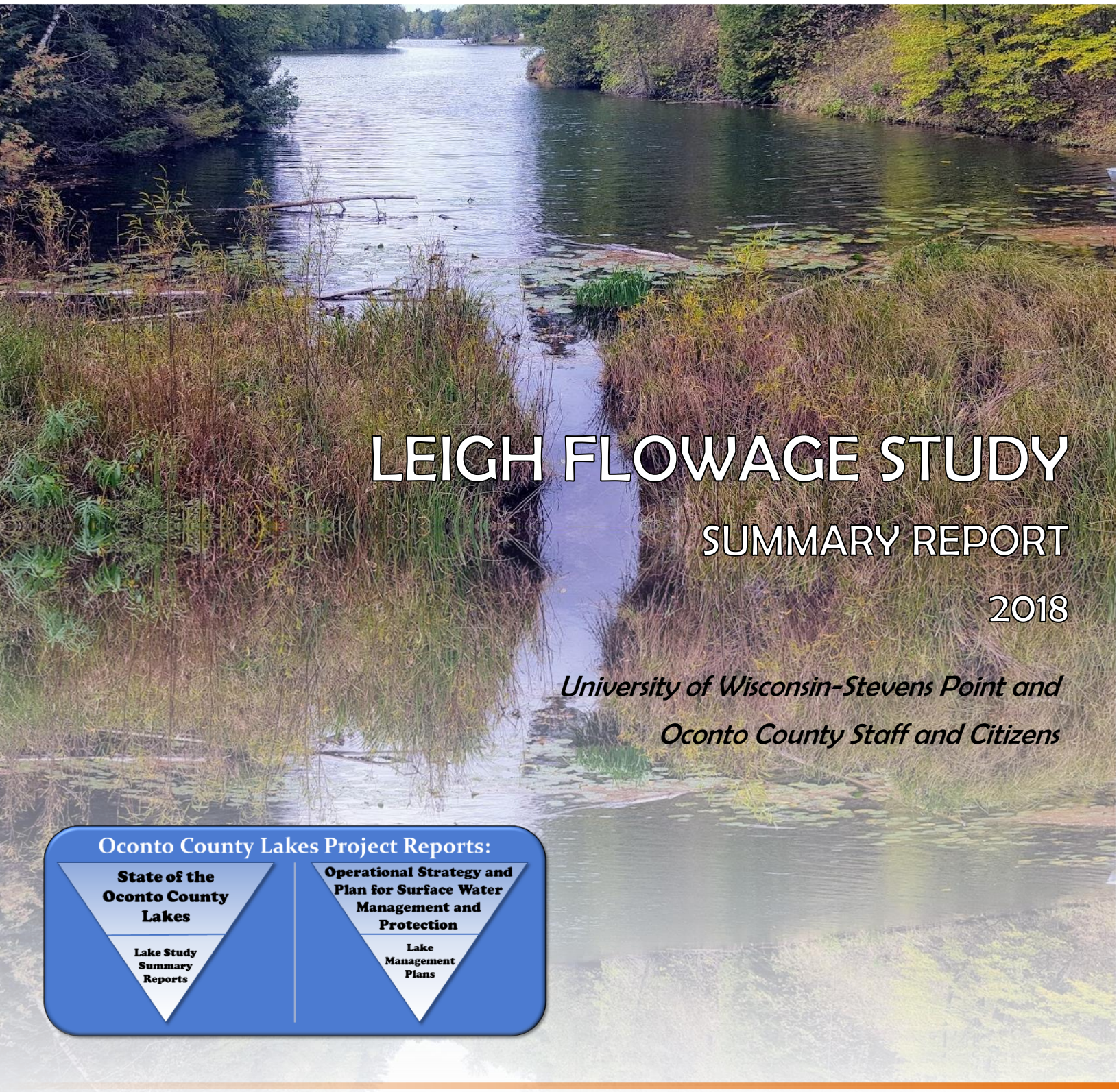
Oconto County Lakes Project



LEIGH FLOWAGE STUDY

SUMMARY REPORT

2018

University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and

Oconto County Staff and Citizens

Center for Watershed Science and Education
College of Natural Resources
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

