Vilas County
LAKES AND RIVERS ASSOCIATION
PO BOX 494 • EAGLE RIVER, WI 54521-0494
VCLRA.ORG
SUMMER 2026

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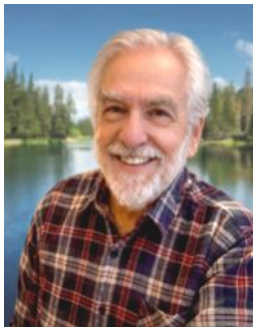
THE President's Message



Last month I had the pleasure of joining our annual Wisconsin River Cleanup, an event we're able to hold thanks to the energy of SOAR Charter High School students and the generosity of Wildwood Outdoor Adventures, which provides all the canoes, kayaks, and gear—delivered to our launch point and picked up at our destination—free of charge. I especially love this event because it brings together two core VCLRA priorities: engaging youth and partnering with local businesses to protect our extraordinary natural waters.

The SOAR students, led by science teacher and advisor Ann Perry, always show up ready to work and ready to paddle. I'll admit I felt a bit intimidated by these kids, who I suspect learned to kayak around age two. In my defense, I do own a couple of kayaks and a canoe—I just consider paddling a river a few weeks after ice-out to be slightly outside my comfort zone (pun intended).

I hope you enjoy the article about this year's cleanup. It's a light-hearted, first-person account of my day on the river, but beneath the humor is something important: once again, SOAR's students and our Northwoods Businesses for Clean Waters (NBCW) partner Wildwood delivered meaningful results for our waters.

As we head into summer, it's worth taking a moment to reflect on the broader state of our lakes. Pressures continue to grow—from invasive species and shoreline development to the impacts of heavier storms and warming waters. Yet the commitment we see from volunteers, students, lake organizations, and clean-water businesses gives me real optimism. Every action we take together helps keep Vilas County's waters healthy, resilient, and protected for the long term.

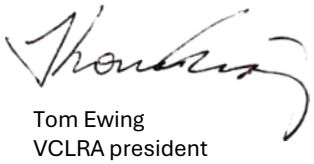
Speaking of annual events, please also mark your calendars for our next Six-County Meeting on the morning of July 17. This year brings two important changes. First, our venue has moved: Nicolet College can no longer host the July gathering, so the planning committee has secured James Williams Middle School at 915 Acacia Lane in Rhinelander—see page 3 for more info. Second, due to time constraints and, frankly, limited participation, we will no longer hold our VCLRA Annual Meeting immediately following the Six-County event. Instead, we'll host a separate annual

Continued next page

meeting later this summer—one that allows us to give proper attention to our members, our accomplishments, and our plans for the year ahead. More details will follow once arrangements are finalized.

Finally, as always, please know how deeply I appreciate your support. Whether you volunteer, share information with neighbors, support clean-water businesses, or contribute financially, you help strengthen not just your own lake, but lakes and rivers across all of Vilas County.

Thank you for being part of this community and for caring about the future of our waters. Together, we can protect what makes this place special—now and for generations to come.



Tom Ewing
VCLRA president

Protect Your Shoreland Workshop

July 23 · 10 AM · Boulder Junction Community Center

Are you interested in learning how to best maintain, improve, and protect your lake or river shoreline? Join us for this free workshop at the Boulder Junction Community Center.

Presenters include: Northwoods Land Trust, Vilas County Land & Water Department, and Vilas County Lakes & Rivers Association.

What You'll Discover:

- How to maintain water quality through shoreland best practices and restoration options
- Conservation choices for private landowners, including the basics of permanent easements
- Helpful programs and resources for new shoreland property owners and lake associations

Join neighbors and local experts to explore how caring for our shorelines keeps Vilas County's waters healthy and connected for generations to come. VISIT NORTHWOODSLANDTRUST.ORG FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO REGISTER IN ADVANCE.

