THE CULLEN CURRENTS

Fall, 2026

Update from the president

by C.B. Bylander

As I write this on October 15, my pontoon boat is still in the water and the dock has yet to be dragged to shore I've been holding out to the bitter end. I always think there's going to be one more nice day on the water. Maybe there will be.

Now that summer is behind us, what follows are a few autumn updates so that you know what I know.

Zebra Mussels: These unwanted aquatic invaders were discovered for the first time in Upper Cullen on October 14. That was when north side property owner Eli Olson pulled his paddle boat up on shore and discovered them on the hull. He found some on this dock, too. This is disappointing yet not surprising. Zebes, as they are called for short, were first discovered in Lower Cullen in October of 2016. A Middle Cullen infestation was confirmed in 2018. So, 10 years after their initial discovery they finally made it to Upper Cullen, perhaps hitching a ride on a boat or sloshing around in a minnow bucket that was brought from there to here.

How prevalent are zebes in Minnesota?

That depends on how you look at it. According to the Department of Natural Resources, zebes exist in only five percent of Minnesota's 11,842 lakes. While that's true because sightly less than 400 lakes are infested, it's also true that zebe-infested lakes are very common in the Brainerd Lakes Area. Zebes exist in the Gull Chain, Whitefish Chain and Pelican, Hubert, Edward, Ossie and Kimball lakes, just to name a few. In short, the Cullen Chain is largely surrounded by zebe-infested lakes.

The zebes most likely arrived by boat because the mussels are not strong swimmers. The only time they go great distances is when they are free-swimming veligers, the life stage in which they are microscopically small and drift in the water column for two to three weeks before searching for a hard surface to latch onto. Once they do find a hard surface, they permanently attach by using tiny elastic threads. Next, they go about the business of procreation. They are experts at this. A single female can produce up to 100,000 to 500,000 eggs per year, releasing massive numbers of veligers into the water. Zebe populations commonly go through a boom-and-bust cycle but are rarely, if ever, eradicated during these natural fluctuations.

If anything, this new infestation is a reminder that we all need to follow best practices when it comes to boating and fishing. University of Minnesota research has shown that boat landing inspectors have not prevented the spread of aquatic invasive species but certainly have slowed down the rate of spread.

Speaking of slowing the spread, I do want to give a shoutout to the Galles family, the owners of Upper Cullen Resort. They have been meticulously diligent in making sure boaters who use their launch site follow the law. Over the years Patty Galles has turned away paying customers who weren't willing to use their decontamination unit after coming to Upper Cullen from an AIS-infested lake. Their commitment to AIS prevention is perhaps a key reason why it took so long for zebes to infest Upper Cullen.

(continued on next page)

Starry stonewort: 2026 marked the third year we've had to deal with starry stonewort, a stringy weed-like algae that has taken up residence in the upper end of Middle Cullen Lake. It continued to spread in 2026 but not by a lot. The infestation was about six acres last year and has grown to about seven acres this year. Sadly, it is spreading down the northwestern shoreline, likely from a combination of fragmentation and water currents.

Thanks to your donations and grant funds from both the DNR and Crow Wing County, we were somewhat successful in minimizing the spread. Your AIS donations and grant money paid for three treatments of a copper-based algaecide-herbicide called Mizzen as well as two perimeter surveys that pinpointed the location and growth status of the infestation. Survey data is required to obtain a DNR treatment permit.

Our association took a slightly different treatment approach this year. Unlike last year, when we launched a DNR-supported "hit it hard and hit it often" approach, this year we used data from a 2025 DNR starry stonewort study on Middle Cullen and treated only three times. That's because the study indicated that our early 2025 treatment didn't do a whole lot to reduce bulbils and neither did our late autumn treatment. Bulbils are the reproductive part of the algae. So, this year we concentrated our treatments during early, mid and late summer when the DNR study suggested our treatments would generate the most bang for the buck.

Unlike last year, we did not conduct a perimeter and growth status survey after the final treatment because we'll need to have another survey done in the spring in order to obtain a treatment permit. Eliminating this survey was a way to reduce 2026 expenses without having much downside because the infestation is not expected to change much between now and spring.