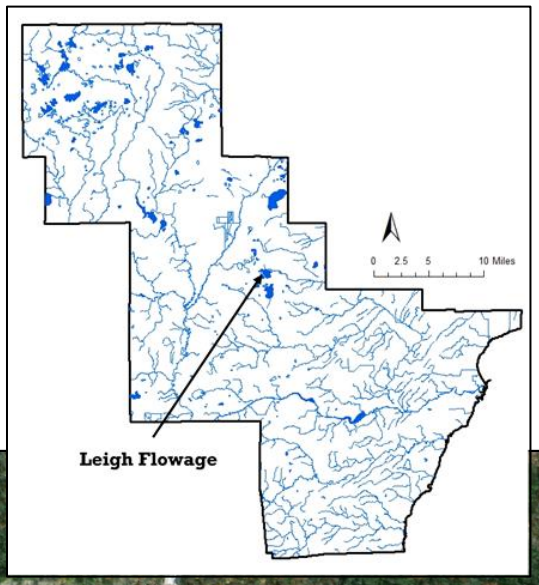
Background

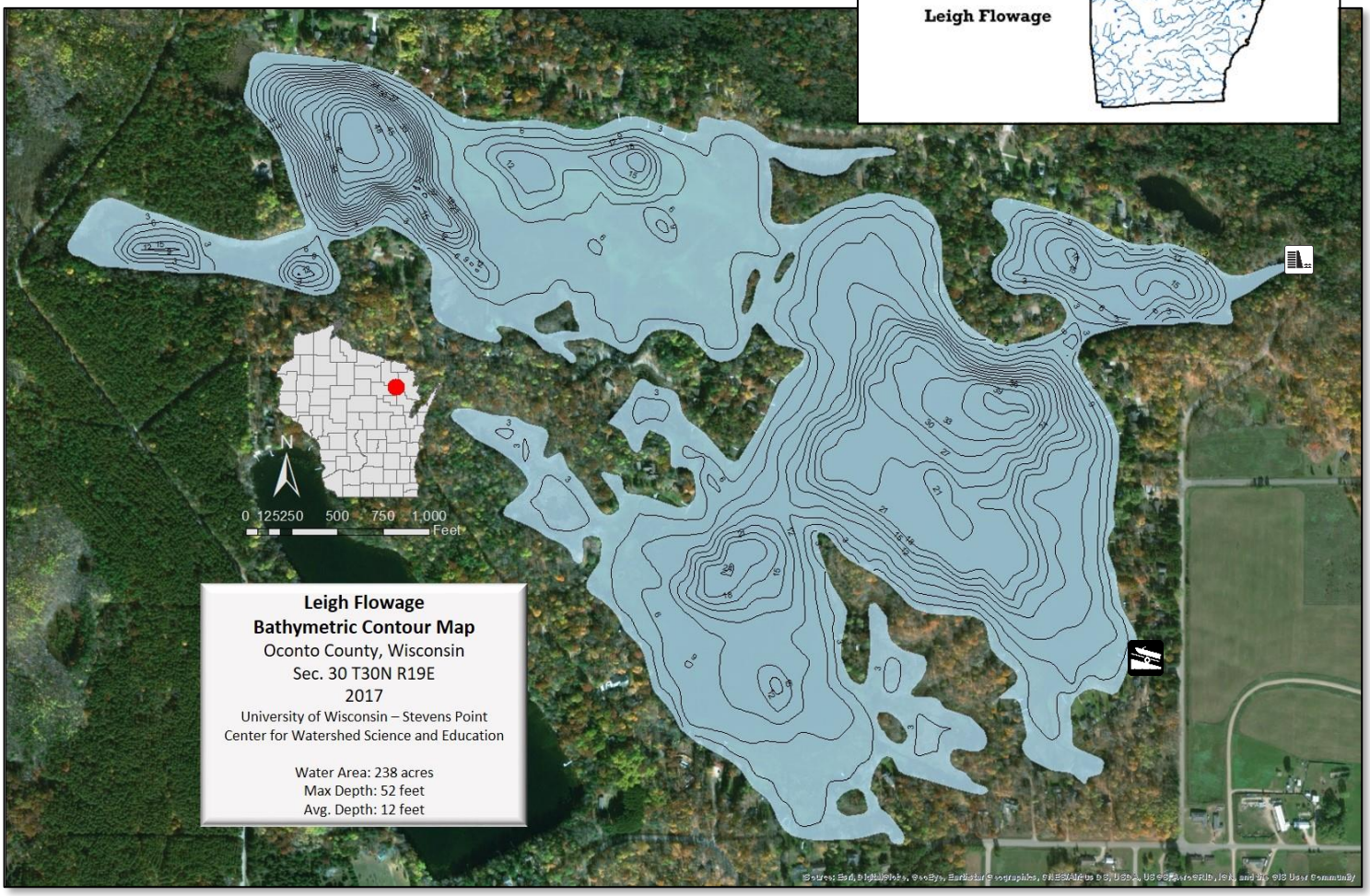
- Leigh Flowage is a 238-acre impoundment in central Oconto County with a maximum depth of 52 feet.
- Water enters Leigh Flowage from small tributaries and wetlands (and groundwater), and leaves via Messenger Creek on the east side. Surface water runoff and direct precipitation also contribute water.
- Visitors have access to the lake from a public boat landing on the southeast side.
- This report summarizes data collected during the 2016-2017 lake study.

