

COON CREEK COMMUNITY WATERSHED COUNCIL



WATERSHED MOMENTS VOL. 3



September wildflowers bloom along Coon Creek’s mainstem. Photo: Caroline Gottschalk



About this document: This annual report features watershed highlights from 2024, as well as a summary of the CCCWC’s 2024 financial position. Unless otherwise noted, material was developed and compiled by Sydney Widell, with editorial guidance from the CCCWC board and general membership.

Cover: July 2024 CCCWC meeting attendees head out to pasture on a golden hour wagon ride at Highland Farm.

Accent Artwork: Gabrielle Whisler

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From the President



CCCWC President Nancy Wedwick delivers a State of the Watershed address at the Sept. CCCWC celebration.

Dear Watershed Community,

We had a very successful year. Thanks to the work of our volunteers, friends, and partners, we accomplished goals set at strategic planning meetings.

One of our goals was to complete on the ground practices. We are excited to achieve that goal with the help of the largest portion of our funding. We also held several events to create awareness and educational opportunities about conservation, and the economic development and community resilience that flows from it.

This year we have many opportunities before us. We look forward to continuing to implement on the ground practices to improve and restore our soil, water, and air. We also look forward to continuing our legacy of conservation leadership through awareness and educational events.

As our historian recently stated, we plant seeds, and we never know where they may take route and flourish. We are excited to see the efforts of conservation flourish in our watershed community.

— Nancy Wedwick

LEARNING TO MAKE RUNNING WATER WALK

The CCCWC draws inspiration from the myriad conservation traditions that span cultures and generations in the place presently known as the Coon Creek Watershed. Soil conservation efforts made by the Haugen family are an important part of this legacy. As some of the earliest adopters of the novel farming techniques developed in Coon Valley during the national soil conservation movement centered here in the 1930s, the Haugens advanced and refined practices, like terracing and contour farming, that remain critical to reducing soil erosion and flooding in the Coon Creek Watershed.

Ernest Haugen was a child in the 1930s, when his family first began experimenting with soil conservation practices on their farm. When Ernest's teacher asked him about their projects, Ernest famously replied that they were "learning to make running water walk."

Nearly 90 years later, Coon Creek Watershed grazer Jim Munsch recounted this story at the CCCWC's very first meeting, and it continues to guide our watershed council's work. This project—learning to make running water walk; and also, learning to *walk with water*—is ongoing.

From the dam decommissionings poised to alter our hydrology at a basin scale, to the climatic shifts upending ways of life worldwide, this moment feels precarious for many reasons. But the Coon Creek Watershed has faced challenges before. Ernest Haugen grew up at a time when soil erosion from intensive agriculture was so severe, cows disappeared into gullies, and rivers, as one-time Coon Creek-based conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote, were "washing the future into the sea."

Today, Coon Creek residents point to the vision and audacity of the Haugens and countless others who stared up at their eroding hillsides and came together to address the problem, and to the beautiful example their work continues to offer.

Our thanks & acknowledgements



Our members and volunteers

Our members and volunteers are the heart of the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council. Volunteers created this grassroots organization from their desire to better care for Coon Creek's lands and waters. From the start, this has been a community-led effort, involving all facets of the community—its landowners, producers, business owners, and more, all dedicated to creating good lives in the Coon Creek Watershed.

Our volunteers have opened up their homes to host meetings, generously shared their skills, knowledge, and ideas, stepped up to plan our events, and so much more. Most of all, their dedication to CCCWC's core value of inclusion drives the culture of this group. We are so grateful for the time, hard work, and heart our volunteers have poured into this organization over the last years.

Coon Creek Watershed farmers and producers

The watershed's farmers are on-the-ground conservationists. We are inspired by the way they put words into action every day through practices that increase water infiltration, cultivate healthy soils, increase biodiversity, and more.

In 2024, they shared their expertise on managed grazing, cover cropping, agroforestry, and other conservation practices with each other and with attendees at our CCCWC meetings. We owe our thanks to them for doing all that they can to make running water walk in the Coon Creek Watershed..

Our partners and sister councils

In 2024, we were grateful for the support and friendship of our federal, state, county, and non-profit partners, who have provided guidance to us on grant applications, helped us build relationships with a wide range of farmers and other conservation leaders, and shared their time at CCCWC meetings.

We also wish to recognize our sister watershed councils in the Bad Axe, Tainter Creek, and Rush Creek Watersheds, who inspire us with their different approaches to conservation and watershed organizing. We are grateful to learn and grow with you, and for the continual reminder that we are all part of and connected by larger watersheds.

This land and the people who have long cared for it:

The area we presently know as the Coon Creek Watershed spans the current and ancestral homelands of the Ho-Chunk, Kickapoo, Santee Dakota, Sauk, and Meskwaki.

The rise of settler agriculture, which unfolded in concert with U.S. attempts to remove the people indigenous to this region, initiated the cycles of flooding, erosion, and sedimentation that continue to play out in the Coon Creek Watershed. Any work to address these ongoing ecological crises must begin by confronting their roots in the ongoing dispossession of Native lands, and by deferring to and learning from the leadership of the people native to them.

Our own work is made possible, in part, by funding from the Ho Chunk Nation, granted to us by Vernon County in 2021. Vernon County receives and reallocates revenue from the Ho Chunk Nation, in accordance with the Ho Chunk Nation's gaming compact with the State of Wisconsin.



**VISION: "A
WATERSHED
NURTURED,
CHERISHED, &
FLOURISHING."**



CCCWC members lead a managed grazing demonstration at Highland Farm during the July 2024 CCCWC meeting.

About the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council

The Coon Creek Community Watershed Council (CCCWC) is a nearly entirely volunteer-run non-profit dedicated to caring for our watershed's soil, water, air, and communities. We were founded in 2021, and we are based in the Upper Mississippi River Basin.

It's not lost on us that, 90 years ago, the valley where we got our start was the same place Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers camped while they helped carry out the first watershed conservation project in the nation.

In the 1930s, Coon Creek residents facing overwhelming and intertwined soil erosion and flooding crises collaborated with the CCC, as well as state, federal, and university partners, to develop

what are now widespread soil conservation practices—practices like contour farming, terracing, and adjusting land use intensity to the slopes of the hills.

Many of these practices continue across the watershed, marking our community's long-term commitment to conservation.