Before I wrap up on starry stonewort, I do want to give a shoutout to our treasurer, Carol Lindahl, who is the point person for applying for government starry stonewort control grants, keeping the books and jumping through all the paperwork hoops that are required to obtain this so-called "free" money. Her grant application work paid for the starry stonewort awareness signs at the Middle Cullen boat landing and at Wilderness Point Resort. It also greatly offset our starry stonewort treatment costs. So, thanks Carol.

Odds and ends: You may have noticed channel marker buoys at the Middle Cullen public access this summer. Our association paid for the markers and placed them in an effort to minimize starry stonewort fragmentation. Vice-president John MacGibbon worked with the Crow Wing County Sheriff's Department to get them authorized, and then he placed them and pulled them out this fall. You can expect to see them again next spring.

In 2027 Crow Wing County will receive only half as much AIS funding from the DNR as it did this year. The county uses these funds for boat landing inspections and grants such as the $3,000 grant we received this year The budget reduction means there may be fewer county boat inspections at Lower Cullen next year and perhaps a reduction in grant funds, too. Time will tell.

Another shoreline being restored

by C.B. Bylander

Yet another Cullen Lake shoreline is being restored, thanks in part to our association's shoreline grant program.

Cullen Lakes Association board member Peter Miller is in the process of restoring 130 feet of shoreline on Lower Cullen, which is the entire length of his property.

"Something had to be done," he explained. "I had ice damage. The shoreline was sloughing. In fact, I was losing shoreline and worried about losing pine trees that I certainly wanted to keep."

So, Miller used our association's reimbursement process to get a free shoreline evaluation and management plan from the Crow Wing County Soil and Water Conservation District. That plan led to a cost-sharing agreement in which the county paid for one-half of the $7,500 project.

"They planted a variety of low growing native grasses that have long roots that hold soil in place," he said. "The weather was good this year. Everything is coming in well, and in the future this planting should be a barrier to geese"

before after

Remember, thanks to the CLA shoreline grant program, you too can get a free shoreline restoration consultation from experts at the Crow Wing County Soil and Water Conservation District. They offer a limited number of site visits per year. To schedule yours, go to the Crow Wing County SWCD website and click on the "Schedule a Shoreline On-site Visit" tab.

Many Minnesotans don't value aquatic plants. The state's lakes are paying a price.

from an article by MPR News reporter Kirsti Marohn

Minnesotans love their lakes. But they don't always love what grows in them. Aquatic plants — often dismissed as weeds — are common in Minnesota lakes. Some property owners remove them with machines or chemical herbicides, creating open water for swimming or boating. But those plants are doing important work to keep the lake healthy, from preventing shoreline erosion to reducing algae blooms to providing fish habitat. And there's evidence that getting rid of native plants in a lake makes it easier for invasive species to move in.

"We know that if you plow up a prairie, there's ecological impacts," said Donna Perleberg, an aquatic plant ecologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. "The same thing is true with a lake."

In recent decades, lake advocates have urged property owners to avoid overdeveloping lakeshore and leaving a natural buffer of trees and plants to protect the lake from pollution. Far less attention has been paid to plants that grow in the water. Scientists hope that a better understanding of native lake plants and their importance will help shift public attitudes toward protection.

An underwater forest at risk

Nisswa Lake in Crow Wing County has some of the clearest water in Minnesota. "A healthy population of aquatic plants is a big reason why," said Perleberg.

On a recent summer day, she stood on a city-owned dock in hip waders and pointed to nearly two dozen species of vegetation growing close to shore. Some, like cattails and bulrushes, extend out of the water. Others, like water lilies, are rooted to the lake bottom with leaves that float on the surface. And some stay submerged, forming an underwater forest

When she peers into the water, Perleberg sees a diverse ecosystem. But she acknowledges that for some people, there's an "ick" factor. Those plants provide shelter for fish and other aquatic creatures. Their roots anchor the lake bottom, keeping sediment from getting stirred up and clouding the water. They take up nutrients from the bottom of the lakes which helps limit algae blooms.

Aquatic plants also help slow boat waves before they reach the shore, protecting it from erosion. On hot days, floating plants such as lily pads act like an umbrella for lake critters. "They provide shade, so fish and invertebrates and other organisms get a little bit of a break from that hot water and the sun," Perleberg said.

