Fall 2025 Newsletter

Conservation is a philosophy of life. It embraces human impulses, human conscience, and human goals. It is unselfish. It is idealistic and realistic. It enjoys the present and looks to the future. It understands the human spirit and recognizes human needs. It is broad in outlook and rich in values. It cherishes human values and natural resources. From The Conservation Challenge by WD Klimstra, founder of the SIU Cooperative Wildlife Research Laboratory (now the Center for Wildlife Sustainability Research).

On Friday, September 26th, the CWSR began a weekend of celebrating the 75th anniversary of its creation. Awards were given to John Schwegman, Max Hutchison, and Jack White for being ***Cache River Conservation Pioneers***. *(Photo of Jack White, John Schwegman, Martha Schwegman, and Max Hutchison by William Parmley)*

All three Cache River Conservation Pioneers worked in the establishment of the Heron Pond Little Black Slough Nature Preserve and were also student workers at the Lab. Max Hutchison brought Heron Pond to the attention of the preservation community and promoted it to Dr. Klimstra who was chairman of the Nature Preserves Commission. Jack White did his master's thesis on the plants of Heron Pond and Wildcat Bluff and John Schwegman did most of the land acquisition negotiations with land owners. Max and John determined the boundaries of the Heron Pond Little Black Slough Nature Preserve.

Doctor's Orders by Tina Cerny Pedrotty

Hanging off the end of the dock is now a wonderful adaptive addition to the Lower Cache Boat Access and for our family, a dream come true. Friday, September 26 , marked a very special occasion as our son, Dominic, was the first to push off from the newly fixed accessible kayak dock. To understand the gravity of the moment I'll have to go back few years and explain.

Dominic was an extremely active young man who enjoyed music, sports, but most of all cherished his time spent in nature. He grew up in a military family traveling the world to include many summers here in Southern Illinois visiting grandparents on the farm. While an engineering student at Virginia Tech, he was called back to this area to attend the funeral of his grandfather, my dad, Richard Cerny. Unfortunately, while driving, he lost consciousness due to a brain aneurysm, and collided head on with an oncoming semi-truck. His sister was his passenger and was killed instantly, but miraculously Dominic survived.

In our quest to help Dominic's rehabilitation, we were blessed with some of the country's best medical and neurological professionals. A valued member of his medical team, Johns Hopkins neuropsychiatrist, Dr. Koliatsos, gave us the best advice we could hope for early in Dominic's recovery process. "Do you have access to nature? To repair your son's brain, he needs to be immersed in the out of doors." Of all the fancy medical breakthroughs — technologies and medications — how could Dr. K prescribe something so simple and so near to Dominic's heart? When we reported that Southern Illinois offers over 30,000 acres of preserved wilderness to include

wonderful kayaking opportunities, Dr. K lamented that the Cache was not an option for all his patients.

A quick Google search will answer any question one might have regarding the vast benefits nature can provide to us. Whether our brains are newly forming, repairing, or aging, kayaking appears to be an appropriate prescription. Many two-dimensional activities, including screen time, develop our central focus almost to the exclusion of our peripherals. Dr. K understood that Dominic would best stimulate his entire brain and multiple senses in a calming yet rich environment. As an example, he would learn to turn his head instinctually again as he heard the many bird sounds. In the early days of recovery, he was still wheelchair bound thus the cardiovascular workout kayaking offered Dominic was a Godsend. Oxygen-rich blood flow to the brain is important to each of us, but vital to those who have experienced a traumatic brain injury. In anticipation of what the twists and bends in the Cache River will present, Dominic's senses are stimulated, as memory recovery and cognition is enhanced.

Dominic's right hand is ataxic so the rhythmic paddling on the water helps build strength and develops coordination once again. It has been established scientifically that interactions with nature increase our dopamine, serotonin, and endorphin levels. As you can image these mood-stabilizing hormones continue to provide the fuel our son needs to keep fighting for a full recovery keeping depression and anxiety at bay.

Opportunities on the Cache offer all these wonderful advantages, but perhaps best of all is the confidence it has built in Dominic as he now leads others through the waterways — and unbeknownst to them — down a path of extended brain health. The social benefit of his trips with family and friends cannot be underestimated. It's a surprise how something so simple, so inexpensive, could pay such high dividends.

You can now understand what the addition of an adaptive kayak launch really means, not just to Dominic, but to all those who seek the good medicine the Cache provides. We are forever indebted to those who made the assurance for the safe loading and egressing from a kayak possible - IDNR Disability Outdoor Opportunities Program, and the Illinois Conservation Foundation but most of all to Dominic's buddy, Jack Nawrot, and to the Friends of the Cache, those who recognized and continue to maintain this ecological jewel. *(Photos by William Parmley)*

2025 Cache Champion

Hannah Holmquist

Hannah Holmquist grew up in Minnesota loving the outdoors. She especially loves animals that are small and underappreciated. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in environmental science and animal ecology at Iowa State University and her master's degree in Zoology at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. After she graduated, she stayed at SIU for two years as a research lab manager, and she is currently an aquatic ecologist for the National Park Service in Springfield, Missouri. It was during her thesis research, studying the fish communities of Buttonland Swamp, that she made a big discovery. Lurking in the complex root balls of the iconic bald cypress trees she found a small fish shining in red, black, and silver. It was a fish thought to have disappeared in the Cache River and the entire state of Illinois for thirty years: the Taillight Shiner. The Taillight Shiner is a 2-inch long fish with beautiful red and black markings resembling the taillight of a car. This secretive fish only lives for about a year in the wild. They eat algae, crustaceans and aquatic critters and spawn in spring and early summer. The female lays roughly 70 to 400 eggs. Hannah published a research paper and contributed to newspaper articles, books, and presentations to work on bringing this discovery to light and help conserve this rare species, along with its unique habitat. She conducted research on the fish communities in Buttonland Swamp for a dedicated three years and established long-term surveys that continue today. Her work has had a valuable impact on the conservation of the Buttonland Swamp and we are honored to award her with the Cache Champion Award.

