

Ganawenim Meshkiki

Eastern Georgian Bay Initiative

Agreement # 2020-006

Final Report

July, 2021

Updated November, 2021

Overview

In partnership with several funders and supporters, including Ganawenim Meshkiki, The Couchiching Conservancy has been working on a multi-year acquisition and stewardship campaign focused on the Black River Wildlands Corridor as identified in *Conservation Priorities for The Couchiching Conservancy*. Since the campaign began mid-2019, we have created four new nature reserves inside the corridor with a fifth slated for completion in the late fall of 2021. We are currently in negotiations with two additional landowners for the protection of significant additional acres of habitat for EGBI-listed Species at Risk. Responding to opportunities, we expanded the scope of the broad campaign to the Carden Plain, where we partnered with The Nature Conservancy of Canada to help create a fifth reserve of more than 1,300 acres, called Cedarhurst. In addition to Ganawenim Meshkiki, our partners include the Echo Foundation, the Gosling Foundation, The Nature Conservancy of Canada, the McLean Foundation and Environment and Climate Change Canada, as well as numerous private donors and clubs. To date we have raised approximately to \$800,000 in cash and pledges in our efforts to achieve a goal of \$1.4 million, matching the Ganawenim Meshkiki many times over and amplifying the impact of your contribution.

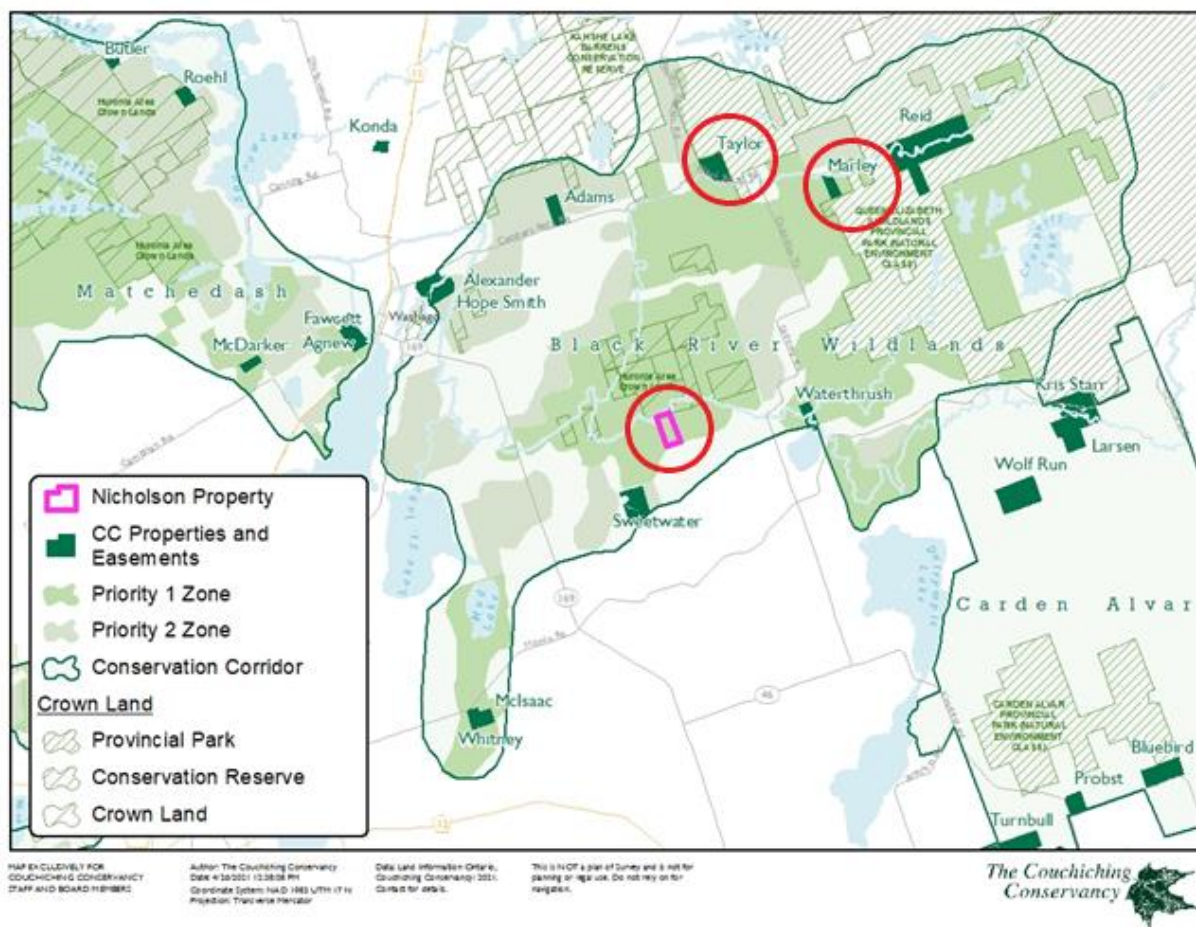
However, the last year and a half have been extremely challenging in terms of completing aspects of the Eastern Georgian Bay Initiative project that were dependent on personal contact and relationship-building. Beginning in the spring of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic slowed the progress of the project, making it more difficult to connect with landowners in the target region and reducing our ability to gather volunteers for specific projects.