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NOTE CHANGE IN VENUE — NEW LOCATION: JAMES WILLIAMS HIGH SCHOOL IN RHINELANDER

2026 Northwoods Six-County Lakes & Rivers Annual Meeting

Friday, July 17, 2026 – 8am -12:30pm

James Williams Middle School, 915 Acacia Ln, Rhinelander, WI

AGENDA

7:00-8:00am — Doors Open for Exhibits Setup

8:00-8:30 — Exhibit Booths & *Hospitality Light Refreshments*

8:30-8:40 — Welcome – Beckie Gaskill, OCLRA

8:40-9:00 — Wisconsin Lakes Update

9:00-9:30 — Oneida County Lakes Classification-JoAnn Lund, Oneida County Land & Water, Grants/ Special Projects

9:30-10:00 — What Manoomin (Wild Rice) Tells About Your Lakes Report Card-Esiban Parent, Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission

10:00-10:15 — BREAK & VISIT EXHIBITORS

10:20-10:50 — Lake Steward Program—Ted Rulseh, Pres. OCLRA

10:50-11:20 — Fisheries Classification & How to Interpret Fish Reports—John Kubisiak, DNR

11:20-11:50 — Light Pollution & Your Lakes Report Card—Michele Sadauskas, Oneida County L&W, Conservationist

11:50 — BREAKOUT SESSIONS including Last Wildnerness Alliance Wake Boat presentation, exhibitors and speakers available for individual questions/discussions

12:30 — Meeting Concludes

Sponsored By: OCLRA and VCLRA

Steering Committee Members: Amy Arlen, Tom Boisvert, Beckie Gaskill (Chair), Mary Jung, Susan Knight, Keith Montgomery, Mariquita Sheehan, Michele Sadauskas, Derek Thorn, Nancy Ver Kuilen

Article by Tom Ewing

PHOTOS BY TOM EWING AND ANN PERRY

I arrived first at Otter Rapids Dam, the roar of the turbines echoing from the river. The churning water on the west side of the dam told me the higher upstream levels would provide a current to push us steadily toward our destination, Big Rock, four miles downstream. The air was crisp — not freezing, but cold enough that I wondered what the water temperature might be. Afterall, ice-out on the Eagle River chain had been only about three weeks earlier, and my cabin would hit 29 degrees the next morning.

The Wildwood Outdoor Adventures truck pulled in, towing a trailer stacked with bright red canoes. "Are you Tom?" one of the men called out. "Yes — Tom from Vilas County Lakes and Rivers," I replied, adding, "Nippy day, but at least it's not raining." I was trying to sound upbeat, but truthfully, I was bracing for a chilly ride.

"How many this year?" he asked. "Small group — four students, Ann from SOAR Charter High School, and me." "Alright. Three canoes."

Soon Ann arrived with the students, followed by Jason, co-owner of Wildwood Outdoor Adventures. Jason greeted me, then nodded toward the dam. "Did you check it out yet?" "Pretty impressive," I said. "I was kayaking out there in January," he added casually. *January. In the Northwoods*. I tried to picture it — the open water maintained by the turbulent outflow, ice forming on the sides of his kayak. Jason's enthusiasm for rivers clearly had no off-season.

Jason's staff began unloading canoes from the double-deck trailer. "Grab a couple from the top rack," Jason

Continued next page

called out. “If we empty the bottom first, the trailer gets top-heavy. I heard of one tipping once.”

I asked whether any kayaks were available. “Nope, just canoes,” he said. Ann chimed in: “I brought my own kayak — much more maneuverable.” Ann, a science teacher and SOAR advisor, probably carried a kayak around with her everywhere.

Uh-oh. That meant I’d be solo in a two-person canoe. I had envisioned myself mostly observing and photographing, not steering a long boat alone in a current.

Jason noticed my hesitation. “Put that one back — take out a shorter canoe,” he said. Then he grabbed a cinderblock from his truck and dropped it into the bow. “There. That’ll balance you.” I must have looked surprised. “I always carry these,” he said with a grin.

I handed out contractor-grade trash bags to each boat. The students launched quickly — clearly comfortable on

the water. I, a summer-only kayaker, climbed into my canoe, noting how far away the bow felt. Jason gave me a reassuring nod and pushed me off.

