



A PASSION FOR PLANTS

Volunteers help native species survive at Lapham Peak

by Mike Johnson, reprinted with permission from *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

Town of Delafield—Almost every day, a group of volunteers is waging a battle against invasive species at Lapham Peak Park.

These volunteers—among them Mike and Yvonne Fort, John Mesching, John Lupo and Cathy Chybowski—are trying to stop the spread of common buckthorn, honeysuckle and garlic mustard, non-native plants that are threatening the extensive oak forest and other native plants at Lapham Peak, which is part of the Kettle Moraine State Forest.

Left unchecked, buckthorn will take over the forest understory, choke out native plants and prevent the oak forest from regenerating, said Ed Muzik, the state Department of Natural Resources' property manager at Lapham Peak Park, W329-N846 Highway C.

Instead of stately oaks at Lapham Peak, one day there could be an "extensive scrubby buckthorn forest," Muzik said.

Mike Fort and the other volunteers are trying to make sure that never happens.

Fort, of Wales, is at the park for at least several hours a day, taking a chain saw to buckthorn, particularly along the Ice Age Trail.

"Buckthorn shades everything out. Oak needs sunlight to grow," Fort said.

Once the buckthorn is cut, the Forts, Mesching, Lupo and others, including students from Kettle Moraine High School, drag or carry it to brush piles, which will be burned sometime after the snow falls.

Last year, more than 400 big piles of buckthorn were burned, Muzik said.

If they aren't cutting buckthorn, the volunteers are uprooting and destroying garlic mustard. Introduced to the United States by early settlers from Europe, garlic mustard was used for cooking and for medicinal purposes. According to the DNR, the herb can displace native woodland wildflowers and most native herbaceous species within 10 years.

And when garlic mustard isn't in their sights, the volunteers are restoring prairie to areas of the 1,222-acre state park in the town of Delafield.

An invader crusader

Muzik credits Mike Fort for much of the progress in the war on invasive species. Fort has volunteered at Lapham Peak for about 11 years, and since he retired in March 2004 as a pilot for Midwest Airlines, the park is like a second home to him.

"He's really had a sustained and dedicated effort," Muzik said. "The joke is, if we could clone him, we'd whip this invasive species problem."

Fort, 62, shrugs off the praise. He doesn't like being the center of attention, and notes there are dozens of people involved in efforts to improve the state park, including the Friends of Lapham Peak.

"I'm out here for selfish reasons. I just like being out here," said Fort, who received a 2006 Invader Crusader Award from the Wisconsin Council on Invasive Species and is considered Lapham Peak's resident expert on invading plants.

"I enjoy the park. I feel like I benefit a lot more than the park benefits from anything I do. Being in a beautiful place ... (For) southeast Wisconsin to have a thousand-acre gem like this is kind of special."

It was as a child and from his grandfather that Fort learned to appreciate nature. Once, his grandfather slammed on the brakes of the old Chevy they were riding in and pointed out a bluebird on a wire.

As an adult, he discovered that bluebird nest boxes at the state park were not being tended. So he started to take care of the boxes. That, in turn, led him to learn that buckthorn and honeysuckle are not conducive habitats for bluebirds. That prompted him to begin working to restore prairie plants to the woodland area.

"We planted our first plot of prairie in 1995," he said. "That was the year we really started getting serious with chain saws and buckthorn control."

About 10 years ago, he teamed up with Chybowski, a biology and environmental science teacher at Kettle Moraine High, to control invasive species at Lapham Peak and at other natural areas around Waukesha County.

Fort said Chybowski is "a wonderful teacher" who is instilling a fondness for nature in her students.

Prairie restoration effort

In the fall, Fort and Chybowski will lead Kettle Moraine High students and other volunteers on prairie seed collecting expeditions at the park.

"Together we planted nine acres after school one afternoon last November," Chybowski said.

This year, after soybeans are harvested from a 10-acre area, seeds will be planted, and by next spring a prairie should be taking shape.

Chybowski points out that invasive species are "second only to habitat destruction as the most serious threat to our native biodiversity. Some would argue it is currently the number one threat," she said.

"Some people don't understand the serious nature of this threat unless it is put into economic terms. Our country spends billions of dollars each year trying to control—probably will never be able to eradicate them—invasive plants and animals," she said.

"Humans keep introducing these species from their homelands to other habitats where they have few to no natural predators or controls, so they spread like wildfire. They are able to compete aggressively in their 'new homes' with the native species, which have evolved there over eons of time," Chybowski said.

With Fort's help, Chybowski is getting students outside to "provide them with opportunities to learn from nature."

In a way, they are grooming the next generation of guardians of Wisconsin's natural resources.

"It is my hope that work in their 'own backyard' instills a sense of stewardship and ownership in my students for their environment.

The work at Lapham Peak by the volunteers and students already is paying off.

"I've seen parts of the forest have dramatic change," Muzik said.

Fort doesn't think volunteers will be able to stop entirely the march of the invaders.

"I hope there are small oases in the storm of the invasive plants," Fort said, "where we still can see, still can remember what the native vegetation was like."