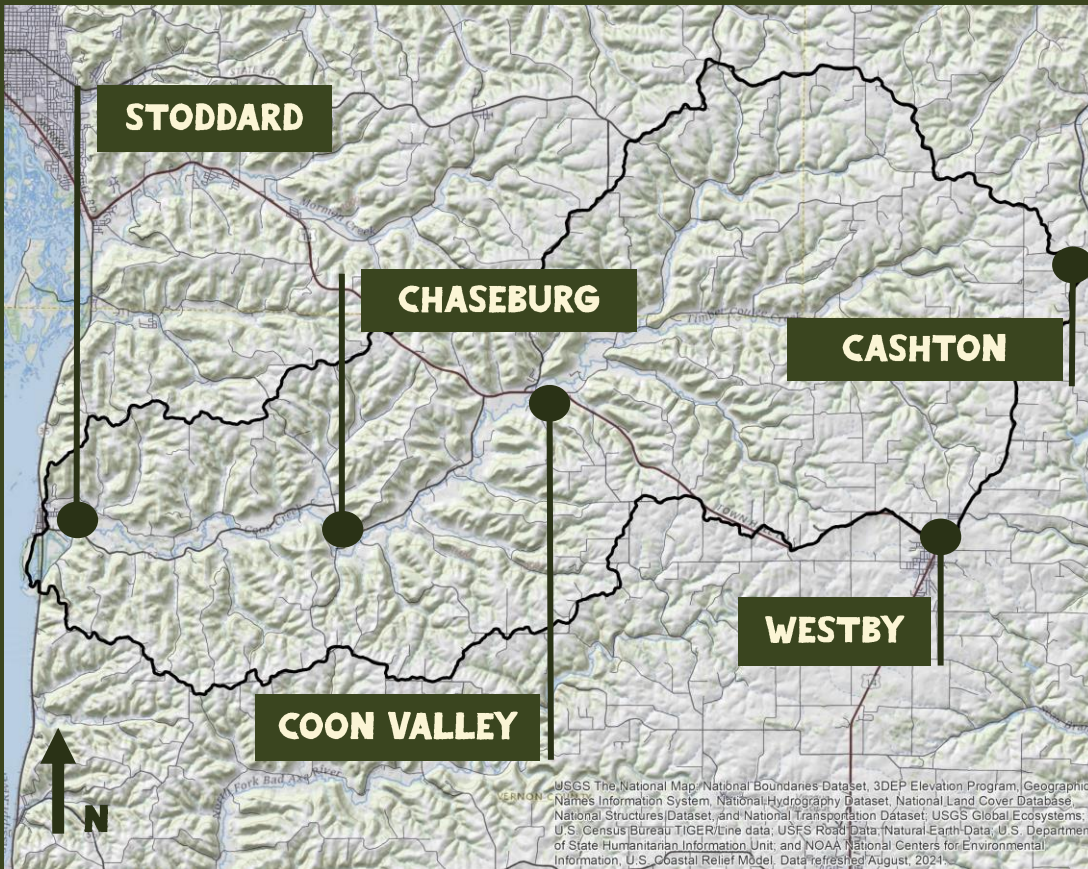
But we know there is more work to be done, and that, as we face increasingly severe floods and droughts, this work is more urgent than ever.

CCCWC's diverse membership comes together around a shared interest in learning to live well with floods, as well as shared hopes for good lives in a thriving Coon Creek Watershed.

Our approach to conservation is guided by the lessons in cooperation and experimentation watershed residents learned during the 1930s.

The CCCWC believes that efforts to care for our watershed community are rooted in the relationships linking people to each other and to land and water, from the ridgetops to the valleys, and across generations.

Our organization is committed to building community around sound land and water conservation practices, supporting producers and other landholders in implementing those practices, and cultivating awareness and wonder for the complex ways water connects us all.



MISSION: "TO CONTINUE THE HISTORIC LEGACY OF CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP THROUGH IMPROVING AND RESTORING OUR SOIL, WATER, AND AIR AS STEWARDS OF THE COON CREEK WATERSHED."

Our members

Our members are farmers, conservationists, educators, writers, entrepreneurs, and more, united by our love for the Coon Creek Watershed and our pride in its conservation history. In 2024, the CCCWC was 102 members strong.

Becoming a CCCWC member is **free and easy**. You may fill out a membership form on our website or at a CCCWC General Meeting.

Membership offers a voice in protecting and shaping the future of this historic and beautiful watershed.

Our funding

CCCWC, Inc. is a 501-(c)(3) non-profit. This means we operate as a **charitable organization** and may **not** attempt to influence policy or benefit private interests. Our work is made possible through grants, donations, and partnerships.



Toby Lee and Joan Greendeer Lee host a forest management workshop as part of the June 2024 CCCWC meeting.



Our board

CCCWC Board members are elected and serve the council on a voluntary basis. Our 2024 board included the following:

Nancy Wedwick President	Ashley Olson Events Planning
Tucker Gretebeck Vice President	Tim Hundt Public Relations
Maggie Traastad Secretary (Jan-May)	Matthew Canter Arts Programming
Monique Hassman Secretary (May-Dec)	Kevin Traastad Crop Specialist
Eric Weninger Treasurer	Zach King Conservation Liaison
Marc Moilien Historian	

Three seats on our board will open in Spring 2025, and we encourage and welcome applications from anyone with a vested interest in the Coon Creek Watershed. Visit our website for more information about board elections.



Taking note: CCCWC Secretary Monique Hassman records minutes at the July 2024 CCCWC meeting.



Our collaborators

We are thankful for direct and indirect support from the following:

Bad Axe Watershed Stewards • Coon Valley Business Association • The Coon Valley Conservation Club • Coulee Region Trout Unlimited • Explore La Crosse • Hill Country Watershed Alliance • La Crosse, Monroe and Vernon County Conservation Departments • The Nature Conservancy • The Natural Resources Conservation Service • River Alliance of Wisconsin • The Rural Climate Partnership • Rush Creek Conservation Watershed Council • Tainter Creek Farmer-Led Watershed Council • U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service • UW-La Crosse • UW-Madison • UW Extension & Extension Lakes • Valley Stewardship Network • WI Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection • WI Department of Natural Resources • WI Land and Water, & many more.

Above: The sun sets over the July CCCWC meeting at Highland Farm, in the headwaters of the Coon Creek Watershed.

Left: CCCWC member Jim Munsch talks agroforestry with The Nature Conservancy's Ricardo Costa Silva at the June CCCWC meeting.

2024 Financial Report

In 2024, CCCWC was funded by \$95,000 in grants from the WI Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), the WI Department of Natural Resources (DNR), The Rural Climate Partnership (RCP), The Nature Conservancy, and Explore La Crosse. Our grants were supported by matches from CCCWC’s producers, county partners, and volunteers, continued grant support from UW-Extension, as well as more than \$20,000 in donations and sales throughout the year.

