

Confessions of a 'river keeper'



Paul Hayes, a retired high school teacher now "living the dream" near the Kickapoo River, has been a vital part of numerous stream restoration projects including efforts to reclaim Weister Creek as a trout fishery.

JUDY NUGENT

LONGTIME SCIENCE TEACHER TAKES LEADING ROLE IN RESTORATION OF WEISTER CREEK.

Jim Schmiedeskamp

On a sunny day last year after fishing Wisconsin's Driftless Area, I rendezvoused with Paul Hayes to get a walking tour of the Weister Creek stream restoration project, supported in part by regional Trout Unlimited chapters and the Department of Natural Resources.

If you enjoy flora, fauna and critters of all types, then this outing to southwest Wisconsin was like spending an hour with Marlin Perkins, remembered as the friendly and knowledgeable host of "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" during the 1960s-'80s. Hayes' vision, passion and commitment to the Weister Creek project are what make it a success and an ideal template for other Trout Unlimited conservation initiatives.

Here are excerpts of my interview with Hayes on the restoration project, including the role of Trout Unlimited and the DNR, and his idea of "living the dream."

Q: First, provide some background on your professional career.

A: My background includes a Master of Science degree in biology from St. Mary's University in Winona, Minnesota. It was there that I caught my first trout and came to love the biotic diversity of the Driftless Area. I spent my professional career teaching high school science for 43 years, 38 of those at Loyola Academy in Wilmette, Illinois.

Q: Why did you retire to the Driftless Area?

A: Our family bought an old dairy farm in 2000 near Westby on the West Fork of the Kickapoo River. We restored the stream, took the cows out of the woods and planted prairie and oaks in most of the corn fields. In 2009, I retired and we built a new home on the hillside overlooking our little valley and have been living the dream.

Q: What are your personal hobbies and interests in retirement?

A: I have been a Trout Unlimited (tu.org) member since 1970 and have worked on countless stream restoration projects, which have allowed me to combine my scientific training with my passion for the outdoors. My wife, Bernadette, and I are "river keepers" and spend many hours doing stream monitoring. We are also active in the National Audubon Society, the local prairie group and woodland owners group.

Q: How would you describe Weister Creek?

A: Weister Creek is a spring-fed stream some 15 miles long in Vernon County in the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin and is a tributary of the

Kickapoo River. The lower 5 miles of Weister Creek are surrounded by wetlands, forests and fields and lie in the Kickapoo Valley Reserve (kvr.state.wi.us) — an 8,000-acre public land that was rescued from an Army Corps of Engineers dam project in the 1970s.

Q: How and when did the Weister Creek restoration project originate and what has been your role?

A: I was appointed to the Kickapoo Valley Reserve management board in 2012. At that time, the Reserve's primary outdoor activities were hiking, biking, horseback riding and skiing. My wife and I did a thorough assessment of all the feeder streams to the Kickapoo on the Reserve. We identified Weister Creek as having the most potential for restoration as a trout fishery. The project was proposed and approved by the Reserve's board. My role has been twofold: to raise funds for the 30 percent match that most of the major grants require, and to provide scientific advice to promote biological diversity and stability to the project.

Q: What makes this project unique from the typical Driftless Area stream restoration project?

A: The project is a demonstration site for a number of practices that enhance biological diversity and sustainability. Many of these are documented in the "Nongame Wildlife Habitat Guide," by Jeff Hastings from the Trout Unlimited Driftless Area Restoration Effort (dares-toration.com). Some specifics of what's been done or is planned include:

- Providing still water wetland habitat, some connected to the stream and some not connected. These areas provide habitat for minnows, tadpoles and larva of many aquatic insects.

- Incorporating natural logs, root wads and shallow-sloped grassy banks for turtles and frogs to use for basking and egg-laying.
- Connecting spring water outflows directly to deep water pools for thermal refuge in summer and winter.
- Constructing snake and turtle hibernacula to provide refuge in winter.
- Removing willow and box elder brush from the stream corridor to discourage beaver while keeping some large hardwoods for songbirds and raptors. Some standing dead trees are saved for woodpecker habitat.
- Planting the 100- to 200-foot stream buffer in prairie grasses and flowers. Once established, the prairie plantings are managed with fire to keep out woody brush. These plantings will enhance pheasant hunting opportunities as well as nongame species.
- Protecting some sandbars to provide shorebird habitat.
- Creating areas for dens of small mammals and furbearers by saving some brush piles or partially burying them outside the floodway.
- Enhancing some vertical banks for bank swallows and kingfisher nest holes.

Q: Who is responsible for project planning and construction?

A: Project planning is shared by the Kickapoo Valley Reserve staff, myself and the Department of Natural Resources' fisheries crew chief. Construction has been contracted to the DNR on a yearly basis — July to June. We may contract with other governmental agencies as well as the DNR in the future.

Q: How is the project funded?

A: More than \$95,000 was funded for Phase 1 and Phase 2, with major contributions including about \$28,000 from

Trout Unlimited in Illinois (Oak Brook, Lee Wulff and Elliott Donnelly chapters) and Wisconsin (Blackhawk and Coulee Region chapters), \$15,000 from Vernon County (Ho-Chunk Trust) and \$45,000 from the DNR Trout Stamp fund. In addition, Pheasants Forever provided financial support for planting 30 acres of riparian habitat along the creek banks. We are currently completing Phase 3 and raising funds for Phase 4.

Q: How would you describe the contributions of the DNR?

A: I refer to the DNR contractors as "artists with backhoes." There are many aspects of this work that are very subtle. Some examples would be visualizing the stream during high-water events — where will the energy be spread out? How can we use flood energy to scour out pools? How to manage farm field runoff? The "artist's eye" will break up long, straight stretches with some gentle curves. Natural logs are used to cover fish cribs or lunger structures rather than squared-off face rock. There is a mix of sun and shade. Some trees are in groves, some alone.

Q: How would you describe each phase and when do you see the work completed?

A: Phase 1 was 1,622 feet above the 24 Valley Road bridge; Phase 2 was 1,693 feet below the bridge. The total project is planned at 9,627 feet. We are currently working on Phase 3. My involvement with Weister Creek will be ongoing once the actual stream restoration work concludes. With a new "adopted" stream, my wife and I as "river keepers" will have plenty of biotic diversity to monitor and maintain at Weister Creek. ❧

Jim Schmiedeskamp is a contributing writer for Oak Brook Trout Unlimited.



Weister Creek is a tributary of the Kickapoo River and runs through the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, an 8,600-acre public land parcel in Wisconsin's Driftless Area.