



STATE EDITION



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COUNTING WETLANDS: Group begins mapping county to help governments protect areas

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By Pat Shellenbarger
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This being an unusually warm and sunny autumn afternoon, John Stegmeier, Beth Vineyard and Barbara Dillon decided to go hunting.

They parked along a narrow, dirt road in the Cannonsburg State Game Area, unloaded their gear and hiked up a hill into the woods. Stegmeier tied an orange ribbon to a sassafras tree to mark his starting point, then began pacing off 200 feet while Dillon held up a compass and directed him due east.

"Keep going to the right," she shouted. "To the right."

"To the right?" Stegmeier hollered back.

"Right," Dillon repeated. "Little bit to the right. Little bit to the left. You're perfect."

If the local wildlife needed any warning that humans were present, they now had it. A woodcock took flight, but no one bothered to shoot it. Their prey wore neither feathers nor fur.

They were wetland hunters.

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Stegmeier jammed a hollow metal probe into the ground and pulled up a soil sample. He tapped the probe against a tree trunk, knocking loose the soil.

"See the reddish-orange color here?" he said. "That's very indicative of an upland."

Vineyard marked "NWC" -- no wetland characteristics -- on her clipboard, and the three pressed ahead.

Their afternoon hike was part of an effort to find and map every wetland in Kent County, no matter how small. State law protects wetlands of five acres and larger. Ultimately, Stegmeier, Vineyard and Dillon hope Kent County's 21 townships will adopt ordinances protecting the smaller wetlands.

First they have to find them.

That's why members of the Grand Rapids Audubon Club formed the Neighborhood Wetlands Stewards two years ago.

"Basically, they were worried that their favorite birding spots and wildlife spots were turning into parking lots," Vineyard said. "It just kind of grew from there."

Small wetlands targeted

The group, with a membership of about 30, received the imprint of officialdom in September when it received a \$73,380 grant from the Grand Rapids Community Foundation and \$75,000 from the Frey Foundation toward the estimated \$225,000 cost of the project.

In 1980, when the state Legislature passed the Wetlands Protection Act, it allowed local governments to adopt their own ordinances protecting wetlands smaller than five acres. But in the 20 years since, very few, and none in Kent County, have.

"The hitch is they have to inventory them first," said Rick Sullivan, executive director of the Center for Environmental Studies, one of five environmental groups supporting the Wetland Stewards. "The

purpose is to try to give the townships the materials they need to protect the wetlands. After that it's up to them to decide what to do with it."

The group chose to begin with Cannon Township, since the township board of trustees has a history of environmental awareness. Ada Township may be next. All told, it may take five years to inventory the entire county.

Some will oppose protection

Cannon Township Clerk Bonnie Shupe said she is glad the Wetland Stewards chose to begin with her township, though she knows some developers, farmers and others may oppose an ordinance to protect small wetlands.

"We face opposition in anything that we do," she said. "It's like anything else that's new: There are people who are afraid. They are going to feel threatened that we're going to take something away from them. But I think with a little education they'll understand.

"We don't want anything to get destroyed from this point forward. If you keep filling them in, we're going to have a lot of problems."

She looked out her office window at a grove of sumac behind the township hall on Belding Road. "There's a very nice little wetland out there," she said. "It's just gorgeous."

Environmentalists know that not everyone sees a wetland as gorgeous, but, rather, as a breeding place for mosquitoes and a wasted piece of land that could be made useable with a little fill dirt.

But, they argue, swamps, marshes and bogs are valuable breeding grounds for fish, frogs, muskrats and other animals that provide food for animals further up the food chain. Wetlands also are important for humans, since they act as filters, purifying polluted water, and they help with flood control by retaining rainwater and slowly releasing it.

"Some people are never going to be reached. They have a different set of values," said Sullivan, of the Center for Environmental Study. "But I think there's a

very strong moral issue involved here. I don't think we have the right to go around willy-nilly destroying everything. Our ultimate purpose is to educate the community so that it wants those laws passed for its own good."

A daunting task

Originally, the Wetland Stewards intended to walk every inch of Kent County, searching for wetlands, but that proved to be unrealistic. Instead, the group decided to study several maps and aerial photos showing the topography, soils and other characteristics of Kent County. By combining the maps and photos, the environmentalists hope to determine the likely locations of wetlands. Even then, they can't be certain that one particular spot actually is a wetland.

"That's when we send someone in," Sullivan explained.

Which is why Stegmeier, Vineyard and Dillon were hiking through the Cannonsburg State Game Area.

One obvious indicator of a wetland is the presence of water, but not all wetlands are wet year-round. Thus, the three also were looking for certain types of soils and plants common to wetlands. Some vegetation, such as cattails and marsh marigolds, are "obligate wetland plants," meaning they occur in wetlands more than 99 percent of the time.

Vineyard kicked a rusty 5-gallon can. "This," she said, "is what we call an obligate wetland piece of junk."

Each of the three is a committed environmentalist. Stegmeier is a member of the Izaak Walton League and a wildlife biology student at Grand Valley State University. Dillon is a member of the Audubon Club. Vineyard is chairwoman of the Neighborhood Wetlands Stewards and makes her living as assistant program director for the Zeeland-based Children's Environmental Trust Foundation, which sends groups of students to the South American rain forests.

She recalled her first visit to the Costa Rican rain forest in 1997.

"It has such an impact to see the clear cutting," she said. "I knew that I couldn't save the rain forest. So what can I do here? That's when I got involved with wetlands."

Most permits gain approval

The most recent survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated Michigan has lost 50 percent of its wetlands. Seventy-five percent of what remains is in private hands.

Even though state law protects wetlands of five acres or more, the state Department of Environmental Quality granted 75 percent of applications for permits to fill those areas, a 1997 study by the Michigan United Conservation Clubs found. For wetlands smaller than five acres, no permit is required.

"There's absolutely no scientific basis for five acres," Vineyard said. "It's a number they pulled out of the hat. It's the smaller wetlands we're concerned about, because they're the ones that can really slip through the cracks."

It was late afternoon with the sun creeping toward the horizon, and the three still had not found a wetland. They walked under wild grapevines arching from the treetops like cables on the Mackinac Bridge. A couple of hundred feet ahead, Stegmeier was calling back that he'd found something. Dillon and Vineyard followed him down a ravine.

"Good job, John," Vineyard said. "You're like a bloodhound."

He jabbed the metal probe into the ground and came up with a dark gray soil sample. He compared it to the swatches in a booklet called the "Munsell Soil Color Chart." Generally, the darker a soil sample, the more likely it came from a wetland.

"This is like off-the-chart black," Stegmeier said. "This is definitely a wetland."

Affecting the ecosystem

As if to confirm it, Dillon stepped forward and sank

to the top of her boot, then pulled it out with a sucking sound. The three headed back to the car.

"I care a lot about this because I value all living creatures and people," Vineyard said. "What you're doing to your land is eventually affecting my rights and other species. You're affecting a whole ecosystem. Is that your right? I'm worried that in 50 years it's going to be gone."

The Neighborhood Wetlands Stewards will hold a public meeting Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 8, at the Cannon Township Hall, 6878 Belding Road NE. The purpose is to share information about their survey of wetlands in the township.

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