thaw dates of their area lakes for 170 years, both Lakes Monona and Mendota had ice cover for only 44 days. These are historically short freezes! In this newsletter issue, Adam Hinterthuer of UW Center for Limnology has contributed an article that explores how changing ice cover negatively impacts walleye. We also have an update on the citizen resolutions to regulate wake boats and Vermont's ground-breaking regulation, an overview of the recent North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference and much more...

**Please continue to support our efforts by renewing or becoming a member today!** This year we celebrate VCLRA's 30th anniversary. Will you consider adding a donation of \$30 or more to your membership? Your added support will go a long way in helping us get our lake protection messages out to wider audiences. Hope to see you at Nicolet College for our Six-County event/annual meeting on July 12<sup>th</sup>!



Tom Ewing, VCLRA president

# 2024 Six-County Lakes & Rivers Meeting

Representatives from six counties came together in February and March to develop the agenda for the 2024 Six-County Lakes & Rivers Meeting, July 12, at Nicolet College in Rhinelander.

## Lakes, rivers and wetlands – we are all connected!

This theme is strongly reflected in the panel discussion, which consists of a diverse group of experts in the field of river regulation, culvert issues, wetlands, and grassroots initiatives. Keynote speakers will address concerns over PFAS contamination, and the potential impacts of climate change. In addition, Mike Engleson, Executive Director, Wisconsin Lakes Association will update us on legislative matters.

It promises to be a wonderful gathering. Come early for refreshments and conversation, and check out the exhibits.

## AGENDA

- 8:30 Refreshments/Exhibits
- 9:00 Welcome/Updates from Moderator: Eric Olson, Director, Extension Lakes
- 9:10 Wisconsin Policy Picture: Mike Engleson, Executive Director, Wisconsin Lakes
- 9:30 Climate Change Effects on Our Lakes & Rivers: Noah Lottig, Associate Scientist, Trout Lake Research Station, UW – Center for Limnology
- 10:00 PFAS Contamination of Our Surface Waters: Tom Jerow, President, Wisconsin’s Green Fire, Rhinelander
- 10:30 Break/Visit Exhibits in Commons Area
- 10:45 Panel Discussion: We’re All Connected! Experts in various fields to discuss preservation and conservation of our waterways, including local initiatives. Will also address questions and comments from audience. Panel members are:
  - Ben Niffenegger – Executive Officer, Wisconsin Valley Improvement Company Addressing: Wisconsin River Projects
  - Jim Ruwaldt – Board Member, Wisconsin Wetlands Association Addressing: Protection and Restoration of Wetlands on Private Lands
  - JoAnne Lund – Special Projects Coordinator, Oneida County Addressing: Assessing Impacts of Culverts on County Rivers & Streams
  - Norm McKindles – President, Spider Lake Association of Iron County Addressing: Turtle River Chain of Lakes– Associations Initiatives
  - Johnson Bridgwater- Water Advocates Organizer, River Alliance of Wisconsin Addressing: Grassroots Efforts Speaking Up/Clean Water Policies
- 11:30 Attendee Comments/Questions: Moderator Eric Olson, Director, Extension Lakes
- 12:00 Individual lakes or county association meetings (Breakout rooms provided)

PLEASE CHECK OUR WEBSITE FOR UPDATES AND THE LATEST AGENDA.



## Save the Dates for: 2024 Lights Out!

One of the best things about living in the Northwoods is enjoying the starry skies! Save the weekends of June 7-9 and Aug 2-4, 2024 for this voluntary Lights Out! event, and help bring awareness to the idea of darkness as a natural resource. More outreach materials are to come. For more info, contact Quita Sheehan at 715-479-3721 or [mashee@vilascountywi.gov](mailto:mashee@vilascountywi.gov). In the meantime, check out some great info on why dark skies are important: [US Fish & Wildlife Service Dark Skies Initiative](#) and [DarkSky International](#)



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# North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference

ARTICLE BY

Jamie VandenLangenberg \*




On Friday, May 3, the North Lakeland Discovery Center hosted the inaugural North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference, attracting over 100 attendees from diverse backgrounds, including landowners, neighbors, lakefront property owners, and conservation professionals.

