

Mapping the Canoe Trail by Joann Wallenburn, Clearwater Resource Council

Can it really be August already? There are abundant signs in the plants that summer is starting to leave us, which brings fall, closely followed by winter right around the corner!

This time of summer, however, is the peak of the growth cycle for most of our native aquatic plants – the plants growing under the water surface in our lakes, streams, and rivers. One of the monitoring activities for early detection of aquatic invasive species (AIS) is mapping the aquatic vegetation in the lakes and rivers. This is the best time of year for that.

The Missoula County Weed District (MCWD) initiated annual aquatic vegetation mapping last year, in response to the increased threat of AIS. They have an extensive list of lakes and river access sites to map. Higher risk waters, such as Seeley Lake and Salmon Lake, will be looked at every year. Other waters may be on an every two, three, or more years. After all sites on the list have been mapped at least once, an on-going schedule will be developed. And of course, if invasive plants are found, schedules could go right out the window!

The weed district staff cannot get everywhere as frequently as they would like. Their efforts can be extended by citizen volunteers who learn how to identify the aquatic plants. Many eyes looking at plants in the water all the time are far better than a once a year visit by just a few pair of eyes.

There's nothing magical or exceptionally tricky to identifying aquatic plants. There are only about 20 different varieties growing in this valley, as opposed to the many hundreds of terrestrial plants. The trickiest part is pulling one to take a close look at it. Unlike terrestrial plants that are growing right at your feet, aquatic plants root on the bottom of the lake up to 20 feet deep. Unless they grow really tall, it's usually not possible to reach down and pull one with your hands. However, once you've had a plant in your hands and learned its identity, it's possible, in most cases, to look through the water and identify it "in situ" – in place. I have stood on a dock on Seeley Lake and looked down and identified elodea, fern-leaf pondweed, coon's tail, water marigold, floating-leaf pondweed, and fragrant water lily; and that's all that was there. The water lily is the only non-native plant.

One stretch of water that didn't make the MCWD list is the Clearwater River Canoe Trail. The risk of an introduction of a native plant by a canoe or kayak is very small, but not non-existent. On the other hand, an invasive plant introduced in the Canoe Trail would find excellent habitat to get established unnoticed. The slow moving water and many little side-channels and backwaters are ideal for an invasion. Once established in the Canoe Trail, fragments would easily travel on into Seeley Lake. And from Seeley to Salmon to Elbow to... I think you get the picture.

The Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) and MCWD have joined together to co-host a combination recreation/education event that will result in mapping the Canoe Trail. Mark your calendars! August 25th, be at the Canoe Trail trailhead at 2:00 pm. The event will begin with an introduction to identification of the native aquatic plants of the area. Participants will be provided kits and maps to collect plant samples, identify them, and mark their locations on the maps. Then the fun begins! On to the water and down the Canoe Trail. Experts will be around to help with identification. At the take-out

(at the Seeley Lake Ranger District), we'll have a cook-out and "show and tell" of our plant samples. All the individual maps will be marked onto a single large map, and we will have mapped the Canoe Trail.

CRC has also assembled aquatic plant mapping kits, including equipment, instructions, and recording forms: one each for Alva, Inez, Seeley, Salmon, Placid, and Big Sky. Anyone wanting to check-out a kit is welcome and encouraged to. Call 210-8453 to make arrangements.

A real-life example of the importance of detecting an invasive plant early is Beaver Lake in Flathead County. Beaver Lake is a small lake near Whitefish Lake. Eurasian Watermilfoil (EWM) was found there, near the boat launch, last fall. It was estimated the plant had been growing there for 3-4 years. The area was quickly treated by placing bottom barriers over the affected area. Bottom barriers physically restrict the plant from growing, similar to weed cloth, and also block the plants from getting sunlight needed to grow. EWM wasn't found growing anywhere else in the lake. Everyone was optimistic that the infestation was caught early before it had a chance to spread. Unfortunately, the plant "escaped" the containment of the bottom barriers and is now growing in multiple locations around the lake and is tall enough that boat motors can get into it, chop it up, and cause it to spread even more. Plant fragments of EWM can root and grow new plants. The lake has been designated a quarantine area by Montana Department of Agriculture. It is closed to boat traffic, but anglers and swimmers are still allowed to use the lake. A far more complicated and expensive treatment program is now needed to try to eradicate EWM from Beaver Lake. Who pays for the treatment? Ultimately you and I do. Beaver Lake is fished mostly by local residents who probably visit many different local lakes with their boats. Do they all "inspect, clean, dry" their boats between lakes? How many other lakes have been unknowingly infested with EWM from Beaver Lake?

To keep our waters AIS free, we need the help of everyone. Keep an eye out. Spread the word, not the weed. Inspect, Clean, Dry your watercraft and equipment.

If you would like to join us on the Canoe Trail, we would like to get a head-count for the food. Also, if you need a canoe, a small number will be available on a reservation basis. Please contact me at 210-8453 or joann@crcmt.org. Hope to see you on the 25th!