

# What's going on With Wisconsin's Wild Rice?

## Trout Lake Station Joins Partners to Investigate

by Adam Hinterthuer

This summer, scientists at Trout Lake Station launched a new research project on one of Wisconsin's most iconic and important aquatic plants – wild rice. Many readers of this newsletter may only encounter wild rice at roadside stands or gas stations during vacations in the Upper Midwest or Canada but, for the original residents of this area – the native Ojibwe people – wild rice is known as manoomin and is a highly valued and culturally important food source still harvested by canoe in the fall.



Freshly harvested wild rice.  
Photo: Carol Warden

Unfortunately, many wild rice populations in northern Wisconsin are on the decline. This is probably due to many factors, says Susan Knight, a research scientist at Trout Lake Station and an expert on aquatic plants. Wild rice, she says, is under assault by things like higher-than-average water levels for the past half decade, big rain events in spring that might flush wild rice seedlings downstream, milder winters that might allow more perennial vegetation to encroach on their habitat, more waterfowl, especially swans, that eat the entire plant and don't wait for seed production and increased development along our lakes and streams.

That's a lot of potential problems facing our wild rice populations but, Knight says, understanding how these factors interact and which are most negatively impacting wild rice will be crucial to protecting it.

“While most wild rice projects look at populations in late summer, we are focused on looking at wild rice through the entire growing season,” Knight says. “We have been out on lakes since early spring and were finding very young seedlings. Our goal is to follow the rice and develop tools to assess the health of the population throughout its life cycle.”

For Erin Matula, the wild rice project was a good reason to head back home. Matula is an undergraduate student studying environmental science at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, a city on the shores of Lake Superior in Michigan's upper peninsula. But don't be fooled by her short career as a “Yooper,” Matula grew up near Ashland, Wisconsin. When her original summer job plans fell through, Matula's mom suggested she check out the job listings for summer students at Trout Lake. And she's glad she did, she says. “Once I read the position description I was hooked!”

In addition to helping Susan Knight and Trout Lake Station director Gretchen Gerrish monitor current populations of wild rice as they grow throughout the season, Matula will have an additional research project collecting much older data on wild rice. She plans to take sediment cores from the bottom of their study lakes and investigate the historic seed banks of wild rice.

Trout Lake has many partners in this project. In addition to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, which is funding the project, partners include the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, North Lakeland Discovery Center, and the ecological consulting firm, Onterra.

“I'm excited to be participating in novel research on wild rice as well as hearing about or helping out in others' research on station,” Matula says. “It's exciting to see everyone out and about and passionate about their own projects.”



Erin Matula using a rake sampler to locate rice grains and rice seedlings in Wild Rice Lake.