The conference began with an invigorating morning hike through a bog, led by the center's naturalist, setting the tone for a day dedicated to environmental education and stewardship. Participants had the opportunity to attend 14 informative presentations by experts from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR), county land and water conservation departments, scientists, and various industry professionals.

Key topics included the impact of wake boats on lake ecosystems, techniques for shoreline preservation, the effects of land use changes on lake sediment, and the interpretation of sediment samples. Attendees also learned about controlling Eurasian watermilfoil using weevils, ecosystem-focused property management, and the advantages of a lake association or district.

The event fostered community engagement and collaboration, ending in an afternoon social hour where attendees could network and discuss the day's insights. The success of the conference was made possible by the generous support of sponsors and the dedicated efforts of volunteers. A special thank you goes out to all the speakers for sharing their knowledge and expertise with the audience.

Overall, the North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference was a resounding success, bringing together individuals passionate about preserving and enhancing the natural beauty and health of the North Lakeland area. 

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*\*Jamie Van, short for VandenLangenberg, is the Water Program Director at the [North Lakeland Discovery Center](#) and also is a member of the VCLRA board. She has a background in wildlife and the outdoors and has worked on various environmental projects, including managing Asian carp in Illinois and restoration ecology in Milwaukee. She can be reached at [jamie@discoverycenter.net](mailto:jamie@discoverycenter.net).*





# Missed Connections: Walleye Struggle with Changes to the Timing of Spring Thaw

ARTICLE BY

Adam Hinterthuer\*  
UW Center for Limnology

MANY LAKES ARE EXPERIENCING SHORTER PERIODS OF ICE COVER, PLUS EARLIER AND LONGER SUMMER-STRATIFIED SEASONS DUE TO CHANGING CLIMATE. CONSEQUENCES INCLUDE WARMER SUMMER WATER TEMPERATURES, CHANGES IN LAKE MIXING AND WATER LEVELS, DECLINING LEVELS IN DISSOLVED OXYGEN, INCREASED CYANOBACTERIAL ALGAL BLOOMS, AND THE LOSS OF HABITAT OF NATIVE FISHERIES. CHANGING CLIMATE ALSO IMPACTS FRESH GROUNDWATER SUPPLIES, WATER QUALITY, BIODIVERSITY, AND ULTIMATELY AFFECTS MANY OF THE ECOSYSTEM BENEFITS TO SOCIETY. VCLRA WILL BE EXPLORING CLIMATE IMPACTS IN A SERIES OF UPCOMING ARTICLES, SUCH AS THIS ONE.

Walleye are one of the most sought-after species in freshwater sport fishing, a delicacy on Midwestern menus and a critically important part of the culture of many



Photo: A. Hinterthuer  
An early spring thaw on Lake Monona in Madison, Wisconsin from February, 2024.

Indigenous communities. They are also struggling to survive in the warming waters of the Midwestern U.S. and Canada.

According to a new study published today in the journal *Limnology and Oceanography Letters*, part of the problem is that walleye are creatures of habit and our seasons, especially winter, are

changing so fast that this iconic species of freshwater fish can't keep up.

The timing of walleye spawning has historically been tied to the thawing of frozen lakes each spring, says the report's lead author, Martha Barta, a research intern at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Now, thanks to our changing climate, the species has been "unable to keep up with increasingly early and more variable ice-off dates."

Within a few days of ice-off, walleye begin laying eggs and fertilizing them. That timing, in a normal year, sets baby fish up for success once they hatch. But, according to Barta, "climate change is interrupting the historical pairing between ice-off and walleye spawning and that threatens the persistence of walleye populations across the Upper Midwest."

Barta and her team used data from walleye surveys from various state natural resource departments and the Great Lakes Indian

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Fish and Wildlife Commission, as well as spring harvest counts from several Ojibwe Tribal Nations, to track the fate of walleye populations on 194 lakes across Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. That data revealed “mismatches” in almost every single lake. While there has been a slight shift to earlier spring spawning dates for walleye, the ice-off dates on Midwestern lakes was shifting at a rate three times faster.