Township of Brazeau

Surface Area: 238 acres

Maximum Depth: 52 feet

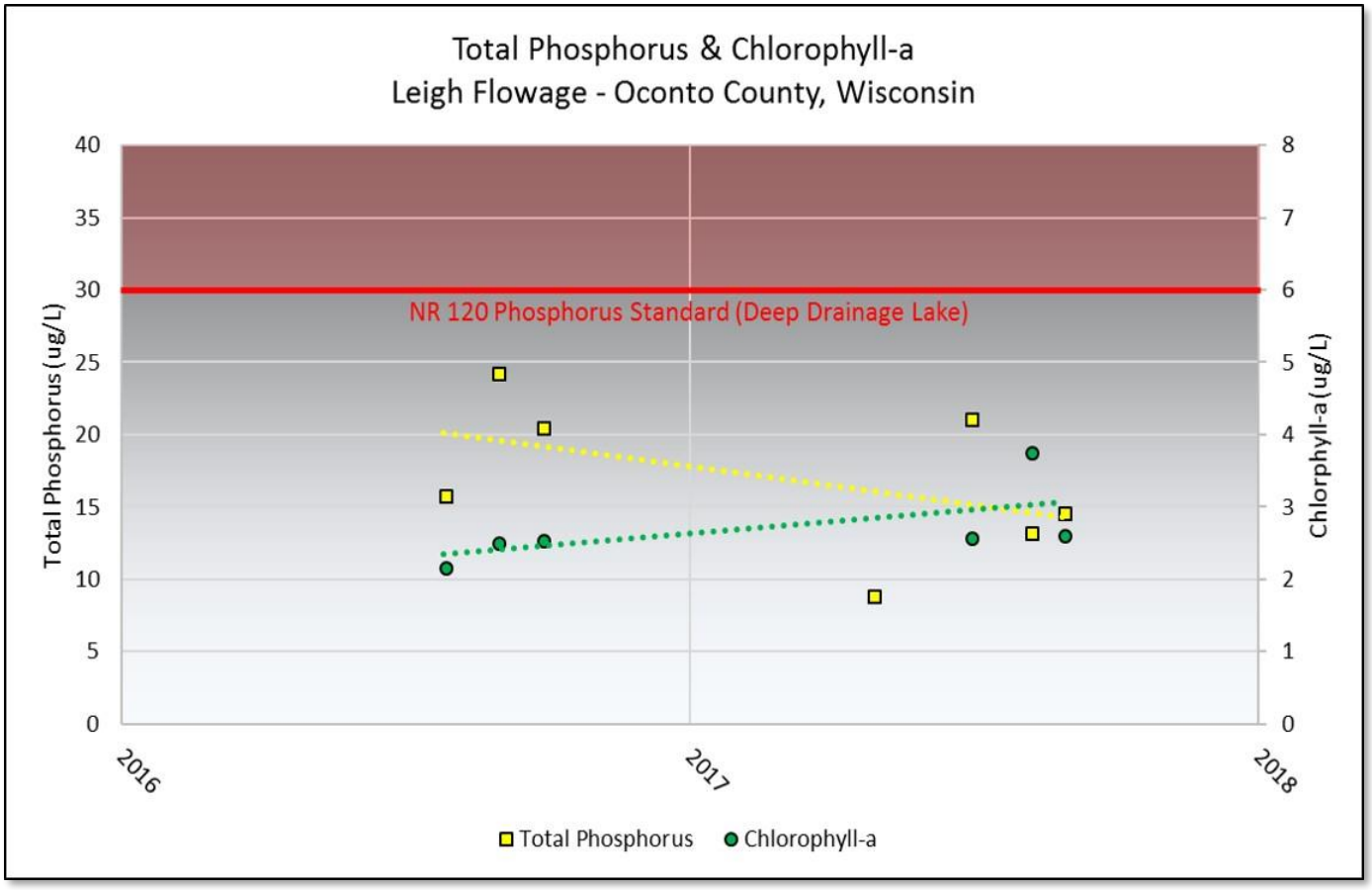




Water Quality

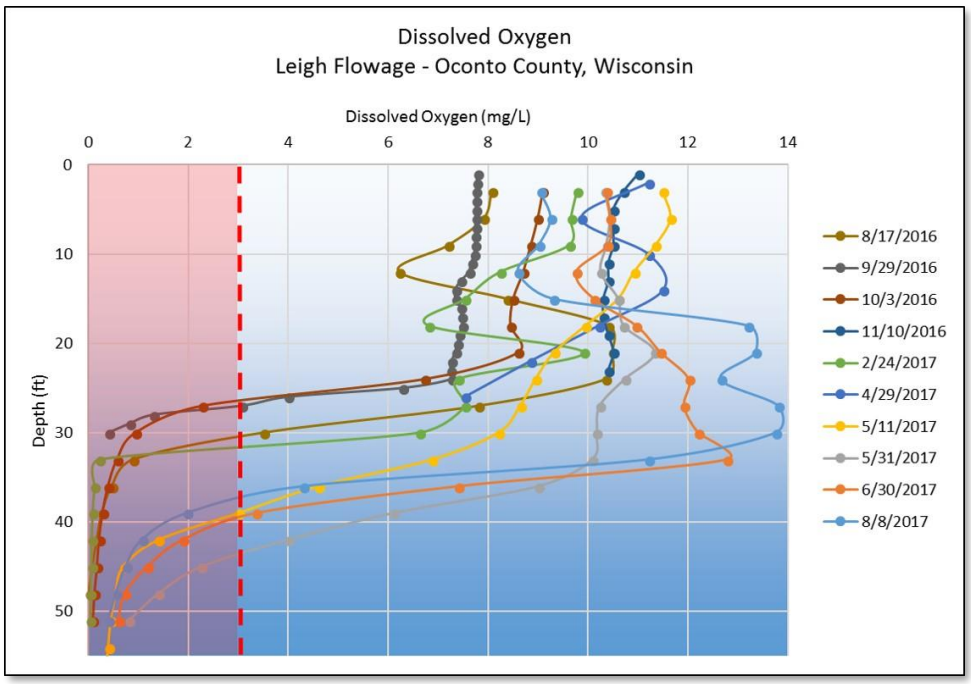
Nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen are what feed aquatic plants and algae in a lake. Excessive amounts of nutrients delivered to a lake will result in abundant plant and algae growth. Disturbance within a watershed combined with the landscape's inability to infiltrate and filter runoff is what primarily delivers nutrients to a lake.

- Total Phosphorus remained well **below** the Wisconsin state phosphorus standard of 30 ug/L for deep drainage lakes during the two-year study. The 2-year trend is decreasing.
- Inorganic nitrogen (0.07 mg/L) remained below the threshold of 0.3 mg/L when algal blooms increase.
- Chlorophyll-a, an indirect measure of algae, remained well below the threshold of 6 ug/L, but shows an increasing trend.



Water Quality

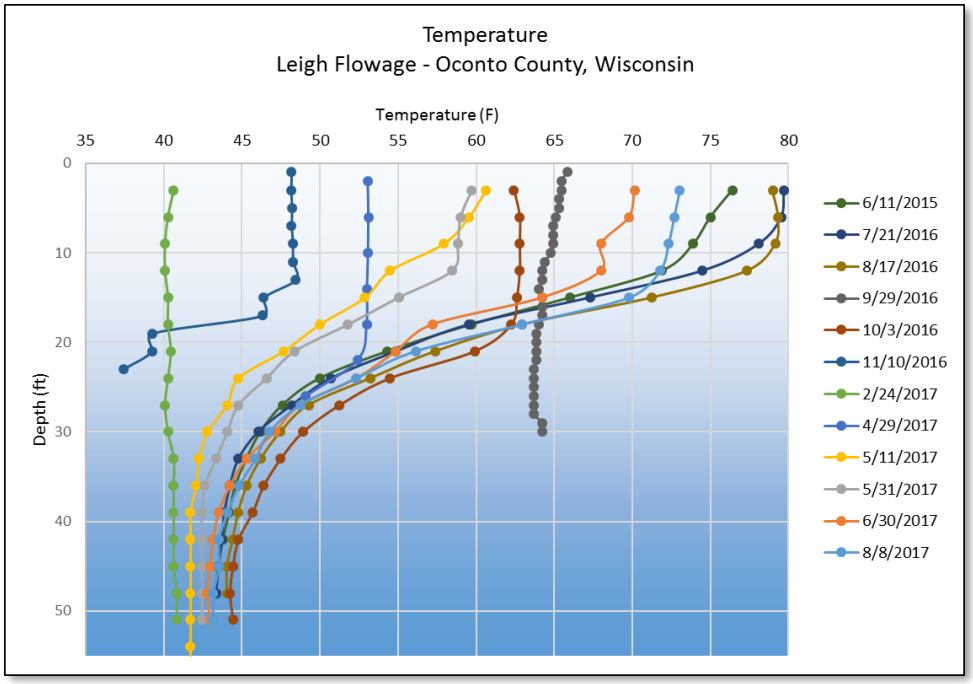
Sufficient **dissolved oxygen** in lake water is essential to the survival of aquatic organisms. The amount of dissolved oxygen present within a lake varies by season and depth. It is determined by the biological activity that consumes or produces oxygen, by water mixing through wind, changes in temperature, and inputs of surface and groundwater. Generally, at least 5 mg/L oxygen is required for fish.



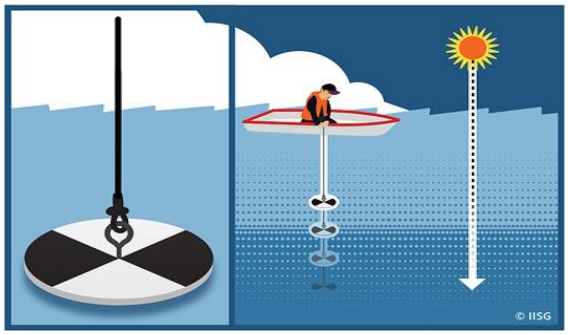
- Sufficient oxygen is available in the top 25 feet of the water column in Leigh Flowage throughout the year.
- Bumps in dissolved oxygen concentrations at 15-30 feet suggest mild algal activity.