The other boats were already ahead, hugging the shorelines in search of trash. I felt the light headwind as I paddled into the center of the river. With only one

paddler, I had to alternate sides constantly, but since the students were stopping frequently to check the banks, I figured I could keep up.

I pulled out my Olympus OM-5 camera — compact, weather-sealed, and perfect for this kind of trip — and began photographing the students as they worked. Each time I stopped paddling, though, the canoe twisted sideways in the current. I quickly learned that photography and solo canoeing don’t mix well.

Up ahead, boulders began to break the surface. The river narrowed and twisted. I quickly stowed the camera and focused on maneuvering. *Bump. A submerged rock nudged me sideways toward a larger boulder. I dug in with the paddle hard and slipped past it. Stay near shore, I reminded myself. Stop drifting down the middle like a tourist.*

The student canoe on the left bank was pulling far ahead. Ann stayed with the pair on the right, so I tried to keep the left-side students in sight. That proved difficult — they were fast, and I was… not.

The rapids intensified. I felt rocks scraping beneath me. Then suddenly the canoe lurched to a stop. Grounded. Completely. I looked around — no one in sight. *This is why we should’ve told everyone to stay together.*

I used the pause to pull out the printed map and check my phone’s GPS. Big Rock was still ahead — we were only

Continued next page

about two-thirds through the route. I rocked the canoe forward, inch by inch, until it finally slid free.

The river widened again, calm and straight. I checked eddies and downed trees for trapped debris but found mostly natural wood. A turtle poked its head up beside me.

My trash haul so far: two plastic bottles.

Eventually a single massive boulder appeared near the right bank — unmistakably Big Rock. A red canoe was already pulled ashore, two students sitting nearby, and the Wildwood Outdoor Adventures truck parked above them.

I paddled back upstream to look for the others. Nothing at first — then two tiny specks appeared in the distance. Good. Everyone was safe.

Cathy Higley had asked for a text when we arrived, so I let her know one student canoe and I had reached Big Rock. "On my way," she replied.

By the time I returned to shore, Cathy was greeting the students and inspecting the trash. "Some fish lures," she noted. "I want that one!" one of the girls said, holding up a large musky lure. "Those are expensive," I told her.

A student held up a heavy, corrugated plastic sign. Cathy tried to read it, but years in the river had made it illegible.

I was surprised by the volume of trash they'd collected — far more than I'd seen from my vantage point. Even the canoe that had raced ahead had gathered a respectable haul. Cathy consolidated everything into one bulging bag, and I snapped a photo of two students straining to hold it up proudly.

Ann and I compared notes about getting separated. She was surprised the students had pushed so far ahead. Cathy joined us, noting the smaller group this year. "We lost a big group of seniors to graduation," Ann said. "We'll rebuild." "So, you're in for next year?" Cathy asked. "Absolutely," Ann said. I didn't say it aloud, but I felt the same. I was already looking forward to it.

Prologue

Cathy later emailed all the partners — SOAR, Wildwood Outdoor Adventures, and VCLRA — thanking everyone and estimating about ten pounds of trash collected—an empty paint can, many bottles, shoes, fishing bobbers and lures, wrappers, and other sundry items.

Lightweight plastics are always plentiful; however, their environmental impact far outweighs their mass. The bulging bag told the real story.

I was proud of what we accomplished together — and eager to return to the river next year.

Tom Ewing is a retired Senior Scientist and former Associate Division Director at the University of Chicago's Argonne National Laboratory, where he continues to contribute as an Associate.

A part-time resident of Eagle River for close to 40 years, he has been deeply involved in lake stewardship throughout the region and currently serves as president of the Vilas County Lakes and Rivers Association (VCLRA).

He holds both an M.S. and Ph.D. in Nuclear Engineering and Engineering Physics from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he pursued research in inertial fusion.

North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference

By Abby Vogt, NLDC Woods and Water Director

North Lakeland Discovery Center hosted the 3rd annual North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference. This all-day event brought over ninety interested individuals to the Discovery Center to learn about, and discuss topics relevant to the health of our woods and waters in the Northwoods.