More and more, the timing is all wrong for walleye, explains Zach Feiner, a fisheries scientist with both the UW-Madison Center for Limnology and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

“In an average ice off year, you have this nice progression of events,” Feiner says. “The ice goes off, you get light and warmer water that creates a bloom of

small plant life called phytoplankton and then tiny animals called zooplankton emerge and eat the phytoplankton and, usually, the walleye spawning is timed for them to hatch when zooplankton are around in high abundance and can serve as fish food for the baby walleye.”

But lately, Feiner says, the timing of yearly thaws has gotten “weird.” Lakes are, on average, thawing earlier, but the number of winters where lakes thaw late is also increasing. What’s being lost are the nice, normal, “average” years when lakes thaw right about when they used to.

The problem with the “weird” years, Feiner says, is that the “progression of events is totally out of sync.” In an early ice-off year, for example, phytoplankton bloom early and begin to die back as zooplankton get going, which means there’s less food for zooplankton and their numbers are so low that “when the fish hatch, there aren’t enough zooplankton around and walleye don’t have enough food to survive,” Feiner says.

In late ice off years, there’s a similar dynamic, where everything that is supposed to flow in a nice, orderly progression gets all mixed up.

This mix up impacts walleye recruitment, or the survival of baby walleye through their first spring and summer of life.

On a year-to-year basis, this isn’t necessarily a problem, as adult walleye can always spawn again the next year, when conditions may be more favorable and more of their offspring can survive and increase the population. But, Feiner says, the heightened variability of spring thaws is “increasing the frequency of bust years and we’re not seeing many or any boom years for a lot of walleye populations.”



Zach Feiner.


While this is obviously bad news for walleye and the people who depend on them, the study underscores the need to identify and protect lakes that can offer refuge in bad years.

There is a need now to “find places where, through management of things we can control – like land use, fish harvest and invasive species – we can buffer or boost their resiliency to be able to handle stuff we can’t control – like climate change,” Feiner says. If fisheries managers can identify lakes

where walleye populations are doing relatively well, they can at least try to keep conditions optimal so that the fish can take advantage during the increasingly rare years when ice-off and their spring spawn do line up.

Then there is also the question of what our “weird” winters mean for other species of fishes.

“Most of our big time sportfish species [in the Midwest], like walleye, perch, pike, bass, bluegill and muskies spawn in springtime,” Feiner says. What’s more, other species like lake trout and whitefish spawn in the fall and their eggs overwinter under the ice.

While his team started with walleye, because of the extensive research being done on them, the next thing I want to do is start to build a bigger dataset for these other species and see if this is a general pattern or if there are species more resilient to the changes we’re seeing,” Feiner says. 

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## LET'S PROTECT OUR LAKES AND WATERWAYS

### Join VCLRA now — we're stronger together!

If you're as concerned about wake boats, short-term rentals and aquatic invasives (like Eurasian water milfoil) as we are, we hope you'll to join us to support our advocacy and education work. In fact, we need you to join us. VCLRA helps individuals and lake associations make wise decisions about their lakes and gives them a voice in preserving and protecting our unique lakes and waterways.

From its inception in 1994, VCLRA has maintained strong working relationships with the Wisconsin DNR, UW Extension, Wisconsin Lakes, and town and county officials and administrators in Vilas County. This allows VCLRA, a lake conservation and education organization, to provide the benefits below to lake associations and their members as well as individuals who do not have a lake association:

- Information and assistance on lake related problems and issues
- Biannual newsletters with insightful information addressing key challenges that impact Vilas water
- Help with forming new lake associations
- Connecting with and interacting with partner organizations and government agencies
- Assistance with and sponsorship of grant applications when an association may not qualify

VCLRA is a constructive citizen group that has earned the respect of the local and state community. Our members and partners are key stakeholders in our mission. Support us! Become a member and help protect our beautiful lakes and rivers. If you are already a member, please renew your membership today.

*Susan*

Susan Knight  
VCLRA membership director



VCLRA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. You can now join or renew your membership online at <https://vclra.org/join-or-renew/> using a credit card or check. You can also use the mail-in form on the reverse side or print the form out at <https://vclra.org/mail-in/>.



## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

We are a 501(c)(3) organization; membership fees and donations may be tax-deductible to the extent of the law  
We encourage you to join or renew online, if possible: <https://vclra.org/join-or-renew/>

Select one:  Individual or Family \$25  Lake Organization \$50  Business Associate-Supporting \$75

Will you consider adding a small donation to your membership? \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Individual or Family Membership**  New or  Renewal

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Permanent address: Street \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Ph: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you wish to receive our newsletter?  Print  Email Email alerts on lake issues?  Yes  No

Name of lake or river of residence, or enter "Off-lake": \_\_\_\_\_

Name of lake or river organization (if established): \_\_\_\_\_

Other affiliation, if any (e.g., town chairman, county commissioner, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

**Lake or River Organization Membership (Lake Associations and Districts)**  New or  Renewal

Is there a change in the organization's contact person from last year:  Yes  No

Lake or river organization name: \_\_\_\_\_

Website, if any: \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate number of individuals represented by lake or river organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Key contact person:  President/Chair  Vice-President/Vice-Chair  Secretary Other officer: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Permanent address: Street \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Ph: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you wish to receive our newsletter?  Print  Email Email alerts on lake issues?  Yes  No

Do you wish to receive additional printed copies of our newsletter to distribute? If so, how many: \_\_\_\_\_

On a separate sheet, feel free to list anyone else in your organization who should receive a copy of our newsletter directly by mail or email and/or receive email alerts.

**Associate-Supporting (Business, other non-profit)**  New or  Renewal |  Business or  Non-profit

Business or non-profit: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: Street \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_



Please make check payable to: **Vilas County Lakes and Rivers Association (VCLRA)**  
Return form with annual dues before **June 1st** to: VCLRA, PO Box 494, Eagle River, WI 54521  
Or join or renew and pay online by check or credit card at: <https://vclra.org/join-or-renew/>



# Wakeboats now regulated in Vermont; Wisconsin overwhelmingly favors restrictions in WCC poll

Reported by Tom Ewing, VCLRA

**A**fter a nearly two-year heated debate, rules restricting wakeboats on Vermont waterways are now in effect. As of April 15th, a wake boat can only operate in a wake sports zone: an area of at least 50 acres, at least 20 feet deep, 200 feet wide and 500 feet from shore.

Here in Wisconsin, participants in the annual poll by the Wisconsin Conservation Congress overwhelmingly supported statewide restrictions on wakeboats and the regulation of ballasted wakesports. Responses to the wake related questions were as follows:

Would you support the WCC and legislature creating a new statute that prohibits the use of wake boat ballast systems on Wisconsin’s lakes and rivers?

YES – 10,608 (66%)  
 NO – 4,193 (26%)  
 NO OPINION – 1,370 (8%)  
 The question passed in all 72 counties

Would you support regulations by DNR to require that all ballast systems used in boats shall have a reasonable practical means of inspecting the system to confirm that no water is retained in the system (tanks, piping, valves, etc.)?

YES – 10,016 (63%)  
 NO – 4,228 (26%)

NO OPINION – 1,771 (11%)  
 The question passed in 71 of 72 counties  
 Would you support the WCC and legislature modifying existing statutes to prohibit generation of intentionally magnified wakes for wake surfing through the use of ballast, design features, operational procedures or any other means on lakes smaller than 1500 acres and less than 20 feet deep and maintain a distance from shore and other lake users of 700 feet?

YES – 10,895 (68%)  
 NO – 3,804 (24%)  
 NO OPINION – 1,288 (8%)  
 The question passed in all 72 counties

A more in-depth article on the WCC results by Wisconsin Lakes may be found at <https://wisconsinlakes.org/all-three-wake-related-wcc-spring-hearing-questions-pass-overwhelmingly/>.

Finally, an overview of recent activity by our state legislature to regulate wakesurfing in Wisconsin was reported in an article in our winter newsletter: <https://vclra.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Summer-24-newsletter-wake-boat-update.pdf>.