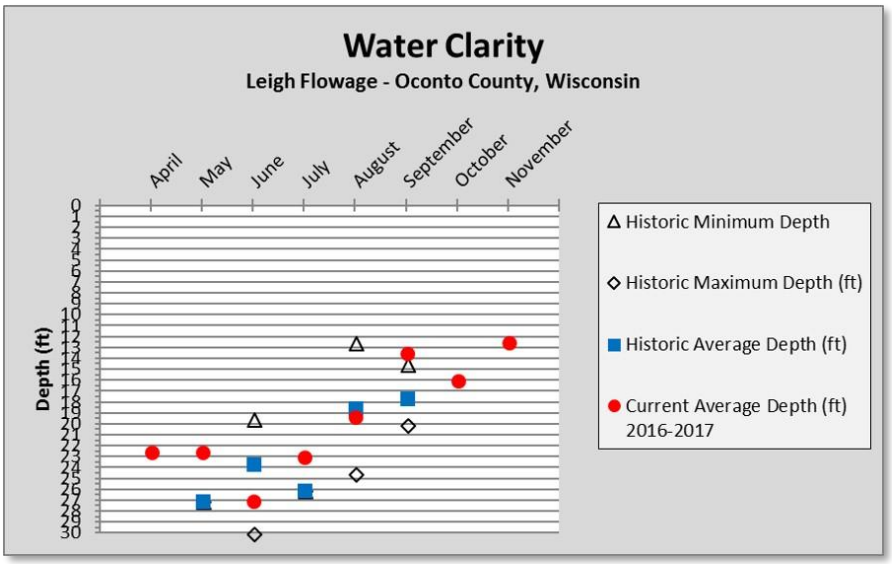
Lake water **temperature** has a significant impact on water chemistry, spatial distribution of fish, microbial growth and oxygen content.

- The temperature gradient in Leigh Flowage exhibits a clear thermocline between 15 and 25 feet during the growing season that separates warmer oxygen-rich water at the top from colder oxygen-poor water below.



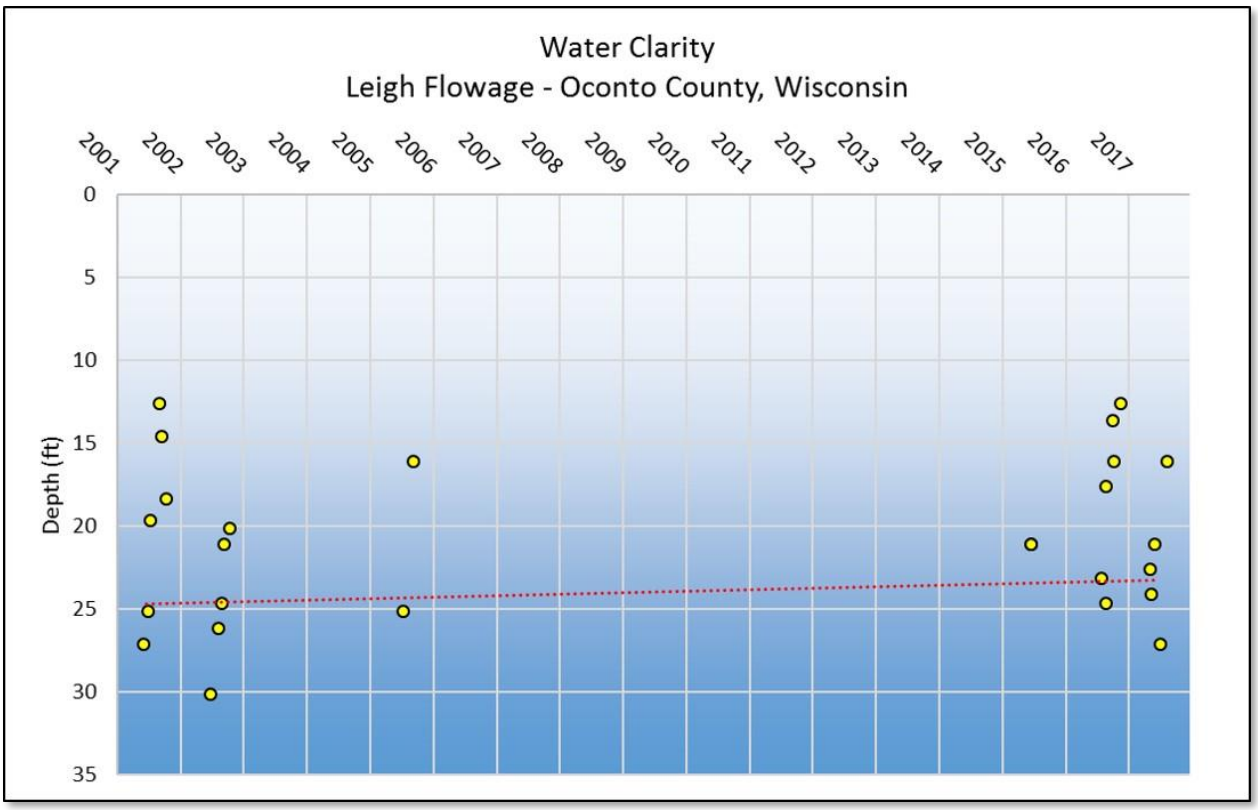
Water Quality





Water clarity is a measure of how deep light can penetrate (Secchi depth). Clarity is affected by water color, turbidity (suspended sediment), and algae. Water clarity helps determine where rooted aquatic plants can grow. It is typical for water clarity to vary throughout the year.

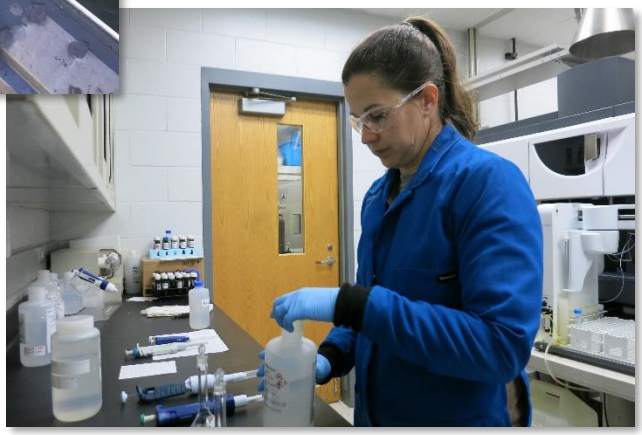
- The graph to the left shows water clarity measurements taken between April and November.
- During 2016-17, on average, the poorest water clarity in Leigh Flowage was in September and the best was in June. This is consistent with previous observations and demonstrates a slightly decreasing depth trend over the long term (July data).



Water Quality

Other chemistry data was collected from lake water samples, such as basic cations, pollutants and acid rain input, and physical parameters. Results of such analyses can provide insights into a variety of other potential impacts to the lake. While concentrations of these compounds in lake water is usually low, higher concentrations can be indicators of other potential issues.