While we are on track to hit our acquisition targets and complete the Indigenous-led bioblitz within the Black River Wildlands Corridor, our efforts to build partnerships with local Indigenous communities have been hampered by lock-downs. Our intention is to continue this work as the pandemic allows in the coming months.

Results to date

Task 1: Bring 3 properties containing EGBI listed SAR habitat under protection and complete inventories to generate property management plans of Baseline Documentation Reports for each.

Despite the setbacks listed above, we are on track to secure three properties totalling 350 acres inside the Black River Wildlands Corridor, all containing habitat for EGBI priority species.



The properties circled in red show the three acquisitions supported by EGBI funding in the context of the Black River Wildlands Corridor. Each property contains habitat for EGBI target species.

The Dr. Ron Taylor Nature Reserve

This 175-acre reserve was created in July, 2020, on the north side of the Black River, adjacent to Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park.

A Property Management Plan, including a species inventory has been drafted for the property. It contains habitat for EGBI Priority SAR and one species has been confirmed two consecutive seasons. Habitat is suitable for EGBI Priority SAR throughout the sand train valley of the Black River, which includes the Taylor reserve. There is an NHIC record for an endangered species at the gate of the reserve.

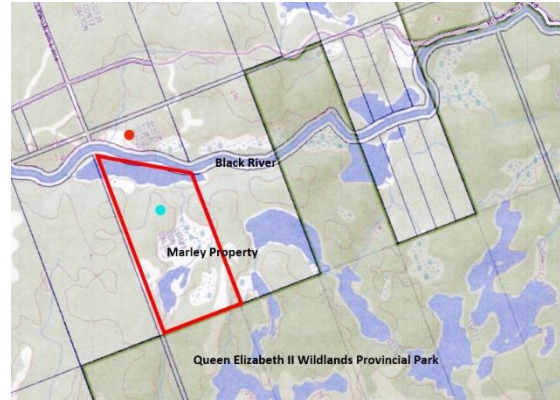


The pond at the Dr. Ron Taylor Nature Reserve.

The Marley Nature Reserve

This 77-acre was created in January, 2021. It fronts the Black River on the south bank and is adjacent to Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park, inside the Black River Wildlands Corridor.

Inventory work began in the spring and fall of 2020 and an Ecological Land Classification analysis has been completed. Due to the inaccessibility of the property and the winter closure of the property transaction, further inventory work is required during the 2021 field season to complete the Property Management Plan.



Granite rock barrens on the Marley property in the fall of 2020.

The Nicholson Property

The Nicholson Property (100 acres) is expected to be transferred to The Couchiching Conservancy by the fall of 2021. Fronting on a portion of the Head River on the south shore inside the Black River Wildlands Corridor, it is located in an area identified as Priority 1 in *Conservation Priorities for The Couchiching Conservancy*, an analysis of priority habitat in the Lake Couchiching region. Inventories and a draft Property Management Plan will be completed during the field season of 2021 and the spring of 2022. The Ontario Land Trust Alliance has been hired to complete the Management Plan. The Nicholson property contains habitat for multiple EGBI Priority SAR. The property owners have submitted a letter of intent to donate and an agreement of purchase and sale for a nominal fee is being drawn up. A market value appraisal has been commissioned for the property and the application process for the Ecological Gifts Program is underway.



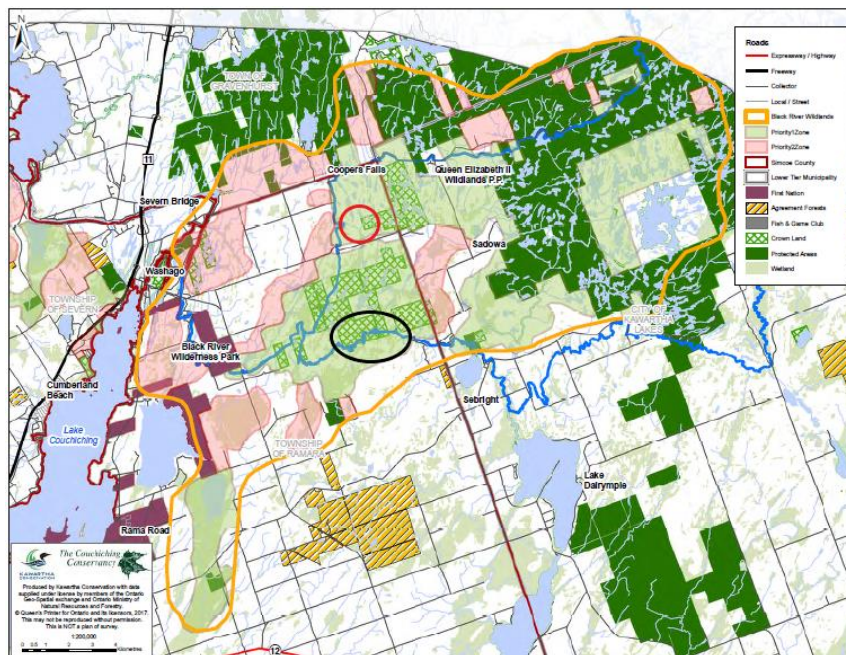
Biologist Toby Rowland explores habitat on the Nicholson property.

