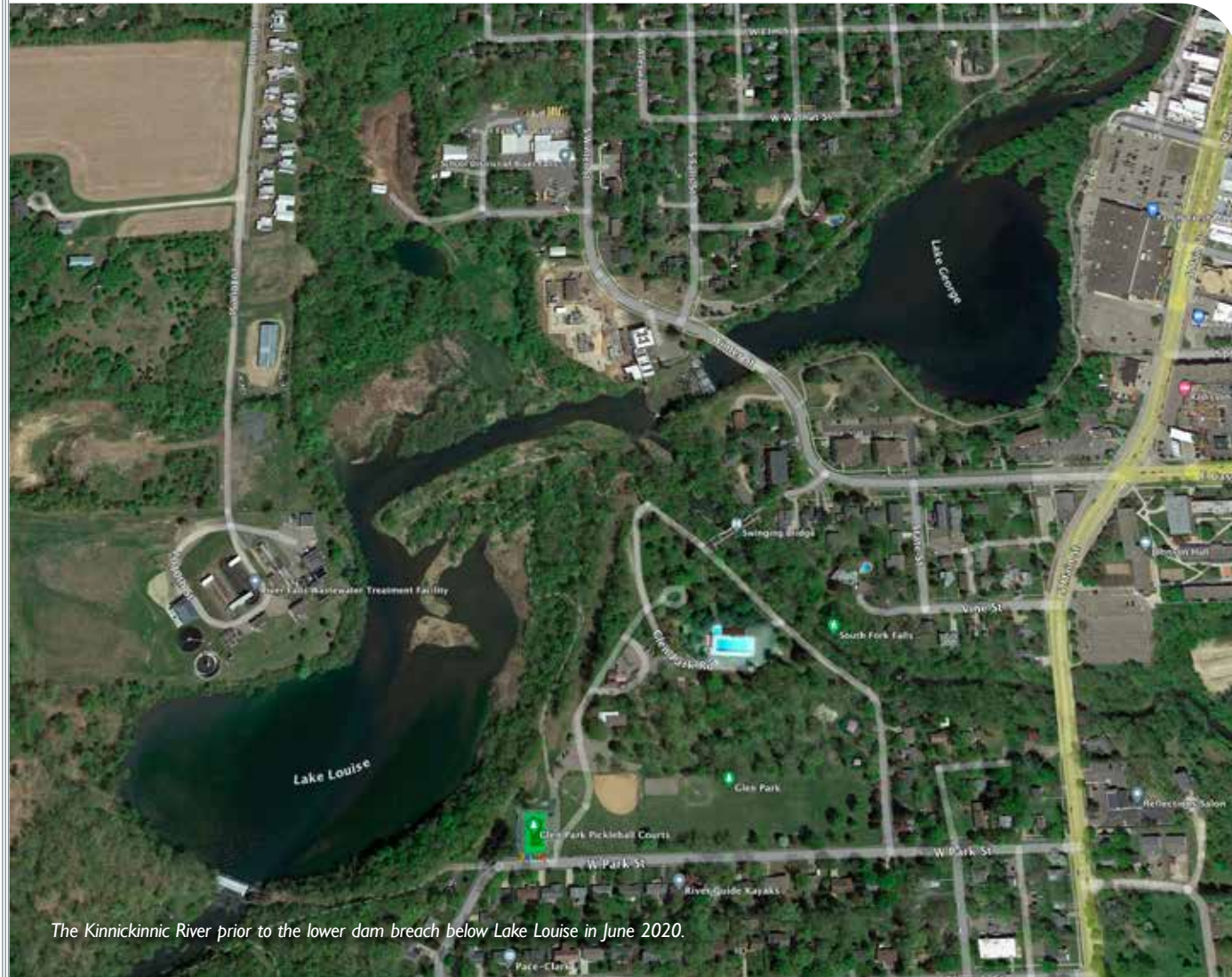




NEWS BITS AND BYTES



The Kinnickinnic River prior to the lower dam breach below Lake Louise in June 2020.

Kinnickinnic River Dam Removal Effort Gains Steam in Wisconsin

When Marissa Merriman is looking for a quiet way to spend a few hours and unplug she heads in a familiar direction: to the Kinnickinnic River.

The Wisconsin stream is barely a 30-minute drive from Merriman's home in St. Paul, Minn.

