



# TWIN LAKES NEWS

• MAINTAIN • PROTECT • ENHANCE

• FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

• EDUCATION • COOPERATION

SUMMER, 2019

TLPA NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 25, NO. 2

## Lake Levels are High!

All we have to do is look around to see the evidence of the high water levels in our three lakes. People have had to raise or extend docks. We see lots of drowned trees around the margins. And some of us may be concerned about erosion of the banks. The channel between South and Middle is so wide that at this point Middle Lake is more like a long bay of South rather than a separate water body. Beaches and points have receded.

There are both pros and cons to higher lake levels. A benefit is that fish habitat is probably improved since the dying trees provide natural “fish sticks.” The deeper water means that boats are less likely to encounter hazards to moving about. Among the down sides are the expense of maintaining docks and the threat of bank erosion. However, since most of the land around us is sloped, actual damage to homes and sheds is less likely than in some places. For example, Pigeon Lake in nearby Bayfield County has experienced radical fluctuations because it is fairly shallow and the banks are pretty flat. Recently County N had to be closed from flooding but a few years ago the lake was so small that people couldn’t launch their boats. There was an interesting feature about this recently on Wisconsin Public Radio: <https://www.wpr.org/high-lake-levels-wisconsin-leave-some-nearby-properties-and-roads-underwater>



Since the Twin Lakes are seepage lakes, the water level rises and falls based on three factors: precipitation, run-off, and groundwater levels. For us, the connection between ground water and lake levels is quite close, since we sit squarely in the Northwest Sands ecosystem. We know the groundwater level is high from the size and extent of the various vernal pools all around.

Lake levels have fluctuated greatly over the years. It was around 10 years ago that the levels were so low that someone (your editor!) could step across the channel between South and Middle and no water flowed through the culvert between North and Middle. In 2018, the Department of Natural Resources measured North Lake at 98.3 acres and South at 106.1. Does anyone have comparative size data for earlier periods? Please share your lake level stories and observations for future newsletters! (e-mail [patriciashifferd@gmail.com](mailto:patriciashifferd@gmail.com))

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## President's Message

Since publishing my e-mail address in the last Twin Lakes News, I received messages from several readers hoping that the Twin Lakes Preservation Association (TLPA) could take some kind of action regarding flagrant shoreline wake violations, drunken boating incidents, grossly excessive noise, and other worrisome activities. The TLPA has no enforcement authority and promotes responsible behavior primarily through education. I generally encourage that you try to speak in a neighborly way to those whose activities cross a line. I've found that a reminder is often all it takes, that most are receptive, and some individuals just weren't aware. Yet sometimes speaking directly is not possible, timely, or even advisable. Activities that blatantly violate statutes or ordinances on the water should be reported to WI DNR Conservation Warden Jon Hagen at 715-635-4099 or 1-800-TIP-WDNR. Disturbances of the peace, dangerous activities on the roadways, and the like should be reported to the Washburn County Sheriff's office at 715-468-4720 or (as appropriate) 911. Please do your part and speak up when it is necessary. It is most beneficial for those in authority to hear from more than just a single reporter.

On the flip side, kudos to those boaters and PWC operators who stopped high-power enjoyment of the lakes promptly at the 5:00 PM No-Wake time on some days of the long July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration. While not all operators followed suit, your neighborliness was noted and appreciated by those who relish quiet hours.

I also extend appreciation to the pilot and passengers of a powerful inboard powerboat observed several times traveling at true Slow No-Wake minimal trolling speed during quiet hours. I hope your conscientious actions were also noted by others.

Stuart Braem, President (Stuartbraem@gmail.com)



## Annual Meeting August 3

Chicog Town Hall, 9:30-11:30

Social Time 9:30-10:00: A good time to catch up with friends & neighbors.  
Program & business to follow

Guest for the program is Phil Sylla, President of Washburn County Lakes & Rivers, who will be speaking about WCLRA's participation in the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, Washburn County property taxes on lake shore property, building a strong relationship with your Town Board, and the Northwest Wisconsin Lake Conference in Hayward on June 21. He also wants to hear our concerns.

## Is It a Muskrat or an Otter?

There are several mammals that spend much or most of their time in our northwoods lakes and streams. The most common are the muskrat, otter, and beaver. Of these, we here at Twin Lakes have the first two—muskrat and otter. As far as I know, we never had a beaver lodge here; their preferred habitat is rivers and streams, the edges of which they use to access the building material for their lodges.

But muskrats are always here and otters visit us occasionally. While these two animals may look similar if seen in the water, they are actually very different in size, habits, and diet.

Muskrats are not really “rats” at all, being from the genus *Ondatra*, not *Rattus*. An adult muskrat is around 2 feet long, half of which is the tail, and weighs somewhere around 3 pounds. They spend most of their time in the water with layered brown fur. This fur protects them from cold water. They can spend around 15 minutes under water without coming up to breathe! Their hind feet are semi-webbed but the tail is the main way they move through the water. They may appear brown, tan, or reddish, and their tails are often visible as they swim. Sometimes they even seem to doze in a stationary spot with much of their body and tail visible.

They live in all the freshwater habitats our northern woods has to offer: wetlands, lakes, rivers, and ponds. They mostly eat plants, particularly cattails and water lilies, with an occasional treat of a small animal like a frog or fish.