End of Year Summary*

Total Grant Credits	\$95,000.00
Grants receivable	\$24,317.54
Total Donations/Sales Credits	\$20,727.12
Net Credits	\$140,044.66
Total Expenses	\$91,119.94
Closing Balance	\$83,181.07

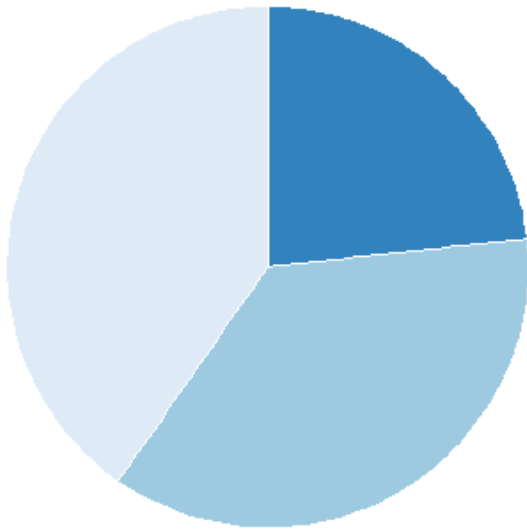
VOLUNTEERS DONATED MORE THAN 1,800 HOURS AT FORMAL CCCWC EVENTS, & COUNTLESS MORE HOURS OUTSIDE OF THEM.

*These figures are not official, and subject to further revision. Official financial records from previous years are available on request.



Above: CCCWC Historian Marc Marc Moilien serves dinner at the Oct. Meeting. **Below:** George Canter, CCCWC’s youngest volunteer, leads a watershed planning activity at Tucker and Becky’s pumpkin patch.

2024 Key Program Areas



Categories

- Conservation Cost Share: \$39,000**
 - \$6,000 (DATCP Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant)
 - \$23,000 (Rural Climate Partnership)
 - \$10,000 (The Nature Conservancy Conservation Challenge Grant)
- Conservation Demonstrations, Education, & Outreach: \$35,200**
 - \$34,000 (Rural Climate Partnership)
 - \$1,200 (DATCP Producer-led Watershed Protection Grant)
- Watershed Planning: \$22,500**
 - \$10,000 (WI-DNR Surface Water Grant)
 - \$12,500 (Wisconsin Idea Collaboration Grant)

Our programs are made possible through generous support from our friends in and around the Coon Creek Watershed. We want to extend our deepest gratitude to the volunteers who have shared their time and talents to organize and support our events.

Many thanks as well to our all our watershed partners for joining us and sharing their time, knowledge, and resources; including Coon Valley Dairy Supply, Tom’s Tents, KG Party Rental, the Coon Vally Lions Club, Triggers and Tackle, Driftless Seed Supply, Knutson and McIntosh Memorial Libraires, Embark Maple Energy, Fizeology, Great American Pancake Co., Hansen’s IGA, Potato King, and to Englishland Agroecology students and faculty at UW-Madison.

We also wish to thank the following for their direct financial support in 2024:

- Coon Valley Lions Club
- Coulee Region Trout Unlimited
- Countertops by Design
- Lori and James Dubczak
- Embroidery & More
- Ethos Green Power Coop
- Joanne Anderson Fletcher
- Great American Pancake Co
- Tim Hundt and Lisa Henner
- Neutral
- Organic Valley
- Portland Implement
- Premier Coop
- Ray’s Gas & Goods
- Resilient Farm Solutions
- River Bank
- Betty Anderson Sanders
- Savanna Institute
- Snowflake Ski Club
- Trout Unlimited Driftless Area Restoration Effort
- Vernon Electric Coop
- WCCU
- Wisconsin Land & Water
- Adrienne and Jeffrey Widell



SLOWING THE FLOW

“I think it would be great if others learned that between the CCCWC and Vernon County Land and Water, there is plenty of funding out there to make these large-scale projects attainable for landowners.”

Zach King
CCCWC Board Member

A downstream look at the recently completed small dam at the Coon Valley Conservation Club. The project was completed with support from the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council.



In 2024, the CCCWC supported more than \$20,000 worth of on-the-ground conservation initiatives, including a water diversion structure and small dam at the Coon Valley Conservation Club.

The diversion structure is intended to prevent runoff from nearby farmland from creating gullies and ditches on lands the Conservation Club manages along Coon Creek. CCCWC partnered with the Vernon County Land and Water Conservation Department and the Coon Valley Conservation Club to fund this work.

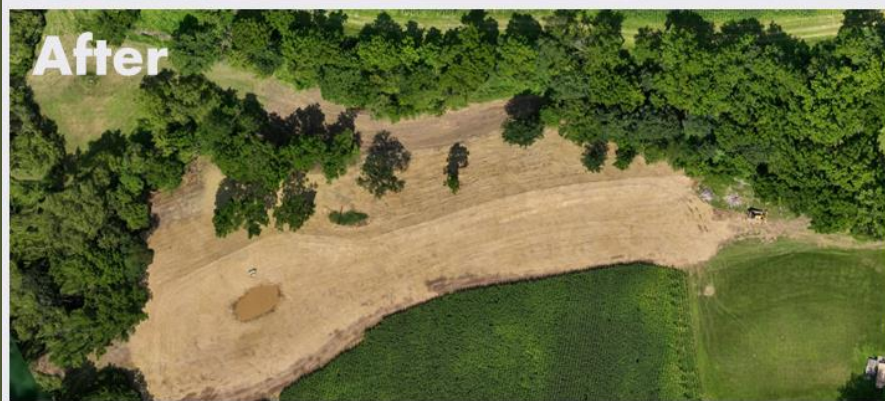
“This project was a priority because the ditches had grown substantially in the last few years with heavy rains,” said Zach King, a CCCWC board member and president of the Coon Valley Conservation Club. “I think it would be great if others learned that between the CCCWC and Vernon County Land and Water, there is plenty of funding out there to make these large scale projects attainable for landowners.”

The CCCWC was able to close a critical funding gap on the water diversion project through a grant from the Rural Climate Partnership.

CCCWC members had a chance to tour the completed project at the September CCCWC meeting, and to learn about opportunities to partner with CCCWC to support their own conservation projects.

Above: Coon Valley Conservation Club member and CCCWC friend Bruce King explains the purpose of the small dam and water diversion structure at the Sept CCCWC meeting.

Below: A before and after look at the small dam and water diversion structures at the Coon Valley Conservation Club. Photos courtesy of VCLWD.





Carol Nikolaus and Sara Freedman pause near a willow sapling they planted with assistance from CCCWC.

New roots on Rulland’s Coulee: Coon Creek Watershed farmers are ‘bringing the land back to life’

When Sara Freedman and Carol Nikolaus began relocating their Bad Axe Watershed farm to Coon Creek’s headwaters in Fall 2023, one of the first things they did was plant trees.