The event hosted seventeen different speakers, from all over the state, covering topics from forest health to environmental impacts from data centers. These presenters included researchers, natural resource professionals, and nature lovers of all types. Participants gained valuable insights about fisheries management in Northern Wisconsin, climate change impacts to our lakes, invasive species impacts to our forests, and much more. Attendees were able to ask valuable questions to each presenter and network following the event at the social hour.

The North Lakeland Discovery Center staff were able to give a quick presentation on the new boat Decontamination System. This system is high pressure-hot water trailer that has two tanks for fresh and reclaimed water. The system is used to remove aquatic species from a watercraft before leaving the landing. Watercraft can be decontaminated for free to help prevent the spread of invasive species. The decontamination system is being utilized at the Rest Lake Boat Landing on various Fridays and Saturdays throughout the summer. Below are the dates that the decontamination system will be at Rest Lake Boat Landing.

- 6/21/2026
- 6/26/2026
- 7/3/2026
- 7/24/2026
- 8/8/2026
- 8/22/2026
- 9/4/2026

NLDC is excited to host the 4th annual North Lakeland Woods and Water Conference next year on April 23, 2027. Hope to see you all there and we are excited to learn from natural resource professionals and nature enthusiasts.

Abby graduated from the University of Montana in 2022 with degrees in Environmental Studies and Sustainability, Science and Practice. She worked as a Seasonal Lake Technician for the Discovery Center in 2022, then spent two and a half years coordinating the Timberland Invasives Partnership, focusing on terrestrial invasive species in Northeast Wisconsin. Passionate about invasive species and native plants, Abby enjoys hiking, kayaking, snowboarding, and pressing plants. She is excited to return to the Woods and Water program and looks forward to expanding the program and helping property owners with restoration. We are also pleased to have Abby as a member of the VCLRA board.

Susan Knight's Field Notes

Little Rock Lake

This is a story about a small lake in Vilas County, an audacious experiment, and the results that led to national improvements in air quality.

Little Rock Lake is a seepage lake nestled in the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest that, for more than a decade, was the site of an elaborate experiment testing the effects of acid rain on soft-water seepage lakes. Seepage lakes such as Little Rock Lake do not have any streams coming in or going out -- making most of them very low in minerals — and are common in northern Wisconsin.

Field technicians deploying instrumentation buoy onto Little Rock lake. Photo credit: NEON Science - CC BY 2.0

Acid rain became a concern back in the 1970s and 80s, especially in eastern US, in places such as the Adirondack Mountains in New York. Acid rain is created when coal-fired power plants release sulfur and nitrogen compounds into the air. Those compounds react with other chemicals in the atmosphere and are converted into sulfuric and nitric acids. These acids mix with moisture in the clouds and then fall as acid rain or snow. Unfortunately, the Adirondacks were right in the crosshairs of prevailing winds coming from power plants in the Ohio River Valley and were hit hard by acid rain.

Soils and lakes have some capacity to neutralize acids, and this is known as their buffering capacity. Our stomachs also have some capacity to neutralize acids. If your stomach is overwhelmed with acid, you can take something like Alka-Selzer to neutralize it. Unfortunately, there is no Alka-Selzer you can add to a lake. Once the acid rain exhausts a lake's buffering capacity, the lake becomes highly acidic. Because of their geology and chemistry, the Adirondack soils and lakes have a very limited buffering capacity, and the acid rain overwhelmed their ability to neutralize the acid precipitation.

The Adirondack lakes were especially hard-hit by acid rain. The greater the acidity, the fewer fish species the lakes had and in highly acidic lakes, there were no fish at all. People were worried the same thing could happen here in the Midwest.