Despite those benefits, Minnesota law allows property owners to remove some aquatic plants to create access for swimming or boating.

Another key reason for the loss of native aquatic plants is excess nutrients from shorelines running off property that doesn't have a buffer along the shoreline. Those nutrients can fuel algae blooms which block sunlight and kill submerged plants.

A 2021 study highlighted the loss of native plant diversity in Minnesota lakes over the past century. Perleberg and her colleagues looked at data collected from lake surveys in the 1920s and 1930s, then resurveyed the same lakes.

In more than half of the lakes, they couldn't locate at least one of the species that was common a century ago.

**Note: This text is taken from a much longer article and will be continued in the winter newsletter.*

Administration
Debi Oliverius - chair
Ryan Kennedy
Patty Hicks
Stu MacGibbon

Environmental Issues
Ryan Kennedy - chair
Patty Hicks
Stu MaGibbon

AIS
Pete Miller - chair
Paul Beilfuss
C.B. Bylander
Joel Knutson
Carol Lindahl

Fundraising/Membership/ Community Building
Lora Graumann - chair
Mark Best
Patty Hicks
John MacGibbon
Randy Steenholdt

Budget and Finances
Paul Beilfuss - chair
Lora Graumann
Joel Knutson
Carol Lindahl
Pete Miller

Water Quality Testers
Eric & Denise Whitson (L)
Debi Oliverius (M)
Matt Galles (U)

Communications/Education/ Partner Relations
C.B. Bylander - chair
Mark Best
Ryan Kennedy
Carol Lindahl
John MacGibbon
Randy Steenholdt

CLA officers
President - C.B. Bylander
Vice president - John MacGibbon
Secretary - Joel Knutson
Treasurer - Carol Lindahl

Webmaster — C.B. Bylander
Facebook page manager — Ryan Kennedy
Newsletter editor — Ann Beaver

Following are the committee reports that were presented at the 2026 Annual Meeting.

Administration Committee
Debi Oliverius, chair

The Administration Committee organized the 2026 annual membership meeting in conjunction with the full board of directors. Mailers were prepared, printed and mailed to CLA members in July for the August 8 annual meeting which is being held at Lutheran Church of the Cross in Nisswa. The committee members assisted with preparing a meeting packet for membership to review which includes all committee annual reports, the projected operating budget for the next fiscal year, nominating committee information, the treasurer's report and minutes from the 2025 annual meeting for review and approval. The committee will handle refreshments, registration and exhibit displays. The speaker for this meeting is Stan Tekiela, a naturalist and wildlife photographer. Pete Miller will update the membership regarding invasive aquatic species.

The committee is working on updating policies and procedures regarding the work and responsibilities of the various CLA committees.

Aquatic Invasive Species Committee
Pete Miller, chair

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Budget and Finance Committee
Paul Beilfuss, chair

The Budget and Finance Committee recommended the transfer of $100,000 from the Money Market Fund to the Activities Fund in order to earn substantially more interest. The Board approved the transfer during its regular meeting in July. We decided to explore investment options offered by the Brainerd Lakes Area Community Foundation (BLACF), our current investment partner, and also to compare BLACF results with other investment firms (e.g. Fidelity). We continue to support our current investments with BLACF, since the investments are doing well, are placed in socially responsible funds (e.g. "green" funds), and fund gains are invested locally. We will conduct an annual internal audit of our budget according to improved audit procedures. We agreed to review and pilot Google Docs to possibly improve and maintain procedures. We also intend to review our current annual budget-building process and to initiate a long-range budget-building plan. In addition, we reviewed our Legacy Fund policy with the Board to keep members informed of its intent and uses.

Communications/Education/Partner Relations Committee

C.B. Bylander, chair

The committee's focus this past year has been on sharing information about the starry stonewort infestation that was discovered in Middle Cullen during the spring of 2024. The goal is to contain the infestation at the far northeastern end of the lake. As part of this effort, the committee designed and installed a starry stonewort awareness sign at the Middle Cullen public boat launch. The sign alerts boaters that this easily spread algae is growing near the end of the dock and that boaters should avoid surface weeds. The sign also includes a color photograph of what the algae looks like and a QR code that allows smartphone users to donate directly to the Cullen Lakes Association. A similar but smaller awareness sign will be installed shortly at the Wilderness Point Resort boat launch on Middle Cullen.