The land they fell in love with on the banks of Rulland’s Coulee Creek had been used recreationally and leased to neighboring farms for decades, but it had been years since anyone actually lived there.

The old farmhouse had collapsed, the siding was falling off the tobacco shed, and the soil had been compacted from years of intensive row cropping.

“There was no regular life on this land for 30 years,” Carol said. “That’s our vision. To bring the land back to life.”

And for Sara and Carol, putting roots in the ground felt like the right place to start.

Over the last fall and winter, the two paged through online tree catalogues, and researched local varieties. They dreamed about rows of pine and spruce between the road and their fields, and willow and river birch along the creek banks. Groves of sugar maples to tap in the spring, and oaks to shade their home and flocks of fiber sheep in the summer.

“I see tree planting as a perpetual thing. Just keep doing it for as long as we can dig holes and stick trees in the ground.” Carol said. “We’re doing it in a very mindful way. We’re working with nature here to try to do what’s best for the health of the land and the creek.”

The couple purchased 54 trees from a regional distributor, with cost share assistance from the CCCWC.

Sara and Carol planted all the trees in a single day, with help from friends and neighbors.

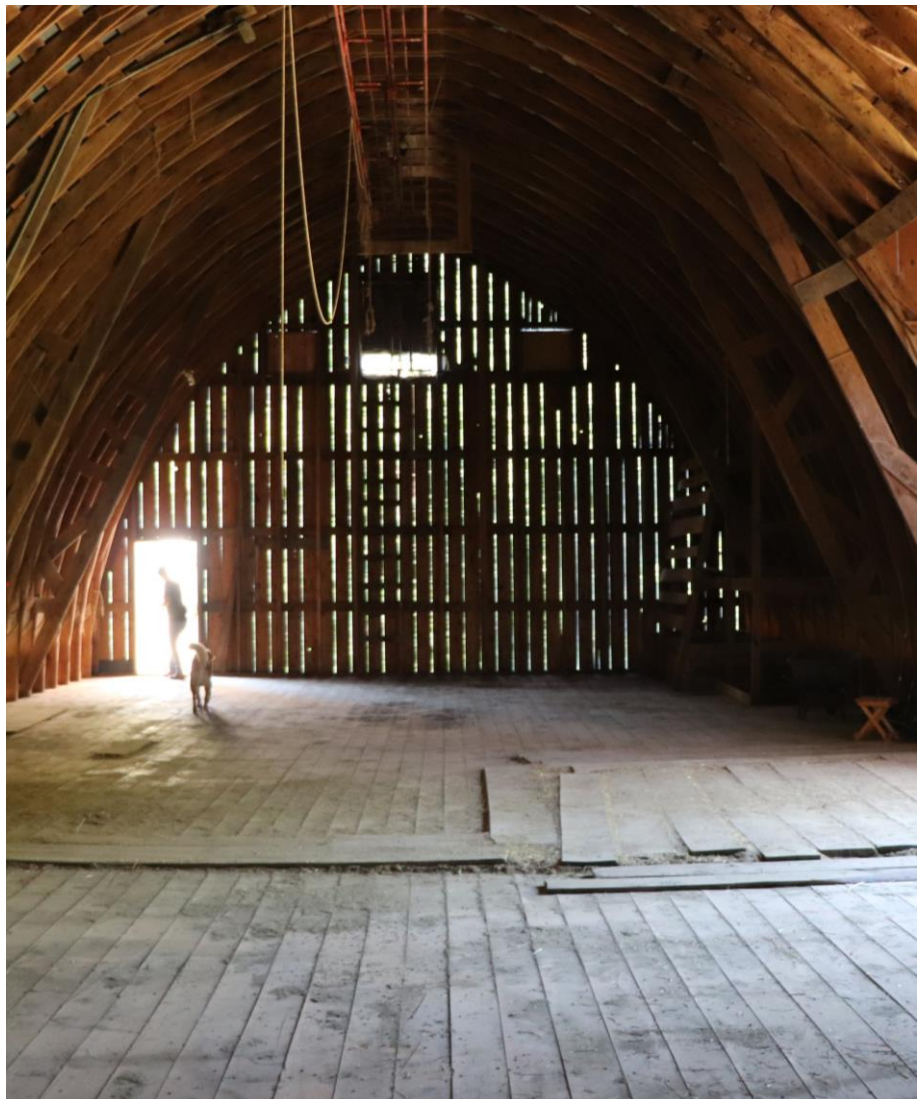
They wrapped each sapling in wire fencing to protect them from deer.

Making the fences and digging holes for the trees ahead of time made the tree planting process much smoother, they said.

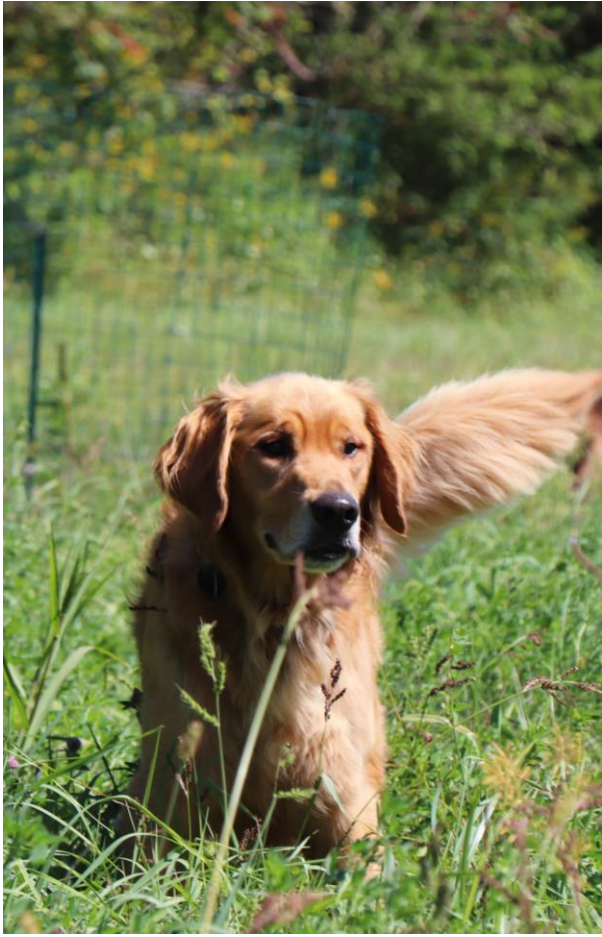
“[Thinking in terms of watersheds brings] an awareness and level of consciousness I have now that I didn’t before. And an awareness of how many other people are trying to do the same thing.”