**VCLRA will also keep you informed of any developments. Be sure to subscribe to our blog at [vclra.org/#news&articles](https://vclra.org/#news&articles) (it’s free) to be alerted via email when news breaks.**



# SOAR High School and Wildwood Outdoor Adventures team to cleanup a stretch of the Wisconsin River

Reported by Tom Ewing, VCLRA

VCLRA was pleased to have the SOAR Charter High School from the Northland Pines School District involved again in a river cleanup on May 21, 2024, with the support of a local business, Wildwood Outdoor Adventures. Students and teachers from SOAR paddled along a stretch of the Wisconsin River near Eagle River, Wisconsin, picking up trash as they went.



Wildwood Outdoor Adventures, which is one of the local businesses participating in VCLRA’s Northwoods Businesses for Clean Water (NBCW) initiative, again sponsored the river clean-up event. NBCW is a partnership between lake conservationists and local businesses whose livelihood

VCLRA board member Lori Brown went along for the ride and to document the event. “It was great fun and very



productive. The group gathered approximately 200 lbs. of trash that included bottles and cans, shoes and socks, a metal lawn

chair, two life vests, a propane tank, a tire, an oar, a ring of wire — A LOT!”


On a previous river cleanup outing conducted last year in the fall, much less trash was pulled from the water, although it was no less fun for the students. Ann Perry, who is a teacher leader at SOAR, indicated that the students were always happy to be involved in worthwhile projects, plus the students really enjoy this!

is directly tied to our lakes and rivers. Tom Ewing, VCLRA president, notes: “the NBCW byline is *clean waters – good for business*, a reference to Vilas County’s lakes and rivers being central to our tourist-based economy.” NBCW businesses integrate lake-friendly practices into their business operations that minimize environmental impacts.



Wildwood graciously provided free of charge the canoes, kayaks, paddles and life vests used by the SOAR HS students and staff for the river

cleanup. Jason and Nichole Bach are co-owners of Wildwood, which offers paddling and tubing on area waters, nature and wildlife tours, gear, and operates a campground.

“We’re hoping this continues to be an annual event! I think it’s wonderful to see area youth and a local business team up to help keep our lakes and rivers amazing,” Tom adds. 

## The Blue Heron Shoreland Stewardship Award

BE PART OF A GRAND TRADITION!

Do you know someone who makes a conscious effort to preserve an outstanding natural shoreline?

**We want to recognize them for their effort!**

To obtain more information about the Blue Heron Shoreline Stewardship Award program, or to make a nomination using our online form or a print-and-mail form, visit <https://vclra.org/blue-heron-program/>. Susan Knight can be reached by email at [seknight@wisc.edu](mailto:seknight@wisc.edu), or by phone at 715-892-7104.



# Mark your Calendar

VCLRA booth exhibit venues are marked with an asterisk(\*). Some events may not have firm dates as of this publication, so check online for updates.

**June 15, 2024: Lakes Fest\*** in Lac du Flambeau, WI. Contact Celeste Hockings at 715-588-4163 or [Chockings@ldftribe.com](mailto:Chockings@ldftribe.com) for more information.

**July 12, 2024: Northwoods Six-County Lakes & Rivers Conference & VCLRA Annual meeting\***. Visit [vclra.org](http://vclra.org), or contact Tom Ewing, [president@vclra.org](mailto:president@vclra.org), for more information.

**July 27, 2024: Forest Fest\***, Trees for Tomorrow in Eagle River, WI. See [treesfortomorrow.com](http://treesfortomorrow.com) for updates.

**October 5, 2024: Cran-a-rama\*** in Manitowish Waters, WI. See [manitowishwaters.org](http://manitowishwaters.org) for more information.

## REMEMBER TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!

**We're stronger together!**

Join or renew your membership online at <https://vclra.org/join-or-renew/> using a credit card or check, or use the mail-in form on pg. 7. Let's work together to protect Vilas County's waters into the future.



Remember to renew your membership!

IN THIS ISSUE:  
News about the Six-County Lakes & Rivers Meeting in July, climate change, wake boats and more!

**Lake County Journal**  
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Vilas County Lakes and Rivers Association  
[vclra.org](http://vclra.org)

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