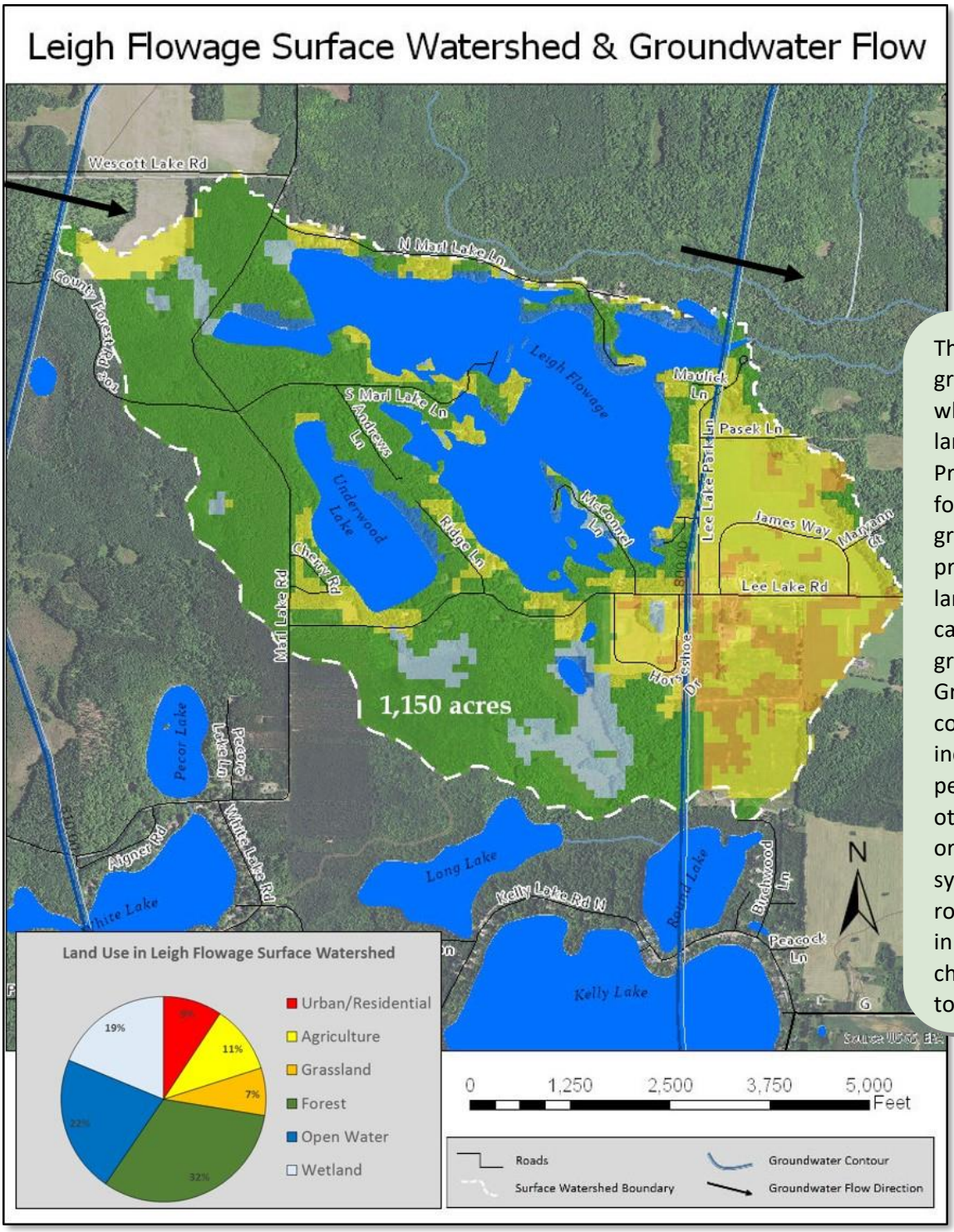
- Concentrations of potassium (0.69 mg/L), chloride (10.2 mg/L) and sodium (3.9 mg/L) were relatively low. This suggests minimal impact from septic systems, road salt, animal waste and fertilizers.
- DACT, a screening tool to determine if your lake is being impacted by pesticides, was not detected.
- Water in Leigh Flowage is hard (137 mg/L CaCO3), having a high level of dissolved minerals. Hard water lakes tend to produce more fish and aquatic plants than soft water lakes and have clearer water as the minerals tend to bind with phosphorus making it unavailable to algae blooms.



For more information on how to interpret your lake's water quality data, please refer to the "State of the Oconto County Lakes Report" that is on file with Oconto County.

Watershed

Groundwater provides water to lakes in Oconto County throughout the entire year. Hard surfaces on the landscape prevent water from soaking into the ground and becoming groundwater. This results in less water flowing to the lake during snowmelt and rain events. Water that does not infiltrate to groundwater becomes **surface runoff** flowing across the surface of the landscape where it can move sediment and contaminants to the lake from within its watershed.



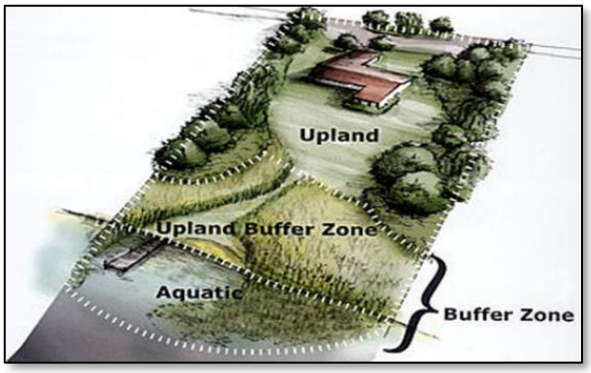
The quality of groundwater reflects what is happening on the land surface. Precipitation falling on forests produces clean groundwater, whereas precipitation falling on land that has chemical use can leach contaminants to groundwater. Groundwater contamination may include nitrogen, pesticides, herbicides and other soluble chemicals originating from septic systems, crops, barnyards, road de-icing, etc. Once in the groundwater, these chemicals move slowly towards a lake or river.

Shorelands

Shoreland vegetation is critical to a healthy lake's ecosystem. It provides habitat for many aquatic and terrestrial animals including birds, frogs, turtles, and many small and large mammals. It also helps to improve the quality and quantity of the runoff that flows across the landscape towards the lake. Healthy shoreland vegetation includes a mix of tall, native grasses/flowers, shrubs and trees.

- Shorelands around Leigh Flowage were surveyed in August 2017. Much of the shoreland is healthy, but many stretches are in need of restoration.