Task 2: Conduct Indigenous-led Bio-Blitz inside the Black River Wildlands Corridor.

The pandemic had an impact on our plans to host an Indigenous-led bioblitz inside the Black River Wildlands Corridor (Task 2). Gary Pritchard, 4 Directions of Conservation Consulting Services, was retained to organize and lead the bioblitz. The pandemic prohibited us from gathering to carry it out in the fall of 2020 as planned. With the approval of EGBI we postponed the bio-blitz to the spring of 2021. However, that too became impossible to facilitate due to the third lockdown of the pandemic. Uncertainty as to the future trajectory of the pandemic in July led us to postpone further planning and recruiting until we had clarity as to conditions. However, we were able to proceed with the bioblitz in the fall of 2021

Work on the bioblitz included:

- Two planning meetings with CC staff and Gary Pritchard.
- Two site visits to determine best location for bioblitz (fall of 2020 and spring of 2021). The two sites considered were Crown land inside the Black River Wildlands Corridor accessed via the Head River and a 630-acre private property touching the Black River adjacent to Crown land. Following a property tour with the private landowner, it was determined the second site would



Two areas scouted as sites to hold the bioblitz within the Black River Wildlands Corridor shown above: The black circle indicates the area originally considered, while the red circle indicates the private land with diverse habitats in close proximity and access to Crown lands of interest.

be more suitable with diverse habitat types present and easier access. The western side of the Crown land targeted via the first site is also accessible through the property.

- The property owners agreed to host the bioblitz and have expressed interest in the reconciliation process and are keen to learn Indigenous traditional knowledge.

- Two, two-hour workshops were held for registered participants via video conference.

Workshop 1 tackled common myths regarding Indigenous peoples. Workshop 2 outlined Indigenous conservation strategies. Attendance for participants was mandatory and the

workshops were recorded. These workshops prepared participants for the field portion of the project.

- Three field days of 5 hours each, focused around three themes: a) Water; b) Wetlands, Reptiles and Amphibians; c) Plants and birds. Records will be shared with Williams Treaty communities, the landowners and CC. CC will hold the records in its database.

Task 3: Engage with appropriate Indigenous authorities to explore potential partnerships to build a protected Black River Wildlands Corridor.

The pandemic has made it particularly difficult to work on relationship-building since face-to-face meetings have been prohibited or discouraged. Email, phone calls and Zoom have been less satisfactory means of communicating regarding challenging and complex subjects. The pandemic challenged the capacities of staff in the relevant Indigenous communities.

The Couchiching Conservancy reached out to the Williams Treaty/Treaty 20/Treaty 16 First Nations in early 2020 and we were working on plans to meet with Sharray James of Chippewas of Rama First Nation and Karry Sandy where we could present our finding on the Black River Wildlands Corridor. This was deemed by advisors to be a precursor to putting the information in front of Councils. Unfortunately the March, 2020 lockdown interrupted the process and we have not been able to resume the process since that time.

During 2020-21, The Couchiching Conservancy helped facilitate the creation of a small land trust working group that is identifying and overcoming potential barriers to successful partnerships with Indigenous communities using a co-management model. Gary Pritchard is participating in the group, along with Ontario Nature, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and Kawartha Land Trust.

In late December, 2020, The Couchiching Conservancy began a dialogue with Beausoleil First Nation through Jeff Monague to discuss a potential partnership for land protection. A Zoom meeting was held with Chief Guy Monague in early 2021 in which The Couchiching Conservancy presented an overview of the Black River Wildlands Corridor Concept and explained the five priority areas identified in *Conservation Priorities for The Couchiching Conservancy*. The Couchiching Conservancy and Chief Monague agreed to explore a partnership to protect land. Jeff Monague and Couchiching Conservancy Executive Director Mark Bisset continued to discuss avenues to achieve that goal, and Jeff has been invited to join the above-mentioned working group. In May, 2021, Joanne P. Sandy was elected Chief. To date, no discussions have been held with the new Chief.

Because our learning curve is steep concerning Indigenous issues and rights, we have participated in a number of workshops and webinars since the beginning of 2020, including:

- Orillia's Gojijing Truth and Reconciliation Roundtable (Ongoing)
- Building relationships and agreements between land trusts and Indigenous communities (conference call, Aug, 2020)
- Indigenous Conservation Agreements in Canada (webinar May, 2021)

We continue to do research into different aspects of the Indigenous experience, including the treaties governing our region, the barriers to land protection posed by The Indian Act, different models for Indigenous Protected Conservation Areas, and positive models for partnerships between Indigenous communities and land trusts.

As a result of our learning to date, The Couchiching Conservancy Policy Committee is working on a revised stewardship policy that will recognize the rights of the Indigenous treaty rights-holders in our region. The policy is expected to go to the board for approval early in 2022.