To test the vulnerability of our Midwest lakes to acid rain, scientists decided to experimentally add acid to a lake and watch what happened to the lake's plants, animals, and chemistry. When doing an experiment, it is critical to have a control, but doing so was tricky in this situation. The researchers decided they would conduct the experiment all in one lake, but that they would divide the lake in half. One side of the lake would be acidified, and the other side would act as a control. Little Rock Lake was chosen partly because it is vulnerable to acid rain but also because it is hour-glass-shaped and could be easily divided with a curtain at the narrows.

You may remember from high school chemistry that a low pH means that something is more acidic. In the Little Rock Lake experiment, researchers added acid

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to lower the pH in three steps; the pH was first lowered by a half pH unit for two years, then another half pH unit for two years and finally another half pH unit for two years. In the end, the pH of the lake matched the pH of the rain in our area, or 4.6. How did scientists acidify the lake? Technicians drizzled acid from a hose trailing out the stern of a boat, and then sped around to mix the acid evenly through the lake.

Little Rock Lake in the summer. Photo credit: NEON Science - CC BY 2.0

As in the Adirondack lakes, fish living on the acidified side of Little Rock Lake were hit hard. The youngest fish were most vulnerable, and some fish species were unable to successfully reproduce. Zooplankton, the microscopic shrimp-like creatures fed on by fish fry and minnows, were also affected. The acidic side of the lake was also clearer, which created billowing clots of algae near the bottom.

The study also found that mercury levels were much higher in fish when the pH was at its lowest levels. The increased acidity encouraged the growth of acid-loving bacteria. As a byproduct of their metabolism, these bacteria converted mercury into a chemical form that could enter the food web. The mercury became more concentrated as it moved up the food web and into the fish we like to eat. Mercury is toxic and high mercury levels are responsible for warnings about eating fish from many of our lakes.

So, was it worth it? The study at Little Rock Late resulted in more than 100 papers, encouraged an international dialog, and ultimately led to congressional action and a decrease in acid rain. The results showed that Wisconsin lakes are susceptible to acid rain and established clear connections between lake chemistry, acid rain, fish reproduction, and mercury contamination. Several of the scientists testified in front of Congress, supporting both the Clean Water Act of 1987 and the Clean Air Act in 1990. Since these congressional actions, the acidity of the rain has decreased, and the threat of acid rain has lessened — quite a legacy for a quiet little Northwoods lake!

For Field Notes, this is Susan Knight of the University of Wisconsin's Trout Lake Station.

Susan Knight is an Honorary Fellow, retired aquatic biologist and researcher at University of Wisconsin-Trout Lake Station Center for Limnology. She has worked on many aspects of lake ecology, with an emphasis on aquatic plants. She also serves as a board member of VCLRA where she is very engaged as an educator, spokesman and technical advisor.

Field Notes commentary is regularly featured on WXPR. Susan can be reached at seknight@wisc.edu.

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, or by phone at 715-892-7104.

Know Your Lake in Real Time

By Noah Lottig*

Temperature is one of the most basic characteristics of lakes. It influences when oxygen becomes scarce, how fish find habitat, when conditions may favor toxic algae growth, and when lakes mix. With high-frequency data, we can capture patterns that most other sampling misses — from daily warming and cooling cycles to rapid changes following storms.

Across North America, and around the world, thousands of lakes define our landscapes and sustain our communities. However, only a small fraction of lakes are monitored and most collect just a few samples each year, leaving big gaps in our understanding of how lakes respond to weather, climate, and human activity. When hundreds of lakes are monitored together through shared technology, we can see regional and even continental patterns that no single site can reveal.

DockSenslQ is a low-cost, dock-mounted temperature sensor designed for citizen science and community-based lake monitoring. It records water temperature every hour and streams the data in real time to a simple web app viewable on your phone or computer.

By installing DockSenslQ, lake associations, schools, researchers, and individual stewards can help build a network of high-frequency lake temperature data — creating a shared resource that supports both local decision-making and global freshwater research.

Affordable and Accessible

Operating a reliable citizen-science network requires both equipment and digital infrastructure. Your purchase not only covers your sensor and its data connection — it helps sustain the servers, databases, and visualization tools that make these data accessible to everyone.

In other words, your contribution directly supports the collection, management, and sharing of critical environmental information, while providing personal, real-time insight into your own lake.