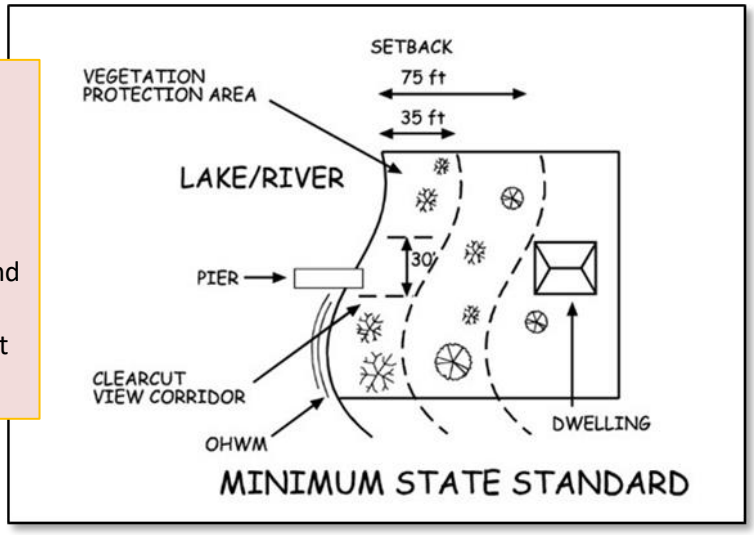
Total lakefront footage	No. Riparian lots	Measured shoreland disturbance (feet)	Measured shoreland disturbance (%)
39,396	143	10,605	27%



State Shoreland Zoning Ordinance
NR 115 Wisc. Adm. Code for Unincorporated Municipalities

No vegetation within 35 feet of the lake's edge shall be removed except for:

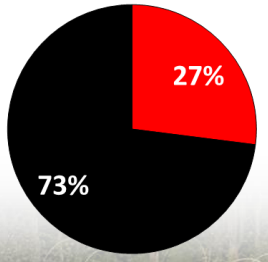
- Up to 30% of shoreline may be removed of shrubs and trees for a view corridor
- A mowed or constructed pedestrian path up to 5 feet wide to access lake



What Can You Do To Help Leigh Flowage?

- ✓ Leave natural shoreland vegetation in place or restore if it has been removed.
- ✓ Learn identify and look for invasive plants and animals and know who to contact if found.
- ✓ Do not purchase prohibited and restricted species. Purchase native plants when possible.
- ✓ Never transplant water garden or aquarium plants into lakes, streams or wetlands. Properly dispose of them.
- ✓ Remove invasive exotic plants from your landscape and replace them with native plants or non-invasive exotics. Scout regularly for new invasive plants.
- ✓ Avoid using garden plants from other regions whose invasive potential is poorly understood.

