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# Volunteers keep our waters healthy for everyone

**Jen DeMoss**

Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council communications director

Herm Boatin waded into Milligan Creek, yardstick in hand. His wife, Darlene, stood on shore with a clipboard, waiting for Herm to report stream depths along the transect tape that she and Monitoring Programs Coordinator Caroline Keson held across the stream.

“I found out that whoever does the paperwork is the boss,” Darlene said, laughing and gesturing towards her clipboard, “and the boss doesn’t have to wear waders. So, this whole time, twice a year, I’ve been the boss.”

This month, we’re throwing the spotlight on our volunteers: folks like the Boatins who help us ensure the health of Northern Michigan’s water, one monitoring event at a time. In 2021, we had 128 volunteer lake and stream monitors. Over 1,300 people have volunteered with us since our programs began. There’s information on how you can join one of our fun monitoring groups at the end of this article.

The Boatins have been part of Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council’s Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program for over a decade. They’ve spent years collecting long-term data on stream depth, temperature, water chemistry, and aquatic animal populations. Herm did graduate school research at the University of Michigan Biological Station, the birthplace of the Watershed Council. He’s dedicated to bringing more volunteer monitors into the fold, particularly because of the challenges our area faces.

"A lot of people on our lakes aren't residents," said Herm, "so they tend to focus on having fun and might know less about the stewardship aspects of living here." He's been working with the Mullett Lake Preservation Society to raise awareness about the work needed to keep our waters healthy for residents and visitors alike.

The Watershed Council is fortunate to have several volunteers who come back year after year to identify plants and macroinvertebrates and drop Secchi discs into lakes in the summer months. Beth Varty lives near Lake Charlevoix in Boyne City, and she's always loved to kayak and swim. She's also been a volunteer stream monitor on the Boyne River for over 15 years.

"I just want to take care of the water for the next generations," said Varty. She's been amazed by the macroinvertebrates — small aquatic animals collected during surveys — she's been able to identify, and their importance as indicators of water health. "If you enjoy clean water and want it to be here in the future, then volunteer," she said.

Varty also appreciates the friends she's made as a result of the volunteer program, and so does one of her companion monitors on the Boyne River, Nancy Cunningham. Cunningham is another volunteer who's been around for over 15 years. She grew up with a father who was an environmentalist concerned about water quality in Flint, and she canoed with him in the Flint River as a child.

"Maintaining those monitoring records keeps me going," said Cunningham. "That way, if something pops up in the water, you know it wasn't there in the past and you have evidence that something's wrong. Having a record of the health of the river is incredibly important."

Keson agrees — she's in charge of maintaining the records that she, volunteers, interns, and other staff members collect each year. This enormous data set serves as a snapshot of water quality from year to year. It helps the Watershed Council, state agencies, and other conservation organizations make informed decisions about water resources.

"Our volunteers make it possible for us to collect all of this data," said Keson. "We've got extensive records on our water bodies stretching back for years thanks to them." Now, Keson is working with new data-reporting software called Water Reporter, which volunteers can try out in the field this summer.

Want to spend some time outdoors this summer with a net and waders, looking at cool wildlife? Want to make friends with folks as interested in the environment as you are? We're looking for volunteer lake and stream monitors for multiple spots. New stream monitors can join us for a training 5-7:30 p.m. May 11 in Cheboygan. New lake monitors can attend a training 5:30-7 p.m. May 17 at the Petoskey City Marina clock tower. For more information, visit [watershedcouncil.org/attend-an-event](http://watershedcouncil.org/attend-an-event), call 231-347-1181, or email [info@watershedcouncil.org](mailto:info@watershedcouncil.org). We'd be happy to have you join our team!

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