Hardware cost: Starting at $150 (one-time purchase)

Data service: Starting at $84/year for real-time transmission and online access

No technical expertise is required — simply mount the sensor on your dock, connect the sensor to wifi, and start exploring your lake in real time.

From Citizen Science to Global Insight: Data from DockSenslQ sensors will be:

- Used by scientists to understand temperature patterns, stratification, and the conditions that precede algae blooms.
- Archived in public repositories for long-term access by researchers, managers, and citizens.

By participating, you join a growing movement to make lakes around the world more transparent, connected, and understood — one dock at a time.

For more information, visit www.aquasens.io.

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*Noah is an Associate Research Scientist and Site Manager with the North Temperate Lakes Long-Term Ecological Research Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison Center for Limnology. With nearly two decades of experience in aquatic ecosystem research, he leads the Lottig Lab's efforts to integrate advanced monitoring technologies with long-term ecological science at Trout Lake Station in Boulder Junction, Wisconsin.

Noah has a Ph.D. in Limnology and Marine Science from the University of Wisconsin.

VilasCounty LAKES AND RIVERS ASSOCIATION

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

We are a 501(c)(3) organization; membership fees and donations may be tax-deductible.
We encourage you to join or renew online at: https://vclra.org/join-or-renew/ — it saves us work!

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: No. & Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Email Address: _____ Ph: _____

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.): _____

You will automatically be subscribed to electronic news alerts and newsletters, which can be canceled by clicking the unsubscribe link. Please forward this link https://vclra.org/subscribe to others in your family you wish to also receive electronic email alerts and newsletters.

Comments: _____

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

Lake or river organization name: _____ Website, if any: _____

Approximate number of individuals represented by lake organization: _____

Key point-of-contact: ___ President/Chair ___ Vice-President/Vice-Chair ___ Secretary Other officer: _____

Contact Name: _____ Email Address: _____ Ph: _____

Permanent Address: No. & Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

President (if not POC): Name: _____ Email Address: _____ Ph: _____

Permanent Address: No. & Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

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Comments: _____

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

Business or non-profit name: _____ Contact name: _____ Email: _____

Permanent Address: No. & Street _____ City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Email Address: _____ Ph: _____ Website: _____

Please forward this link https://vclra.org/subscribe to others in your organization you wish to receive electronic email alerts and newsletters. The point-of-contact listed above will automatically receive our electronic communications, which can be canceled by clicking the unsubscribe link.

Comments: _____

Please make check payable to: **Vilas County Lakes and Rivers Association (VCLRA).** If you process your membership on line but want to pay by check instead of credit card, include a copy of your emailed membership acknowledgement with your check, or write the name of your organization on the check memo field, and mail to: **VCLRA, PO Box 494, Eagle River, WI 54521**. We encourage you to join or renew online at: https://vclra.org/join-or-renew/, or return this form with annual dues to our address above.

Mark your Calendar

FOR THESE UPCOMING EVENTS

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 28, 2026: St. Germain Independence Day Celebration*, in St. Germain. Contact Lois Ruediger at 715-542-2881, or email businessconnection155@gmail.com for more information.

July 17, 2026: Northwoods Six-County Lakes & Rivers Conference*. Visit vclra.org, or contact Tom Ewing, president@vclra.org, for more information.

July 23, 2026: Protect Your Shoreline Workshop. 10 AM at Boulder Junction Community Center. Visit northwoodslandstrust.org for more information.

August 1, 2026: Lakes Fest* in Lac du Flambeau, WI. Contact Melinda Walker at 715-588-4213 or melinda.walker@ldftribe.com for more information.

July 25, 2026: Forest Fest* in Eagle River. Visit www.treesfortomorrow.com for details.

September 19, 26: Harvest Festival* in Manitowish Waters, WI. For more information, visit www.ManitowishWaters.org, or call the Manitowish Waters Chamber of Commerce at 714-543-8488.

Remember to renew your membership!

vclra.org

Vilas County Lakes and Rivers Association

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