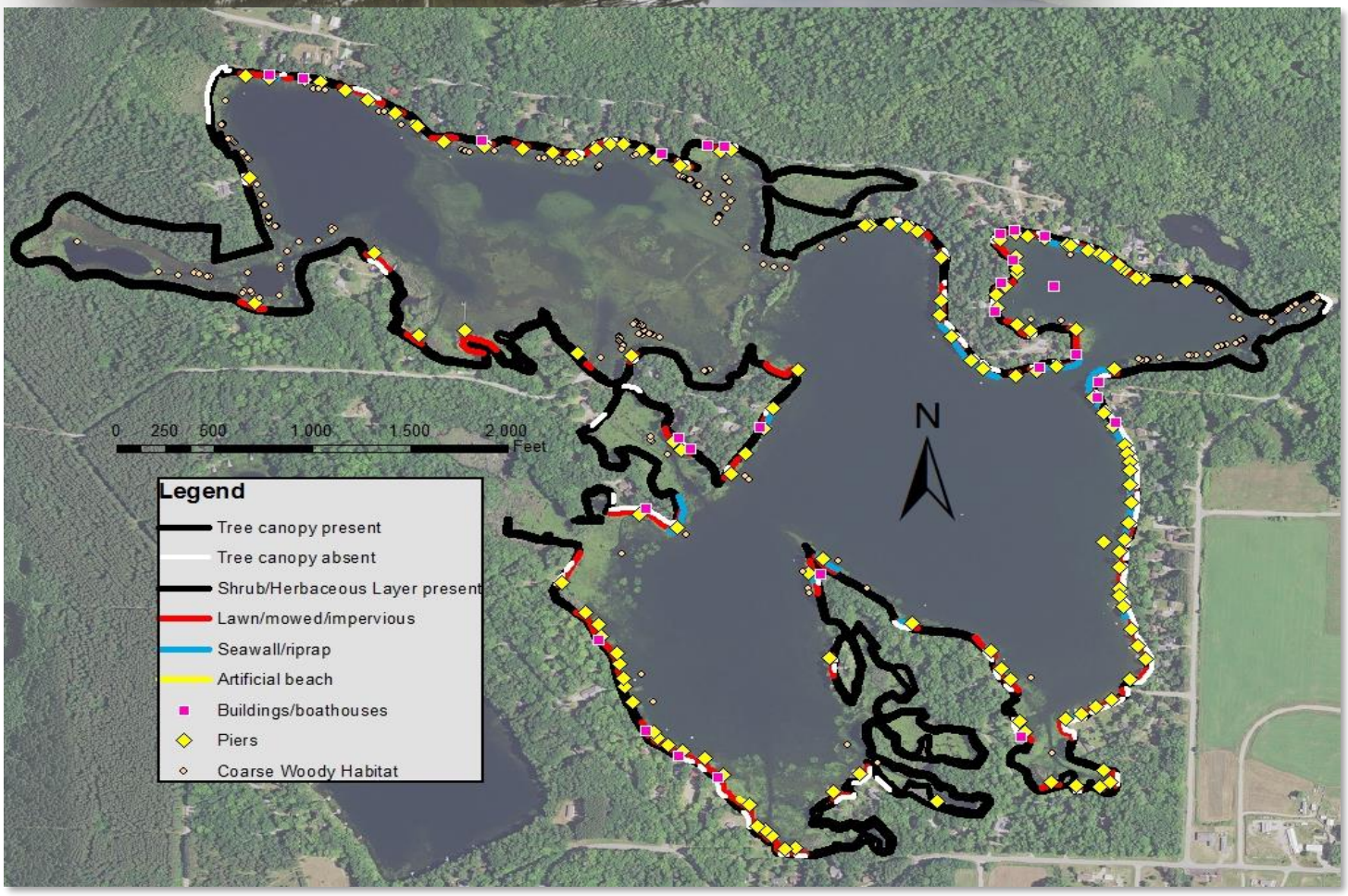
Shorelands



■ Disturbed Shoreline

■ Undisturbed Shoreline

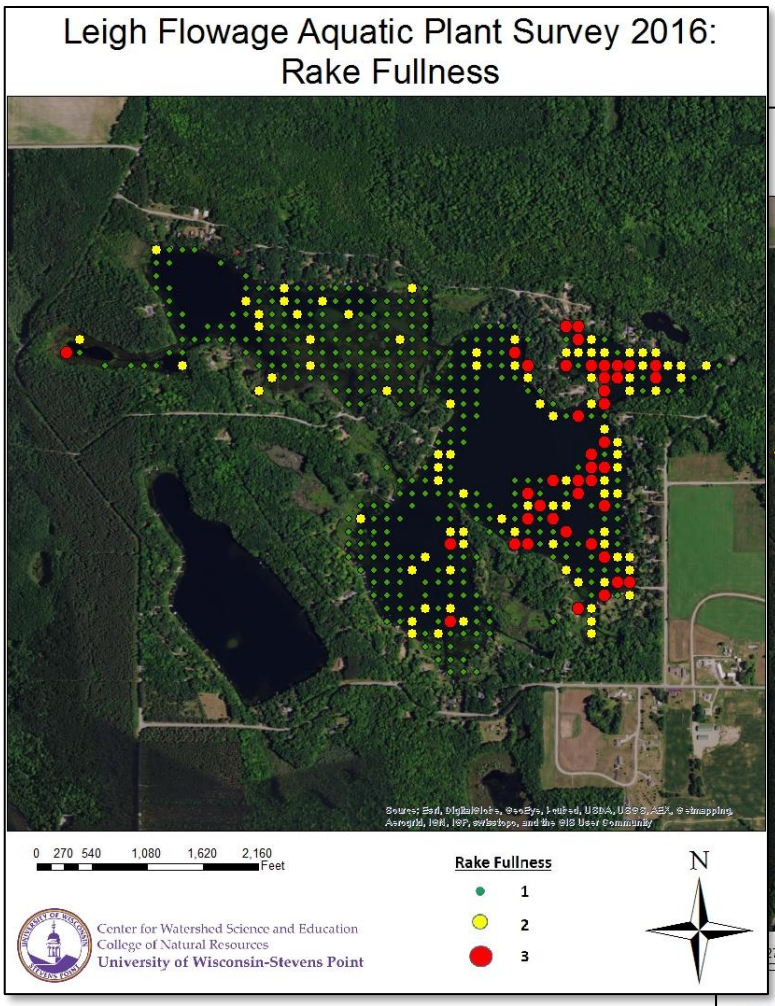
Modifications, Structures, Erosion	Measured Occurrence
Artificial Beach	165 ft
Rip Rap	1,212 ft
Sea Wall	1,138 ft
Impervious Surface	3,607 ft
Mowed Lawn	10,076 ft
Erosion	75 ft
Nonconforming Buildings	30
Piers	131
Coarse Woody Habitat	29 logs/mile

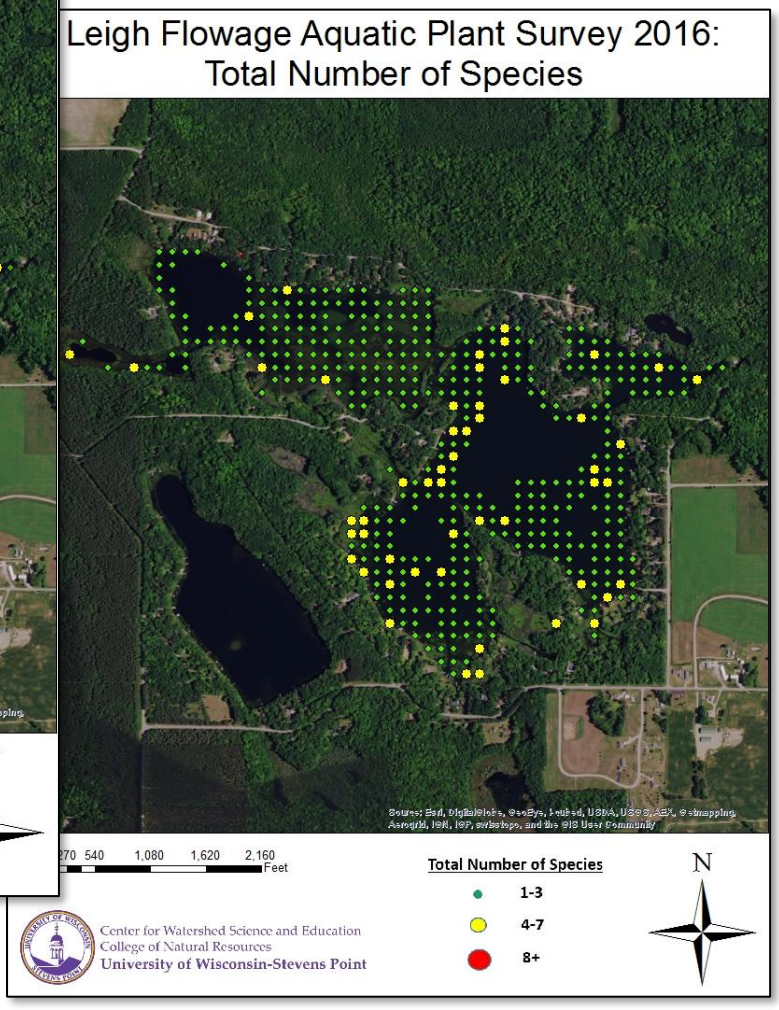


Aquatic Plants

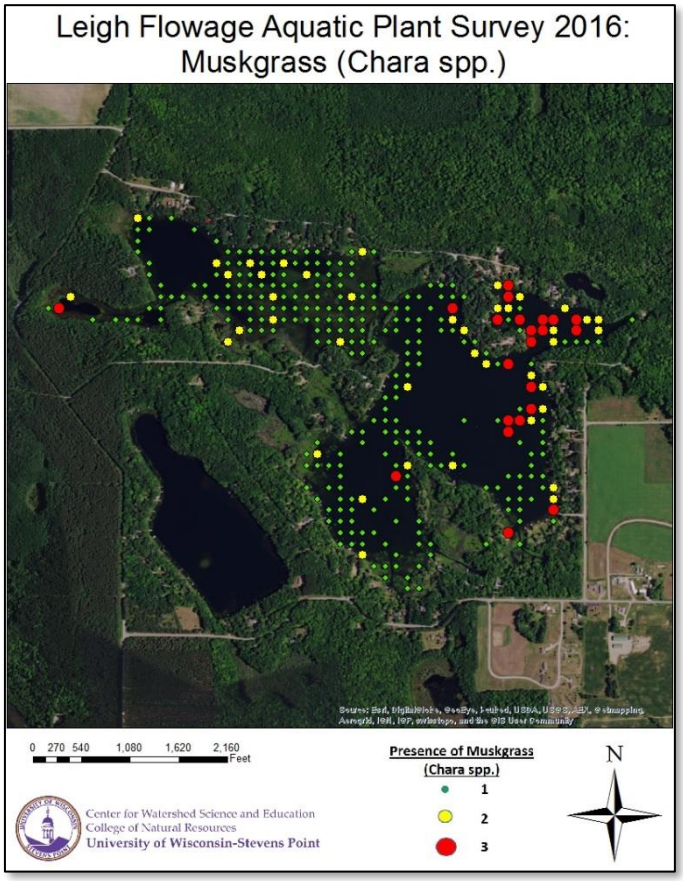
Aquatic plants are the forest landscape within a lake. They provide food and habitat for terrestrial and aquatic creatures such as fish, ducks, turtles, invertebrates and other animals. They increase oxygen levels in the water and utilize nutrients that would otherwise be used by algae. A healthy lake typically has a variety of aquatic plant species creating diversity that can help to prevent the establishment of aquatic invasive species.