The committee, following up on the advice of consultant Steve McComas, surfaced the idea of purchasing channel markers to be installed near the Middle Cullen boat landing to help keep boat props from striking the starry stonewort infestation. Vice president John MacGibbon is working with the Crow Wing County Boat and Water Patrol on this issue.

In response to concerns about the impact of wake surfing on shorelines and vegetation, the committee created and posted preferred wake surfing maps on the association's website. These maps—one for each lake—are educational tools that identify areas that are at least 20 feet deep and 500 feet from shore. These are the recommended distances for safe wake surfing, according to University of Minnesota research.

The committee also did its normal activities, which include providing content for quarterly newsletters, managing the website and maintaining relationship with the Crow Wing County Lakes and Rivers Alliance, Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates, Whitefish Area Property Owners Association (they too have a starry stonewort infestation) and others who share a common interest in lake conservation.

Environmental Issues Committee
Ryan Kennedy, chair

In the fight against Starry Stonewort, avoiding prop contact and resultant distribution of bulbils resulting in further spread of the infestation is critical. Boat props chop the long stems of starry stonewort into pieces. Each floating fragment can start a brand-new population. Our control efforts are focused on the site of the current SSW infestation at the Middle Cullen public landing. As part of that effort, we are purchasing green and red navigational buoys through the Crow Wing County Sheriff's Recreation Division (Water Patrol). We'll install them as guidance at the landing to direct boaters through a non-infested pathway.

Fundraising/Membership/Community Building Committee

Lora Graumann, chair

We're pleased to share that our lakes association continues to thrive. As of July 21, 2026, we have 243 members. This includes 10 associate members (family members of current property owners or former property owners), and 10 complimentary memberships for new property owners. Your continued support plays a vital role in helping us protect, preserve, and enhance the beauty and health of our lake community. We are sincerely grateful for the participation, commitment, and generosity of our members. Thank you for being an essential part of this important work and for helping ensure our lake remains a treasured resource for generations to come.

Nominating Committee (ad hoc)
Randy Steenholdt, chair

The CLA Board of Directors currently has 13 members — six from Lower Cullen, six from Middle Cullen, and 1 one from Upper Cullen. The CLA by-laws require the Board to have a t least 12 and no more than 18 members. Of the terms of seven current board members are ending as of the 2026 Annual Meeting. Six of these members are standing for reelection to a two-year term:

Mark Best	Middle Cullen
C.B. Bylander	Upper Cullen
Ryan Kennedy	Lower Cullen
Carol Lindahl	Lower Cullen
John MacGibbon	Lower Cullen
Pete Miller	Lower Cullen

The following person is standing for election to an initial one-year term:

Stu MacGibbon	Lower Cullen

FY 2027 Operating budget

Paul Beilfuss, Budget & Finances Committee chair

The following budget was approved by the membership at the August 8 Annual Meeting.

Income	
Membership Dues	$ 6,200
Donations	50,000
Interest income	250
Total Estimated Revenue	**$56,450**
Expenditures	
Administration Committee	
Supplies, Postage, Printing	$325
Food and AV	85
Room Donation	75
LARA Membership	75
Soteroplos Scholarship (CLC)	250
MLR Membership	250
Guest Speaker	750
Environmental Issues	
Water Quality Monitoring	$1,100
Communications/Education/Partner RelationsCommittee	
Map/Guide Update	$ 350
Newsletter Postage	500
Newsletter Printing	900
Web Site Management	600
Special Sessions/Seminars/Workshops	500
Aquatic Invasive Species Committee	
Treatment and Control	$60,000
Fundraising/Membership/Community Relations Committee	
Supplies and Printing	$175
Postage	500
New Owner Packets	25
Total Committee expenditures	**$66,460**
Board Liability Insurance	$1,000
Miscellaneous	300
Total Estimated Expenditures	**$67,760**

Proposed FY '27 Operating Budget increase over FY '26 $910

FY '27 Estimated income less estimated expenditures ($11,310)

Footnote: Grants are anticipated for revenue, but actual