Sara Freedman
Sheep Grazer

IN 2024, THE CCCWC FUNDED 8 TREE & SHRUB PLANTING PROJECTS IN THE COON CREEK WATERSHED.



Top: Overlooking Sara and Carol’s farm in Coon Creek’s Headwaters. **Bottom:** Light pours through the slats of a barn the two are restoring.



Left: Theo the dog leads the way through the grove of pines Sara and Carol planted along their road. **Right:** Carol and Sara share updates from their tree planting project at the Sept. 2024 CCCWC meeting.

In addition to planting trees, Sara and Carol have spent the last year rehabilitating old barns on the land and preparing to move their herd of fiber sheep to their new grazing grounds.

They've also converted over ten acres of land from corn to hay, planted seven acres in pasture, and are planning a project that would reconnect parts of Rulland's Coulee Creek to its floodplains.

Ultimately, Carol and Sara are working to make running water walk on their land and support a thriving stream ecosystem, all while producing high quality wool.

"There's so much history on this

land, it's humbling to feel like caretakers here." Sara said. "It's humbling and it's exciting."

Sara and Carol have looked to the Natural Resources Conservation Service and Monroe County Conservationists for guidance and resources as they pursue these conservation projects, and they have also turned to their watershed neighbors.

"It's been such a gift to have the Coon Creek Watershed community to help us find conservation resources." Carol said. "It's a silver lining we didn't know we were getting when we moved in."

Now, the sense that they are part

of a larger watershed is something they say inspires and drives their work.

"[Thinking in terms of watersheds brings] an awareness and level of consciousness I have now that I didn't before," Sara said. "And an awareness of how many other people are trying to do the same thing. There's a whole community doing this. And that's where groups like the watershed council can make such a difference. We're just getting started."

We are grateful for funding from The Nature Conservancy, which made Carol and Sara's project, and seven others like it, possible.

2024 Cover Crop Report

The CCCWC offered cost share assistance for cover cropping for the third year in a row, thanks to support from the WI Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection’s Producer-led Watershed Protection program. Enrollment in our programming grew by one farm and more than 69 acres from 2023.

	2024	2023
Total funding available	\$6,000	\$8,450
Number of participants	9	8
Total acres planted in covers	304.6	235.25
Average acres/participant	33.8	29.4

Why cover crop in Coon Creek?

Cover crops are grown to maintain soil cover, and are often planted between the growing seasons of other crops. This practice helps improve soil health, reduce runoff, protect soil from nutrient loss, and more.

In an oral narrative interview with the CCCWC, council member and long-time farmer John Zinn explained why cover cropping is one strategy for managing flooding in the Coon Creek Watershed:

“You intercept the energy of raindrops as they fall, so that as raindrops get slowed down, the soil has the proper structure to be able to soak them up and direct that water into the groundwater, rather than make it run off as surface water. As the Haugen brother said, the water walks rather than runs.”



The sun went down, the cover crops came up, and Coon Creek turned out for the Oct. 2024 CCCWC meeting.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER, LEARNING FROM THE LAND



Top: Guests at the June CCCWC meeting gather at Lee's Tree Farm, and listen as Toby Lee highlights his family's forestry management practices.

Bottom: Joan Greendeer-Lee leads Kati Thompson, Tucker Gretebeck, and Eric Weninger through the forest she and Toby care for.

Right: More scenes from the June meeting at Lee's Tree Farm.

For Toby Lee and Joan Greendeer-Lee, practicing forest management in the Coon Creek Watershed is all about creating thriving woodlands for the next generation. Joan and Toby shared more about their forestry practices as hosts of the Coon Creek Community Watershed Council's first field visit of Summer 2024 on their Coon Valley tree farm.

CCCWC coordinates field visits, like the one Toby and Joan hosted, monthly during the summer. These events are a place where Coon Creek Watershed producers and other residents can connect with and learn from each other about the conservation practices that work best on the lands where they live.

In addition to learning from each other, Toby and Joan say it's important for watershed residents to take time to learn from the land itself.

"No matter where your land is, as you learn about it, it takes a lot of effort for good stewardship and care of the place," Joan said. "It takes time and effort, and you need to put that time and effort in to keep it well."

Joan and Toby take this approach seriously in their own forest management practice. They have managed a diverse array of woodlands across the region since the 1990s, harvesting red oak and other hardwoods, and occasionally, some varieties of pine.

“There had always been woods in the Driftless, and those woods were harvested,” Toby said. “Historically, loggers would take the best trees and leave the junk. The plan is to reverse that process, to clean up the forest.”

When they are not harvesting timber, Toby and Joan work to help their forests thrive amid challenges like increasingly severe weather and changing forest ecology.

One of Toby and Joan’s key priorities is minimizing soil loss in their woodlands, especially where timber harvesting leaves the ground exposed and disturbed. According to Toby, creating buffers around streams and gullies and excluding them from harvest, as well as re-establishing vegetation and planting tree seedlings quickly after harvest, are a few strategies that reduce soil erosion in logged areas.

“These practices have undoubtedly had a positive impact on reducing the erosion on our farms,” Toby said. “Nonetheless, over the past decade we have seen unprecedented flooding in the gullies as a result of abnormally heavy rains. Roads through the woods that were constructed generations ago have now been washed out.”

As severe floods become more frequent across the region due to climate change, practices that help reduce flooding and runoff are increasingly critical to reducing erosion. For Toby and Joan, understanding how water moves through a particular forest stand is an important first step to minimizing flooding and erosion, as well as sustaining land, water, and traditions.

Diverting runoff into the forest by sloping logging roads is one way to slow water as it travels through the woods and reduce erosion, Toby said. Joan, who is Ho Chunk, locates and cares for the springs that flow in forest stands, which are sacred. Where logging roads must cross a spring or gully, Joan and Toby build culverts to protect both.

Toby said that many of these forestry practices can be done by hand. Others, like cleaning up timber stands after a harvest, are usually best handled by timber buyers. Toby noted that it is important for foresters to detail their expectations for timber harvesting in their contracts with buyers to ensure the best care for forested lands.



“It’s been a learn-as-you go process,” Toby said. “Neither of us have any formal training in forestry or forest management.”

Instead, Toby and Joan have turned to the broader forestry community for guidance and support, as well as to partners like the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the WI Department of Natural Resources.

“With each experience, we’ve learned a little bit more,” Toby said. “Whether it is harvesting timber or timber stand improvement, what has evolved is a forest that is healthier, more productive, and more enjoyable for the next generation.”

Toby recommends anyone interested in forest management familiarize themselves with techniques that improve forest health over time, as well as the cost share opportunities that can help them begin their practice.

OUT TO PASTURE



Matthew Canter leads CCCWC members on a pasture walk at the July 2024 CCCWC meeting.