Muskrats, like beavers, build their homes. A muskrat home is usually a burrow into the bank of the lake with an underwater entrance. Or if you see a large mound near shore but it's made of cattails and other vegetation rather than sticks, it's probably a muskrat “push-up” and not a beaver lodge. There have often been muskrat push-ups near the culvert on the north side of Middle Lake. Here a breeding pair and their young hang out, coming out in the evening to forage for their meals throughout the night until dawn, munching on aquatic plants. They do not store food for the winter, but continue to be active under the ice. While they do have natural predators, the fact that a female can have three litters a year serves to counteract this. They are able to live even in fairly polluted water, fortunately not a problem for our muskrat population. However, like many animals the muskrat population appears to go through cycles; in the muskrat's case this is about 10 years.



## Otters or Muskrats? (continued)

Otters are much bigger than muskrats, weighing around 25 pounds with a long streamlined body around 3 feet long. Their feet are fully webbed allowing them to move quickly and gracefully



through the water. Otters are quite dark and generally appear almost black. As otters swim and dive about, it's only their heads that we usually glimpse. They will, however, sometimes lift their necks and even full forequarters straight up and "bark" at you as a warning to stay away. In the winter, you may be fortunate to see an otter running along the lake, stream or road edge, moving in a distinctly humping style and occasionally sliding.

They are great travelers, especially during the spring, summer and fall. Each day the otter social group will move around 3 or more miles. These groupings are either an adult female and her offspring or a group of males. Otters are celebrated for their playfulness, especially the young. In winter it is sometimes possible to see the track they leave as the slide across the snow.

Fish are the main staple of their diet. Diving for fish they move quickly through the water, staying under for maybe 4 minutes at a time. Small fish are eaten in the water, but large fish will be dragged to the bank. Then they dry off their fur, by rolling on the ground or rubbing on logs. Other less common food sources are crayfish, frogs, even insects.

Like the muskrat, otters live in dens dug into the banks of the lake or stream. But apparently otter are squatters, taking over dens built by other animals, like woodchucks, red fox, beaver or muskrats. The females will take up residence in an available den to bear and raise her pups.

Like many animals, otters mark their territory by using scent from their feces, urine and musk. This smelly mess is called a spraint. This summer, such markings have been found on both North and South Lakes. However, actual sightings are fairly rare; while kayaking recently on North Lake Bette Braem saw an otter swimming. Hopefully, others of us will actually get to see them. Most of the time when we see a swimming mammal, it is a muskrat.

Both muskrats and otters can be trapped, although the regulations and permitting for this are very different for the two. Generally, trapping can occur in the winter; while there is no limit on the number of muskrat that can be trapped, otter trapping is severely limited to one otter per region. The reasons for this are obvious, since the population sizes of the two species differ very greatly. Otters are much less common and their habitat has declined much more.

Finally, there is one other mammal commonly seen on or in the waters of our lakes, namely humans, *Homo sapiens*. Of course, we are a good deal less furry than our muskrat and otter companions. Happy swimming and fishing!! Enjoy the water this summer.

## Taxes and Lakes

Boring subject maybe but perhaps of interest? Washburn County Lakes & Rivers Association recently completed an analysis of the contribution of lake properties to the budgets of local agencies which are supported by property taxes. The taxes we pay on our property goes to Chicog Town, Washburn County, Spooner School District and Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College. The rate of taxation (the mil rate) is the same for both lake and non-lake property owners and is based on the assessor's use of comparable values. The more valuable the property, the higher the taxes. But towns in Washburn County vary greatly in the percentage of property tax paid by lake owners vs. non-lake owners, since some towns have more lake property than others.

Not surprisingly, Chicog Town is toward the high end in the percentage of total taxes paid by lake owners. Almost 73% of the property taxes in Chicog Town are paid by those of us who live on lakes. The average paid by the 672 lake owners was \$1980 while the average paid by the 1044 non-lake owners was \$480.

## Our Lake Levels (Continued)

Recent precipitation history and climate models suggest that lake levels may remain high for some time to come; some have even suggested that the levels we see now may be the "new normal." The Wisconsin State Climatological Office has interesting data about precipitation here in NW Wisconsin and elsewhere. This agency defines "normal" as the average over the period of 1981-2010. Using this standard our region had above average precipitation in 8 of the 12 months from June '18-May '19. In addition, precipitation levels were above normal for 7 of the 8 years from 2010-2018. And all the models of climate change predict that the Upper Midwest will be subject to increased precipitation and more frequent extreme flooding events; the last few years have, of course, born this out.

So only time will tell what our lakes will look like in the years to come.

***THE MISSION OF THE TWIN LAKES PRESERVATION ASSOCIATION IS TO MAINTAIN, PROTECT, AND ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF THE LAKES AND SURROUNDING AREA FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS. WE WILL ACCOMPLISH THIS BY EDUCATION AND THE COOPERATIVE EFFORTS OF OUR MEMBERS AND THE PEOPLE OF THE SURROUNDING AREA.***

Coming in the Fall newsletter:

- Zebra mussel and water quality update
- Loon nesting this summer
- Ice on-off data

**TWIN LAKES PRESERVATION ASSOCIATION  
P.O. BOX 410  
MINONG, WI 54859**

**TO:**



**Join the Lake Association? Why On Earth Not?** We monitor lake water quality, provide important information via three newsletters a year, publish a free Handbook of Best Practices for lake property owners, and have fun together at the Summer Social and Annual Fall Meeting. Dues are only \$25.00 a year. To join, fill out the form below and mail with a check to TLPA, Box 410, Minong WI 54859. And thanks!

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Your Lake \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Lake Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Lake Phone \_\_\_\_\_