"It's the closest trout stream to the Twin Cities metro area," said Merriman, an ecologist with the U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers and a board member of Fly Fishing Women of Minnesota. "The upper river has great numbers of fish. They're not large but I'm not after lunkers."

As beautiful and productive as the

"Kinni" is in its current state, it could be even better. And it will be.

An effort to remove two century-old dams in the city of River Falls is gaining momentum, thanks in large part to advocacy and fundraising efforts headed by Trout Unlimited and partners who are eager to see the river once again flowing free for its entirety.

"Here is an opportunity to make

this iconic Midwestern trout stream more resilient to a warming climate," said Duke Welter, who is heading up the fundraising effort for the Kinni Corridor Collaborative.

Removing the first dam targeted for demolition will cost an estimated \$3.4 million. The city will cover \$1.2 million of the cost, with an expected grant from the state's Department of Natural Resources adding another \$1 million. A volunteer-led fundraising effort has raised more than \$140,000. Welters said efforts are ongoing to tap into both individuals and foundations in hopes of raising the balance so the project can be completed in 2023.

The dams, which generate only about \$75,000 worth of electricity between them, change the complexion of the Kinni.

"It's basically two rivers," Welter said.

The river's upper 20 miles are heavily spring-influenced, packed with native brook trout and wild brown trout to the tune of about 7,000 fish per mile.

"Then it flows into River Falls," said Welter, who recently retired after heading the outreach efforts for TU's Driftless Area Restoration effort.

Not surprisingly, sediment has filled in those two small reservoirs, Lake Louise and Lake George. They are barely a few feet deep, their waters soaking up the sun's rays on hot days.

"The thermal warming from those small impoundments is dramatic, and the river below the dams is nearly 5 degrees warmer than above them," Welter said.

Even so, the river below the dams holds wild browns—up to 3,000 per stream mile. It's popular for fishing, in part because it's bigger water than the tight and brushy upper river where Merriman usually fishes.

However, increased warming is creating more stress for the browns in the lower section of the stream.

Nature provided a partial preview of the potential impact when the lower of



Junction Falls dam

Nature provided a partial preview of the potential impact when the lower of the two dams—Powell Falls Dam—was damaged in a flood in June 2020. The Lake Louise impoundment was drawn down with the river cutting a channel through more than 10 feet of sediment.



Powell Falls dam

Pocket Water

the two dams—Powell Falls Dam—was damaged in a flood in June 2020. The Lake Louise impoundment was drawn down with the river cutting a channel through more than 10 feet of sediment.

“It actually looks like it found a pretty good channel,” Merriman said.

Temperature monitoring in 2021 found that the lower river was about 3 degrees cooler than in recent years before the draw-down.

“Now, we know that one year of temperatures is not a trend,” Welter

said. “It’s a data point, but it’s a very encouraging one.”

Redds from spawning trout were even observed in the new channel, according to Welter.

TU volunteers have been monitoring the river’s temperatures since the early 1990s and advocates have long pursued the removal of the dams. Faced with increasing maintenance costs and the modest electricity-generating potential of the dams, city officials recently began the process of decommissioning and removing the dams.

Merriman, who works primarily in wetlands and stream restoration, says she is eager to see the restoration of the stream channel unfold after the dams are removed.

In February, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved the city’s request to surrender its license for the Powell Falls Dam, opening the door for the DNR Municipal Dam Removal Grant.

When the lower dam is removed, Welter said, crews will move sediment to help restore the river channel. The property is to become a park.

The Junction Falls dam is targeted for removal in the next decade.

Merriman, who works primarily in wetlands and stream restoration, says she is eager to see the restoration of the stream channel unfold after the dams are removed.

“I’m thrilled about it,” she said of the prospect of the river flowing unimpeded all the way from its headwaters to its junction with the St. Croix River.

Merriman, who grew up fishing Driftless Area streams with her dad around Rochester, Minn., often fishes on her own these days.

“It’s my chance to recharge and unwind,” she said.

But she sometimes welcomes company, including during an outing she was planning for a weekend in early June.

“I’ve been helping a woman learn to fly fish,” she said. “We’ve fished in some local ponds and she has caught sunfish, but she’s never caught a trout. So, I’m taking her this weekend.”

The destination? The upper Kinni, of course.

— *By Mark Taylor. For more information on the Kinnickinnic River restoration effort, including donation options, visit www.kinnickinnicriver.org.*