More than 40 people gathered in the headwaters of the Coon Creek Watershed to learn about managed grazing and organic dairy farming at the July 3 CCCWC meeting.

The Canter family, who hosted the meeting, hoped that attendees left their farm with more confidence to experiment with conservation practices, and were inspired to think about ways they could “make running water walk” in their own places across the watershed.

“Every little bit helps,” Matthew Canter said. “Sometimes what I do can feel innocuous when I’m surrounded by an ocean of non-

conservation, but for every little bit I do, things downstream could be a little bit better.”

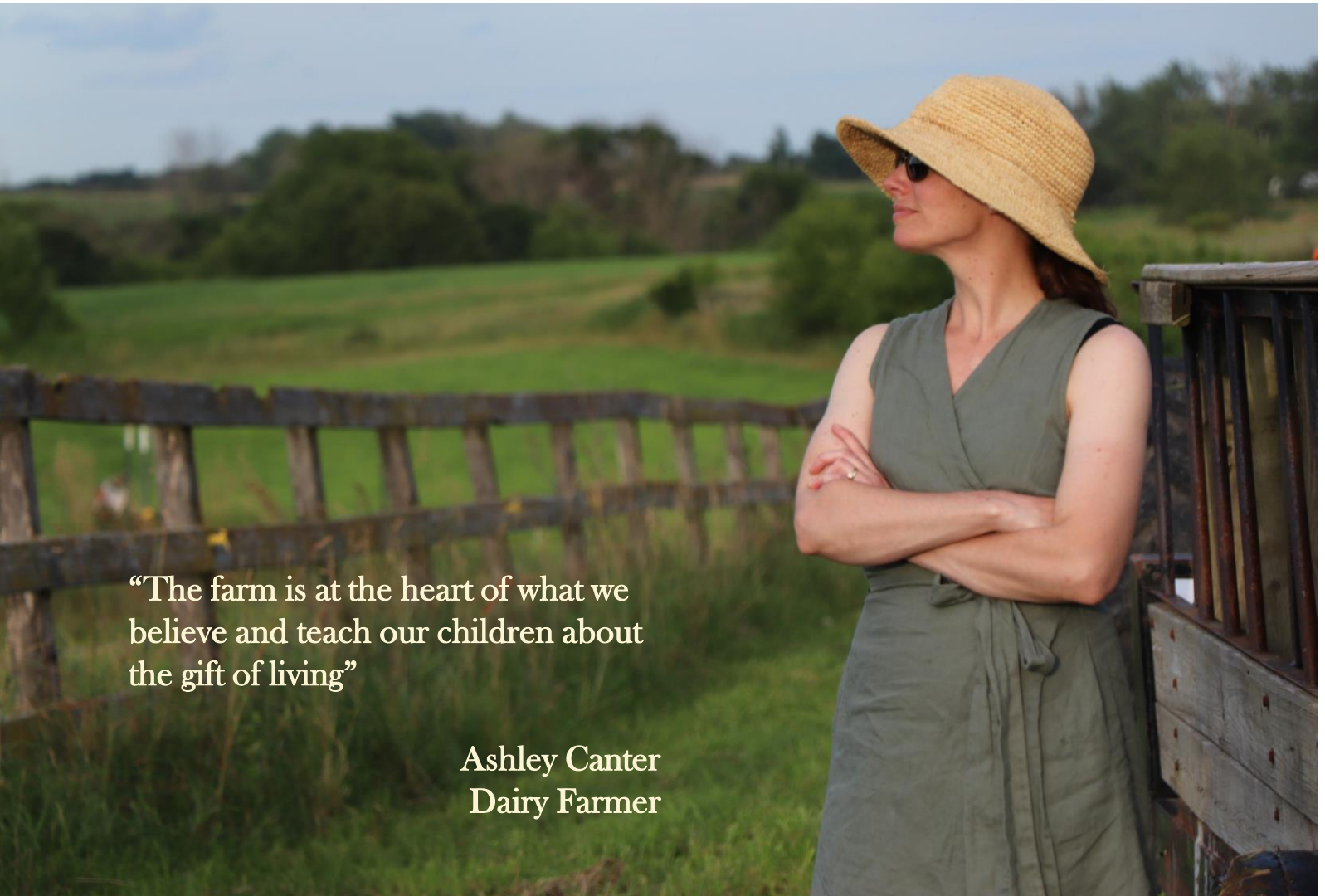
Matthew, who also serves on CCCWC’s board, grazes 100 cows with his family on a 300-acre organic dairy farm on Rogstad Ridge. His wife, Ashley, says their farming practices have not only helped improve soil health and store water on their ridgetop farm, but that they’re something that brings her family together.

“I love how the farm binds us together,” Ashley said. “Especially as a homeschooling family, we all work here but we all live here too. Everyone has chores; at every age the children have something to

contribute. But we don’t simply finish the work and move on with other activities. The farm is all around us, all the time: in the eggs and milk we enjoy for breakfast, the wildlife we study for science, and the spaces we run in for imagination and play. The farm is at the heart of what we believe and teach our children about the gift of living.”

Coon Creek watershed residents joined the Canter family during the July meeting for fresh strawberry cake, a tractor ride, and a golden hour walk through the Canters’ ridgetop pastures.

Matthew explained rotationally



“The farm is at the heart of what we believe and teach our children about the gift of living”

Ashley Canter
Dairy Farmer

Ashley Canter pauses in the pasture during the July 2024 CCCWC meeting

grazing his herd of Jerseys, Ayrshires, and Normande Crosses helps his cows and pastures thrive. The cows stay active and enjoy a diet full of fresh, nutrient-packed grasses. In turn, they produce high quality, nutrient-packed milk. At the same time, the cows help fertilize the pastures by trampling organic matter into the soil, and their grazing pressure can stimulate grass growth.

“Overwhelmingly, our practices are governed by the way we manage our animals,” Matthew said. “The impact on the land of moving the animals very quickly in large groups to different fields is

still surprising to me”

The Canters moved to their farm on Rognstad Ridge from Ohio in 2007. In 2015, they took up organic sheep rearing, and expanded their practice to include dairy farming two years later.

“Getting past that 5-7 year hurdle, things start to look, if not lucrative, at the very least, stable,” Matthew said. “There is a market for organic, grass fed dairy.”

The Canters did not have experience in dairy, but with guidance from neighbors, assistance from local conservation

agencies, and support from the Organic Valley Cooperative, they’ve been able to find a rhythm that works for them.

“The drum I keep relentlessly beating is that grazing dairy can be done, and it can be done by people with no experience.” Matthew said. “It’s still such a shame that people, even within the dairy world, have these hang-ups. It’s like, you have to do it this way, or you have to check all these neat little boxes and if you don’t, you’re going to fail.”

