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## Milfoil invades stream in Litchfield

By [Betty Adamsbadams@centralmaine.com](mailto:Betty.Adamsbadams@centralmaine.com)

Staff Writer

LITCHFIELD -- There's trouble in Purgatory Stream.

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Whitney Grass peers down an Aqua Scope to check for suspicious underwater plants as Cameron Dufour tows her through Purgatory Stream in Litchfield. The two were surveying the stream on Wednesday for Friends of the Cobbossee Watershed.

Photo courtesy of Friend of Cobbossee Watershed

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A non-native invasive plant -- variable leaf milfoil, which fouls waterways, clogs boat props, snags ankles and looks and feels yucky -- has been confirmed in the stream between two dams.

The infestation of the plant -- listed among the "11 Most Unwanted" aquatic plants by the Maine Center for Invasive Aquatic Plants -- was found between the dam at the outlet of Woodbury Pond and a second, unnamed dam at the intersection of Hallowell-Litchfield and Hardscrabble roads.

And the culprit behind the infestation could well be an osprey who peeped from a substantial-size nest atop a utility pole along Central Maine Power's transmission line just down Hallowell-

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Litchfield Road.

"He's got some fresh vegetation up there," said Bob Moore, executive director of Friends of the Cobbossee Watershed, a group aimed at protecting and improving the 28 lakes and streams of the Cobbossee Watershed. "Maybe it's a piece of milfoil."

Moore said while he couldn't determine the origin of the infestation --the stream is occasionally too bony for even the lightest craft to pass -- it could have been the bird.

"That's making a leap," Moore cautioned.

Variable leaf milfoil -- which looks like a brownish-green bottle brush under water and spikes above water when it matures -- is blooming between the transmission line and the smaller dam.

On Wednesday, Moore had two teams in boats surveying Purgatory Stream and Woodbury Pond to determine whether the milfoil had spread.

Cameron Dufour, in a life preserver with goggles strung around his neck, waded almost chest-deep in the stream, towing a rubber raft. Whitney Grass floated in the raft, peering down an Aqua Scope at the underwater foliage.

Dufour and Grass work for Friends of the Cobbossee Watershed. Grass is a volunteer with AmeriCorps. The pair put in at Woodbury Pond dam, watched by Moore and by damkeeper Terry Averill.

Dufour and Grass' mission was to see whether any of the invasive milfoil had become dislodged and somehow worked its way upstream.

Ryan Burton, a technician with the Cobbossee Watershed District, spotted the invasive plant earlier this spring, and the Department of Environmental Protection confirmed the find.

"It's not technically in Tacoma Lakes, but it's knocking on the doorstep," Moore said.

On Woodbury Pond, Sadie Hartford rowed a small aluminum boat. Her mother, Susie Wilding-Hartford, and Diane Clay, both members of the Tacoma Lakes Improvement Society, surveyed the plant life.

Clay scanned the water and Wilding-Hartford compared the results to charts with the results of last year's survey. So far, the pond has been free of the variable leaf milfoil.

"Hopefully they're not going to see any above the dam," Averill said as he watched them work.

"If they find something (in Woodbury), it would really be devastating," Moore said.

The two women are experienced water surveyors, having done the work on the pond for several years. Each also does Secchi disk readings to track the transparency of Buker, Jimmy and Woodbury ponds.

Averill, too, suspects the osprey brought the invasive plant to the stream, but he's less sure of which one.

"Within a mile radius, there are four osprey nests," he said. "They're in the water all the time, and every time you see one fly over, they have something hanging."

The surveyors and Moore breathed a sigh of relief at the end of the day after finding no evidence that the milfoil had spread further.

"At this time, it's limited to between the osprey nest on the power pole and the second dam," Moore said.

He said he will talk to the Department of Environmental Protection about erecting signs to warn people about the infested area.

Milfoil is an aquatic plant species that grows quickly, can choke out other plants and interfere with recreational activities such as swimming and boating. The invasive plant is often spread from lake to lake by boaters.

For more information on invasive plants and the work of Friends of the Cobbossee Watershed, visit [www.watershedfriends.com](http://www.watershedfriends.com).

Photos and sites of non-indigenous aquatic plants are also available on the Department of Environmental Protection website at [www.maine.gov/dep/blwq/topic/invasives/doc.htm](http://www.maine.gov/dep/blwq/topic/invasives/doc.htm).

Betty Adams -- 621-5631

[badams@centralmaine.com](mailto:badams@centralmaine.com)

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