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Prolonged drought continues to hamper enjoyment of area lakes



[Will LaBreche](#) / Staff Writer

Last updated: Wednesday, August 29th, 2007 09:37:29 AM

Recent rainfall in northern Wisconsin has done little to curtail drought conditions plaguing the area. The problem is most evident on area lakes, where exposed shoreline proves the greatest testament to the severity of the drought.

On a recent tour of Round Lake with Al Reinemann, owner of Timber Trail Lodge, the last remaining resort on that lake, it is easy to see, in person, his concerns that the lake is devastatingly low. Many homeowners have already removed both docks and boat lifts from the water, while many remaining boats can be found suspended in mid-air, literally high and dry.

At the Pine Cove Shores development, for example, large boats are lined up on lifts in a small cove, the entrance of which has been nearly sealed off by the low water, leaving passersby to wonder how exactly those boat owners plan to remove their vessels come fall.

At Timber Trail Lodge, Reinemann pointed out a length of exposed shoreline and an orange bucket, placed on a stake at the ordinary high water mark. Between the two, not less than 40 feet of muck and dying vegetation.

Reinemann is left wondering just what the future of the drought, and more centrally, the plan for the Round Lake watershed, will mean for lake levels on Round Lake.

According to Dave Kafura, water regulations and zoning specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the area's precipitation deficit is negative 6.61 inches, compared to the 30-year average. Together with the deficits from 2003 through 2006, the total is 2.6 feet of rainfall below average.

"A couple of one-inch rains are not going to wipe this deficit out; recovery from this drought is going to take time with numerous precipitation events over months and years to return to the average," he said. "We are seeing sections of warm and cold water streams that are literally dry — small ponds that normally have a permanent surface water are nothing more than wet mud. Large expanses of bog wetland are so dry that a person can literally walk through them in tennis shoes. Clearly all are showing signs of the drought impact."

For those concerned about their own lake levels, Kafura said much of the exposed shoreline has do with a lake's bottom profile. Round Lake, for example, in a 1938 aerial photo showed that many of the bays of that lake were separated from the larger body of water by sand and gravel bars — bars that are again beginning to appear at the mouths of these Round Lake bays.

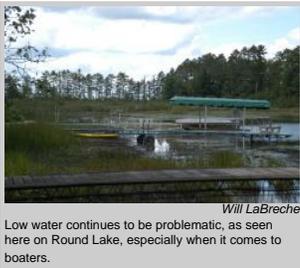
Historically, Kafura said that during the 1930s, lakes had much lower levels than those today. "We are not near the low levels observed in the mid- to late-1930s," he commented. But even though each lake will respond differently to the drought, on average lakes in the area are down 18 to 30 inches below the ordinary high water mark.

"A couple of good rains might make the grass greener and the garden look good, but it is a drop in the bucket in addressing our deficit," Kafura said. "What we need is frequent, steady, soaking type of



Will LaBreche

Vacationers wrestle their pontoon through the low water under the Round Lake narrows bridge on Highway B. The woman at right then stood on the bow of the pontoon, and quite frustrated, exclaimed, "And this is vacation?!"



Will LaBreche

Low water continues to be problematic, as seen here on Round Lake, especially when it comes to boaters.

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precipitation — rains that increase soil moisture, recharge groundwater with surplus stored in our wetlands (that) will provide for long-term baseflow to our lakes and streams.”

But the drought is not just affecting area lakes; it markedly impacts agriculture in the area as well.

According to Phil Holman, assistant superintendent of the Spooner Agricultural Research Station, the drought has “greatly decreased forage yields” which means those raising livestock will be forced to find alternative means to feed their animals.

“The grain yields will also be down — corn and soybeans — the rains have been real patchy this summer. Some places will get an inch and others nothing, even just a few miles apart,” Holman said. Last year, the area was nine inches below normal, while this year through July, he added, the area is down about five to six inches.

“Up to this past week, we haven’t had anything in August,” he said. “The last two winters have been relatively short on snowfall, so the soil has not had a chance to recharge in the spring and that’s a big reason why we’re seeing even the deeper-rooted alfalfa struggle so badly after the first crop.”

Even though it does not take a trained eye to identify struggling crops, lake levels, as mentioned, continue to be the eyesore for many lake lovers. But while Reinemann and other residents of area lakes keep their eyes to the skies, awaiting that soaking precipitation, many are left wondering whether even owning a boat anymore is worth the hassle.

As one vacationing family staying on Little Round Lake voiced their frustrations, while walking their pontoon through literally inches of water in the Round Lake narrows, one yelled to the other: “And this is vacation!?”

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