

A Brand New Field Season

by Joann Wallenburn, Clearwater Resource Council

The ground outside my window is a patchwork of snow and bare ground. The newly arriving spring birds are starting to dominate my birdfeeders. I hope the bears sleep a little longer, until the birds consume the suet and I can put everything safely away until next winter. With the coming of spring comes a brand new field season. Volunteers are already busy preparing for the many programs that are active in our valley. New volunteers are always welcome. Many hands make light work.

Adopt-A-Lake will continue again this year. Adopt-A-Lake volunteers get out on the lakes about every two weeks throughout the summer, for an hour or so to take some water quality measurements and observations. Many take their fishing rods and use Adopt-A-Lake as an excuse to go fishin'.

The Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) has received funding to run a new volunteer program, Adopt-A-Stream, just this one year, to check water quality in many of our area streams. Eleven sampling sites will be sampled intensively for a number of characteristics at least a dozen times during the season. Volunteers will collect water samples to be tested in a lab and will also take some measures of the water depth and water flow (speed). If your favorite stream isn't one of the intensively sampled streams, there is still an opportunity to collect some of the information that can be compared directly with those that are. If you are interested in helping with this program, or just keeping a check on your favorite stream, there will be an information and organizational meeting at the Seeley Lake Museum and Civic Center on April 11th at 7:00 pm. Bring your questions and friends and neighbors to learn how easy it is to collect important information about the health of our water sources.

My personal passion is aquatic invasive species (AIS) prevention. We'll be doing some of that too, this summer and can always use more volunteers. We are lucky (knock on wood) that we haven't been hit by any of the really bad aquatic invasives so far. We've had whirling disease in our waters for a long while and the Missoula County Weed District has been battling yellow flag iris and purple loosestrife along the Clearwater River for the last 7 or 8 years. So far, no Eurasian Water Milfoil, no Curly-Leaf Pondweed, no Asian Clams, no Zebra or Quagga Mussels, no Asian Carp. And we want to keep it that way. Because our lakes are a "chain of lakes", any invasive that gets into one lake will work its way over time all the way down the chain. An invasive in Inez, for example, will migrate to Seeley Lake, Salmon Lake, Elbow Lake, and so on. Many of these plants and animals will also establish in the moving waters of the river and damage them, too. In some cases they may move upstream as well, and once they get in the system anywhere, the chances of moving on their own or as hitch hikers on boats, trailers, wading shoes or other means are pretty good. I think we can all agree we want to keep them out. How do we do that?

The most powerful tool we have is awareness and education. The more people who learn about AIS, understand how bad AIS are and how simple it is to not move them from one water body to another, the more our waters are protected from an unintentional introduction. FWP will be running the boat

inspection station down at Clearwater Junction again this summer. Certainly, inspecting watercraft for AIS is important, but one of the biggest benefits of the boat inspection station program is educating the very people who are moving watercraft through our state and planning to launch them in our waters. Reports from last year's inspection stations clearly showed that public behavior was being changed for the better. Many more people were "Inspect. Clean. Dry." – ing their boats regularly because they learned about the risk of AIS.

If we do suffer an introduction of unwanted AIS, the earlier it is detected, the better. We have miles of shorelines and many square miles of lakes that are all at risk. No one person or even group of people can reasonably inspect everywhere all the time. Again, education is key. When you're slow-motoring back to the dock, look at the plants you are traveling over. If you know what plants belong, you'll better recognize an unwanted newcomer. CRC has aquatic vegetation identification and sampling kits available on a loaner basis. We'll be glad to help you start learning about the aquatic plants you never paid attention to before. I certainly never gave them a second glance – until I learned there could be really harmful plants among them! The more eyes that know to take a look and know what they're looking at, the more likely an introduction will be detected early; hopefully early enough to eradicate the invader.

The mussels and clams are a bit more difficult. Zebra and Quagga mussels spread through microscopic, free-swimming juveniles called veligers. CRC has developed easy to follow procedures for collecting concentrated, filtered water samples to be sent off to test for the presence of veligers. Loaner kits are available with all the materials, forms, and instructions needed to collect these samples. Ideally, samples would be collected in several locations on each lake several times during the summer. There are dedicated volunteers who regularly sample Big Sky Lake and Placid Lake. If you are interested in sampling another of the motorized-boat lakes in the valley, we can provide training and equipment. It's just another excuse to get out on the water!

A new threat detected last summer in Lake Coeur d'Alene in Idaho is the Asian Clam. The Asian Clam differs from the Zebra and Quagga Mussels in that the adult form of the Asian Clam does not attach itself to surfaces and grow massive colonies that block water intake pipes or other similar structures. Otherwise, the Asian Clam wreaks all the same havoc as the mussels. Unfortunately, both the mussels and the clams have look alikes that are native in our lakes. Salmon Lake, in particular, has many Fingernail Clams that are native and about the same size as the Zebra Mussels and look very similar to the Asian Clam, only smaller. Keep an eye out for them too and if you're not certain what you see is native, don't hesitate to call CRC (210-8453) or report your finding to TIPMONT (1-800-847-6668).

As we say goodbye to winter, let's look forward to sunny, fun-filled days on our lakes and streams. Let's each give a little of our time to help keep our waters healthy and fun for ages to come.