

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Welcome Back!

By Susan Songster-Weaver

For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Young anglers Becca and Jesse enjoy fishing for bluegills in a cleaner lake.

Kayaking slowly up the lakeshore, my spirits soared higher and higher with each rhythmic rise and fall of my paddle. Fishermen, boaters and water skiers had returned to the bay. Houses normally empty, now bustled with busy, smiling people who waved and shouted greetings as I glided by. Dusty, cobwebby docks, stacked in weed-covered piles for years, now stretched out from the breakwalls like long bony fingers. Playful dogs pranced about and barked at the joyful screams of children splashing each other as they swam and played in the clear, warm water. Brown-headed female mallards bobbed close to shore carefully guarding their clutches of small ducklings. “Welcome back,” I thought, “Welcome back!”

In Burtis Bay, for the first time in nearly a decade, I could see the bottom of the lake. The seedy, lime-green algae was gone and as were the huge clumps of Eurasian Water milfoil (*myriophyllum spicatum*), which had nearly choked out all the other aquatic vegetation in past years. It grew to the surface and lopped over, covering the area with a dense canopy, thick enough in some spots to allow herons and ducks to virtually “walk on water.” But, at the end of last summer, we knew something dramatic was happening in the bay even though we could not see it.

Along our breakwall, enormous quantities of stringy floaters had been washing in – long stems devoid of leaves. We hoped the milfoil was taking a beating, but never expected the exotic nuisance to be knocked out. What was causing this change? On the leafless stems we noticed some insect casings. Then, after talking to a few people, including some scientists, it was determined that the casings were those of Caddice or Caddis Fly larvae.

Caddis Flies are moth like aquatic insects, indigenous to our area. Mostly dull brown, Caddis Flies have long antennae and hairy wings that fold like a roof over their abdomen. Caddis worms or larvae look a little like caterpillars and are food for many freshwater fishes. When used for bait by fishermen, they are called creepers. The larvae build and inhabit underwater cases or nets like the ones we saw on the milfoil stems. Caddis Flies are valuable to freshwater ecosystems. Not only are they an important food for fish, they

help clean the water by feeding on plant and animal debris. (<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/caddis+fly>) And now, it looked like the Caddis Fly might be very valuable to Chautauqua Lake in the war against Eurasian Water milfoil.

In recent conversations with Robert Johnson, of Cornell University, I learned that the fall of the milfoil might not have been the result of a singular effort on the part of the Caddis Fly larvae. From his careful observations and studies on the lake, it looks like a trio of weed-eating insects might have tag-teamed against the milfoil in this battle. Bob believes that “the Caddis Fly larvae did the final damage to the water milfoil in Burtis and should receive top billing,” but their munching was most effective because “the indigenous weevil and some moths (had) severely damaged the plants last spring and summer before the Caddis Fly larvae finished them off.” Wow! A team effort and another lesson we can learn from nature.

To me, this is wonderful news, but I am cautiously optimistic about the insects being the only silver bullet in our belt as we fight this pesky invader. Ten years is a long time to wait for nature to work her magic. And, even though it appears that “all is well with the lake,” we know from experience that the milfoil can quickly rear its ugly head and counter attack with a vengeance. Some experts believe once the milfoil establishes itself in a body of water, it is almost impossible to eradicate (lakeaccess.org/erasian/watermilfoil.html). So, with that in mind, what can we do to maintain and continue the milfoil-free atmosphere we now enjoy in the lake? We can educate ourselves, be pro-active, and open-minded about other tools available for weed control.

Milfoil spreads mostly by stem fragmentation. These broken stems float away, sprouting roots in the nutrient rich lake water, and then drop to the bottom to grow a new plant. Educate yourself, be able to identify the floaters and remove them whenever possible. When you see an established milfoil colony, try to remove the weeds or inform people who can, like the Chautauqua Lake Association. Support efforts to stop erosion and sedimentation with the planting of trees and other vegetation along the banks of our lake and feeder streams. Be an active participant in this war or the milfoil will re-establish itself in a heartbeat.

With that said, I’m ready to get off my soapbox, shut down my computer, and put on my bathing suit. The sun is shining, the lake is smooth and clear and there’s fish to catch, kayaks to paddle and a pair of water skis that need to get wet. Enjoy the rest of the summer and be sure to tickle your toes in the lake ‘cuz this year, the water’s fine! And...welcome back!