As the Canters’ practice expanded, so did the size of their farm -

growing from 11 acres when they began to over 300 today. The land they farmed initially had been intensively row cropped, and was networked with gullies. Matthew tried to grow alfalfa, but the seeds he planted stayed dormant in the acidic, eroding soil.

But by planting clovers and perennials, Matthew said he was able to lower the soil's acidity and reduce soil erosion. As the soil changed, the alfalfa seeds he planted years earlier began to grow, too.

"I think that's kind of impressive," Matthew said. "It shows just what soil will do if you treat it like soil and not just a medium for growing things. It's working with the soil."

For the Canters, seeing the land respond to their conservation efforts over time is something that drives their work. In addition to soil health improvements, Ashley also said birds and insects are becoming more abundant on their farm every season.

"The greatest inspiration is the land itself," Matthew said. "I would certainly say that any time I am doing something that seems unnatural to the land, there's almost like a moral imperative to be responsible for the land rather than to manipulate and exploit it."



CCCWC member and Monroe County agronomist Bradley Robson pilots a new four-pad scale the council purchased for Monroe County in Spring 2024. This tool helps farmers accurately track their manure and compost spreading rates, which in turn protects soil health and water quality. These scales also aid farmers in measuring the production of harvested forages, allowing them to compare the profitability of perennial crops to standard row cropped rotations.

Top: The Canters' herd grazes in the headwaters of the Coon Creek Watershed.

COMMUNITY, CONSERVATION, & SHARED STORIES

Lessons from the Learning to Make Running Water Walk Oral Narrative Project



Council member Mike Breckel takes a first look at *Process*, the first volume in the *Walking with Water* collection.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) project that transformed the Coon Creek Watershed in the 1930s is widely celebrated as the nation’s first experiment in watershed-scale conservation. For some Coon Creek Watershed residents, the project has long shaped perspectives on economic resilience and community care as well.

“From a more social standpoint, my dad shared that the CCC was a lifesaver for a lot of people around here,” said Lisa Aalgaard, whose family has lived in the Coon Creek Watershed for generations. “I remember being raised to think, ‘Doesn’t everybody think this way,

that we should take care of everybody?’”

The CCC’s work famously began at a time when catastrophic flooding and soil erosion were upending lives and livelihoods in the Coon Creek Watershed. Lisa noted the project also coincided with the peak of the Great Depression, and that it provided resources to families in the watershed at a moment when many were struggling to get by.

“I think the CCC was my dad’s early introduction to his belief in having a strong social welfare network,” Lisa said. “That’s a layer I don’t want to be missed in the work

of the CCC. The timing of it and the value that it had for conservation was huge, but it had a bigger impact, at least from my family’s perspective.”

Lisa is one of 70 Coon Creek community members who shared their perspectives on the CCC and life in the Coon Creek Watershed as part of *Learning to Make Running Water Walk*, an oral narrative project we organized in collaboration with partners at University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Stories participants shared during the project are featured in *Walking with Water*, a four part

zine series devoted to highlighting reflections on flooding, conservation, community, and culture in the Coon Creek Watershed.

Place, the second zine in the *Walking with Water* collection, was released at our Nov 6 General Meeting.

In *Place*, storytellers reflect on how the Coon Creek Watershed is changing, and what it means to be a part of a watershed community. They look to the past to understand how the region's history has shaped its present, and in turn, imagine how current actions might shape Coon Creek in the future.

Place and the other zines in the series are produced by our staff, and students and faculty at UW-Madison, and La Crosse-based Ope! Publishing. They feature original artwork from artist Gabrielle Whisler. *Process*, the first zine in the collection, was released in June 2024 and shares stories and lessons from the CCCWC's first two years.

The Learning to Make Running Water Walk Oral Narrative Project developed from a partnership between us, UW-Madison faculty, undergrads, and graduate students, and the UW-La Crosse Oral History Program.

By gathering together to listen to stories in the Coon Valley Conservation Club and homes and farms and fields across the watershed, we worked to learn from the experience and expertise of past and present watershed residents, to build on the watershed's history of conservation leadership, to understand current practices, concerns, and hopes, to support the development of a Coon Creek Watershed Plan, and to find common ground through shared stories.



Top: The entrance way to the historic CCCWC camp overlooking downtown Coon Valley. **Bottom:** Copies of *Process*, available at the June 2024 CCCCW meeting.

Accessing the CCCWC oral narrative archive

Between Fall 2022 and Summer 2023, UW-Madison students and faculty interviewed 70 Coon Creek community members as part of the Learning to Make Running Water Walk Oral Narrative Project. Excerpts from their stories are highlighted in the *Walking with Water* zines, which are available for free at public libraries in Cashton, Westby, and Coon Valley, while supplies last. The full archive will be publicly available soon through the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Murphy Library Digital Collection.



Updates from the Coon Creek Watershed planning process

What is a watershed plan?

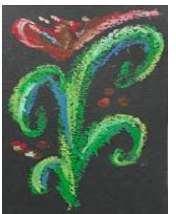
A watershed plan is a framework for identifying and addressing community concerns regarding the care and management of local waters.

CCCWC began the planning process to reduce flooding, build economic resilience, improve community health, and care for Coon Creek’s lands and waters.

Fall Events

In Fall 2024, CCCWC held four public meetings and events across the Coon Creek Watershed to inform watershed planning priorities. 40 people attended the events, and material from these meetings is available on our website.

Top Left: Visitors gather at Tucker and Becky’s Pumpkin Patch in Oct. 2024 to help raise funds for the Knutson Memorial Library, and share their thoughts about the future of the Coon Creek Watershed. **Bottom Left:** A watershed planning meeting at Knutson Memorial Library. **Right:** Young watershed residents draw their favorite things about the watershed.



Community Priorities and Perspectives

Four major, interrelated goals emerged during Fall 2024’s community conversations, and will shape the focus of the Coon Creek Watershed Plan.

Enhance flood resilience

- Attenuate and infiltrate runoff through dispersed upland practices
- Reconnect streams & floodplains
- Manage & reduce impervious surfaces

Protect waterways

- Reduce upland soil erosion
- Expand nutrient management planning
- Maintain stream habitat conditions that support local species

Improve soil health

- Expand perennial practices
- Adjust land use to slope, soil type, & proximity to streams
- Shift from a soil loss to a soil growth framework

Support residents

- Continue development of land use decision making support tools & knowledge sharing networks
- Develop local supply chains & alternative land transfer and land holding models
- Fund conservation practice implementation

Fostering watershed literacy, celebrating conservation



VALLEY CONSERVATION DAY

In May, we partnered with Coon Valley Dairy Supply Company to host our second annual Valley Conservation Day.