- The aquatic plant community in Leigh Flowage is characterized by high-quality vegetation, with a floristic quality index (37.4) above the regional average. There were a total of 37 species in the 2016 survey.
- During the 2016 aquatic plant survey of Leigh Flowage, 67% of the sites had vegetative growth. The maximum depth of vegetation was 29.5 feet.
- The most frequently encountered plant species were chara (73%), slender naiad (29%) and northern water-milfoil (11%). All three species are native to Wisconsin.

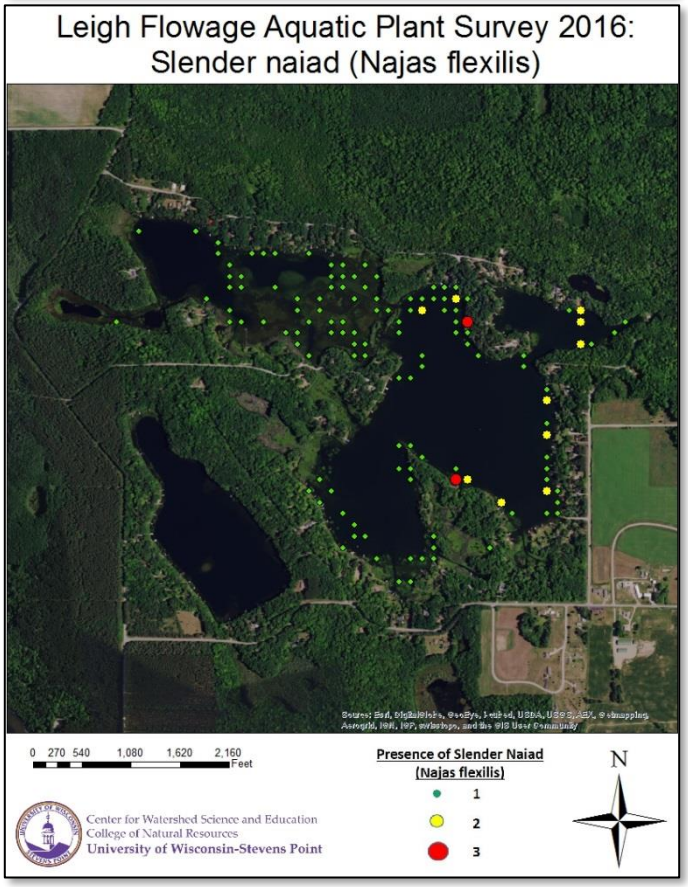




Aquatic Plants

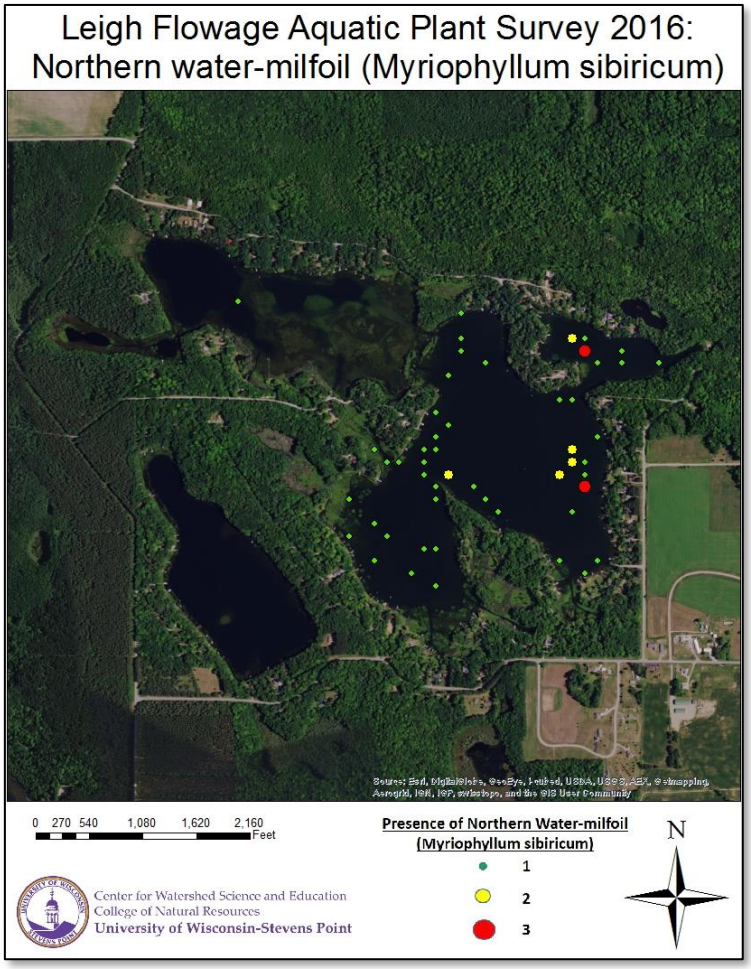


Chara is a type of macro algae that grows attached to muddy lake bottoms and has a musky odor. Muskgrass, as it is known, filters the lake water and is helpful in preventing the establishment of invasive species.



Slender naiad has glossy, finely toothed leaves appearing as whorls near the end of stems. Also known as the water-nymph, the whole plant is eaten by waterfowl and provides shelter for small fish and insects.

Aquatic Plants



Northern water-milfoil is important forage and cover for aquatic animals and an important food source for waterfowl.

Aquatic **invasive species** are non-native aquatic plants and animals that are most often unintentionally introduced into lakes by lake users. In some lakes, aquatic invasive plant species can exist as a part of the plant community, while in other lakes populations explode, creating dense beds that can damage boat motors, make areas non-navigable, inhibit activities like swimming and fishing, and disrupt the lakes' ecosystems.

- ✓ Phragmites is the only invasive species observed on Leigh Flowage in the 2016 survey.
- ✓ Banded mystery snail (2015), Chinese mystery snail (2014) and zebra mussel (2014) have been previously documented in Leigh Flowage.

Phragmites, a restricted species in Wisconsin, invades moist areas and can alter hydrology and choke out native species and wildlife habitat.

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared as an appendix to the **Oconto County State of the Lakes Report**, which is on file with the Oconto County Land Conservation Department.
Written and prepared by the Center for Watershed Science and Education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Primary Authors

Ryan Haney and Paul McGinley

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to our project partners for supporting this project by providing insight, enthusiasm, and funding:

Oconto County Lakes and Waterways Association

Oconto County Land Conservation Department – Ken Dolata

Oconto County Staff and Citizens

UW Extension-Oconto County – Dale Mohr

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources - Brenda Nordin

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Lake Protection Grant Program

UW-Stevens Point Water and Environmental Analysis Lab

Center for Watershed Science and Education
College of Natural Resources
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point