

## Explore the Indian River Lakes Conservancy (IRLC)

BY: WAYNE C. STRAUSS

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**I**n Macomb's Purchase of 1792, William Macomb and his partners bought nearly 4 million acres of land – encompassing virtually all of what we refer to as the “North Country”. Meandering through this massive tract was the Indian River, which rises in Indian River Village in Lewis County and flows through Jefferson County and St. Lawrence County to Black Lake. The purchase resulted in financial disaster for Mr. Macomb. However, in the 229 years since then, the Indian River and 18 natural lakes along its course – including Butterfield Lake, Moon Lake, and Sixberry Lake – have provided recreational activities for generations of seasonal and permanent residents.

Known collectively as the Indian River Lakes system, these bodies of water have an important ecological purpose. The system serves as a watershed for the Oswegatchie River, which flows north from the Adirondack Mountains to the St. Lawrence River.

In 1998, this important function was no doubt on the minds of the five couples who conceived the Indian River Lakes Conservancy – widely known as the “IRLC” - around a dining room table on the shores of Butterfield Lake. The organization was intended as one which would preserve, protect, and steward the Indian River Lakes. The cause was initially advanced by environmentalist Mr. Henry Carse, who donated the 28-acre Osprey Point Marsh on Butterfield Lake, helping to launch the fledgling

institution. His wish was to preserve the marsh from commercial development, forever. In 2003, Mr. Carse contributed 824 acres between Butterfield Lake and Grass Lake with the same thought in mind.

Fast-forward to 2021. Over its history the IRLC, today a non-profit land trust, has grown to include over 2,500 acres of land under conservancy, with over 20 miles of hiking trails available to the public. Mr. Carse's second donation became known as the Grand Lake Reserve. To date, IRLC has grown to include the Redwood Hill Preserve in Redwood, NY, and the Baker Woods Preserve in Natural Bridge, NY. These lands offer visitors a chance to see the region's rich abundance of flora and fauna, experience spectacular natural vistas, and partake in a wide variety of canoeing options. IRLC continues to pursue expansion.



"WHIRLERS culminate their summer learning program with a paddle on Clear Lake."

“Conserving valuable wetlands is only part of our mission,” said Mr. J. Wylie Huffman, Executive Director of the IRLC. “We also seek to preserve river and lake water quality, provide public access to trails and waterfront landings, and to promote environmental studies and educational programs focused on the watershed and its biological diversity. Since 2018, we have offered an annual Children’s Nature Camp for campers from age 3 through 12. Nature Camp gives participants the opportunity to learn about environmental stewardship, while providing environmental education to which they may not otherwise be exposed. And we’re particularly pleased with the continued success of Project WHIRL.”

Project WHIRL is the acronym for Protectors of “Water and Habitat on the Indian River Lakes,” which is the centerpiece program facilitated by IRLC and now ending its third year. The program is a creation of IRLC’s Executive Director in collaboration with a small group of passionate volunteers, who include local educators and a half dozen carefully selected expert conservation collaborators. Project WHIRL is an 8-week mentoring program in which high school students learn from college mentors and practicing environmental professionals, who lead the students in experiential learning activities. These activities include water quality sampling, gathering data on invasive species, and introduction to fisheries ecology. WHIRLERS also have the opportunity to visit colleges that offer environmental science and biology programs, such as Paul Smith’s College, SUNY Environmental School of Science and Forestry (ESF) and Clarkson University. Since its inception in 2019, when it was associated with only one school district, WHIRL has “graduated” 35 students, 4 of whom have directed their college studies toward a career in Environmental Science.

This past summer’s Project WHIRL included a project in which a biology professor from Clarkson University needed data from the lakes to support sustainable methods to control invasive species. An 11-passenger van and driver provided by Uncle Sam Boat Tours took WHIRLERS to their worksites. Working with environmental professionals through the IRLC, students successfully gathered the necessary data from four of the lakes. This relationship with Clarkson has grown substantially; the University is currently seeking grants that will enable WHIRL to expand to additional school districts beyond the six that participated in 2021.

“One of our WHIRLERS loved to fish and be on the lakes, but had no educational plans beyond high school,” said Mr. Elliott Hillback, Chair of IRLC’s Board of Directors. “Through Project WHIRL he learned that he could pursue a career in environmental conservation, and now plans to do so. Naturally, he now returns to volunteer with the program.”

“With support from The Land Trust Alliance and a New York State Conservation Partnership Program grant, IRLC has launched an expanded series of environmental programs for families and adults,” he continued. “While we are organized as a land trust, IRLC takes a holistic approach to land conservation, preservation of water quality, and community education. We work closely with lake associations.”



"(l to r) Liam Loveland, Victoria Huffman and Gaby Ames work with Doug Carlton, a retired fisheries biologist, at a Project WHIRL worksite."

The IRLC is always pleased to welcome new members and volunteers. Volunteer opportunities include positions as Land Steward, Event Crew, Outreach, Education, and Administration. The annual Donor & Volunteer Recognition Cruise provided by Uncle Sam Boat Tours is one way that the IRLC offers thanks to its generous donors and volunteers. Whether you're a nature enthusiast or a subject matter expert in your field of study, IRLC has a way for you to carry on the conservation efforts envisioned at its founding. For more information on IRLC membership or volunteer

opportunities, please visit their website at [www.indianriverlakes.org](http://www.indianriverlakes.org), or call them at 315-482-4757.

[All photographs courtesy ILRC]

By Wayne Strauss

*Wayne C. Strauss retired after 21 years as Vice President of Oppenheimer Funds in Rochester, New York. An attorney licensed to practice in the State of New York, Wayne also holds several securities licenses. He has served on the Board of Directors and as a Proctor for Rochester Area Mensa, and is currently a member of the adjunct faculty of St. John Fisher College in Rochester. An Eagle Scout and member of Toastmasters International, he spends as much time as possible aboard his boat "Convexity," in the Thousand Islands. See Wayne's newest article [here](#) and [here](#) on the old site.*

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