The full-day watershed celebration featured a performance from Mollie B and Friends as well as other live music, a makers market with more than 50 local artisans, local food and beer, and conservation fun for the whole family. The festival brought people together from within and beyond the Coon Creek Watershed to celebrate all the ways water connects us. Understanding these connections is a key tenant of watershed literacy.

Valley Conservation Day by the numbers

- More than 400 guests attended, from as far away as Chicago, Madison, Green Bay, and the Twin Cities.
- More than \$2,000 were raised for conservation projects in the Coon Creek Watershed
- 27 conservation partners participated in the Watershed Fair
- 50 local artisans were featured in the makers market
- 4 bands performed, including headliner Mollie B & Friends.
- More than 30 volunteers spent months planning to host a fantastic event
- 15 pickles were entered in the first annual pickle-off (*below*)



By collaborating with Coon Valley Dairy Supply Company to hold Valley Conservation Day on the site of the historic Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Coon Valley, we hoped back the experimental and collaborative spirit that made the Coon Creek project a national model for land and water conservation.



Left: CCCWC member Orlan Bakkum takes in a conservation demonstration. **Top:** A young guest explores a table-top watershed model **Mid-left:** CCCWC board member Kevin Traastad leads a soil infiltration demonstration **Mid-right:** A crowd gathers to see Mollie B. & Friends perform **Bottom:** Trout Unlimited leads a fly-tying clinic and distributes free fishing poles to young attendees.



A LOOK AHEAD

Valley Conservation Day is now Coon Creek Confluence! Mark your calendars for May 3, 2025, and join us at the Westby Rod and Gun Club in beautiful Timber Coulee to celebrate community conservation.

We would also be thrilled to welcome you at our council meetings. The CCCWC meets at 6:00 the first Wednesday of the month at homes and farms across the watershed for dinner, council news, and presentations from a wide range of guests. Our meetings are free and open to all. Information about meeting locations is posted to our website: <https://cooncreekwatershed.org/events/>

Conservation curious?

If you are interested to learn more about making running water walk where you live, there are many resources to get you started. Here are just a few:

- Your county conservationists can provide consultations and access to state-of-the-art conservation planning tools. Depending on where you live in the watershed, contact the La Crosse, Monroe, or Vernon County conservation department.
- Your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Center can connect you with additional technical assistance, as well as a wide range of cost share programs. Search for your local office here: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/wisconsin>
- NRCS also provides a variety of primers on different conservation practices, like cover cropping, no-till farming, and more. Find it at this link: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/natural-resource-concerns>
- CCCWC offers an expanding range of cost share options to our members. Visit our website or contact us



Ashley Olson and Jim Munsch share a laugh at the July CCCWC meeting. CCCWC meetings are a place to connect with and learn from others.

to learn how we can support your conservation projects. Additionally, our monthly meetings offer an opportunity to see conservation practices in action and learn from the wealth of knowledge in our community.

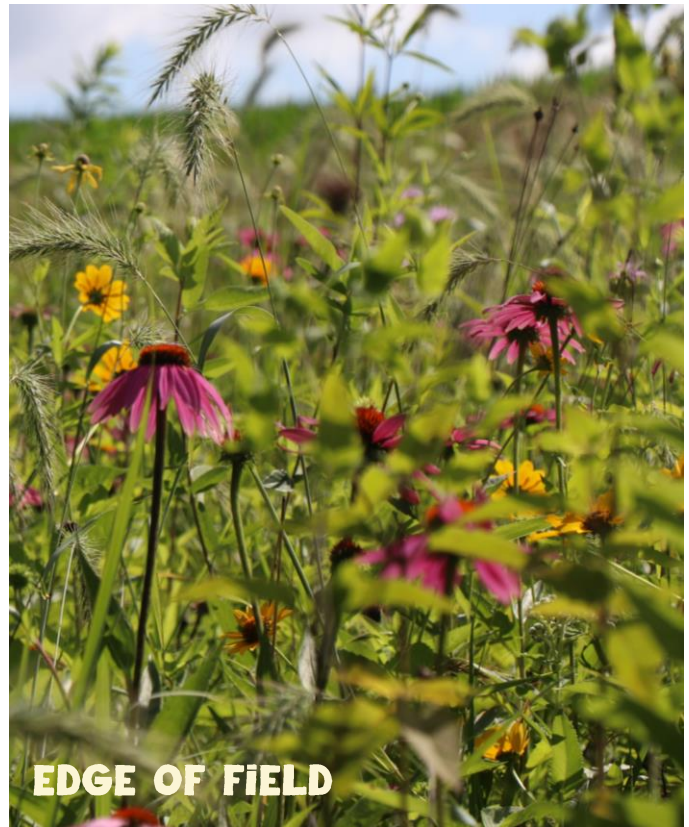
2025 Cost Share Opportunities

In 2025, we are pleased offer a range of cost share options for council members and watershed residents interested in making running water walk where they live. We administer cost share on a first come, first serve basis, so apply early if our programming is of interest!

You may apply using the form below, by sending a letter of inquiry to council@cooncreekwatershed.org, or by filling out the online form on our website:

<https://cooncreekwatershed.org/cost-share/>

Our cost share offerings are always growing, so check our website or contact us to stay up to date on available funding



Prairie plantings in the Bad Axe Watershed. Establishing prairie, including prairie strips, is an example of an “edge of field” practice covered by our 2025 cost share.

- Cover Crops: \$25/acre. Only available within the Coon Creek Watershed
- Alternative perennial crops: \$100/acre. Only available within the Coon Creek Watershed
- Edge of field practices: \$250/acre. Only available within the Coon Creek Watershed
- Trees: \$10/tree for up to 50 trees. Trees must be planted with tree tubes and tree stakes.
- Shrubs: \$3/shrub

Cut out and complete the form below and mail it to 113 Central Ave., Coon Valley, WI, 54326 to apply for cost share

Contact Information	
Name: _____	Email: _____
Mailing address: _____	Phone: _____
Cost Share Request	
Please check all that apply, and supply additional information where requested	
<input type="checkbox"/> Cover crops Type of crop(s): _____ Acres planted: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Trees Type(s) of trees: _____ Number of trees planted: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Alt. perennial crops Type of crop(s): _____ Acres planted: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Shrubs Type(s) of shrubs: _____ Number of shrubs planted: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Edge of field practices: Type of practice(s): _____ Acres planted: _____	



BE IN TOUCH

113 Central Ave,
Coon Valley, WI, 54623
council@cooncreekwatershed.org
Find us on Facebook and Instagram