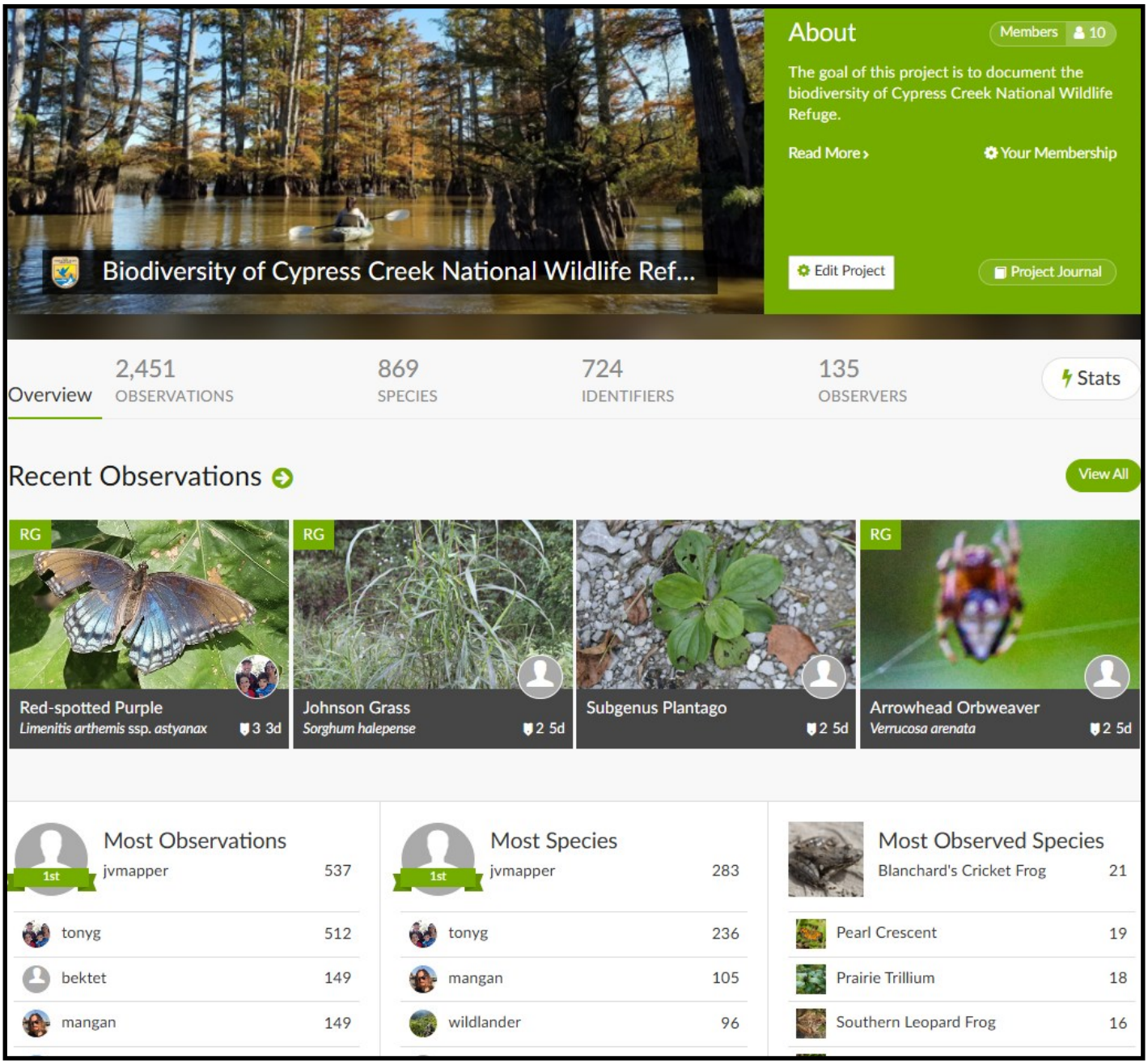
(Photos by Mark Denzer)

Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge Bioblitz

On Sept 26-28 the Friends of the Cache sponsored an iNaturalist Bioblitz to help document the biodiversity of Cypress Creek NWR. A total of over 400 new observations were added which included 95 new species for the project. This new species total may go up as currently unidentified species are identified.

If you are an iNaturalist member, we would encourage you to make observations any time you get a chance, as the project is ongoing. Another Bioblitz is planned for April.

Thanks to all who participated!



From my 3x5 notebook by Susan Post—August 25, 2016

Tree cattle are not cows that like to spend a lot of time under or near trees but a common name for a group of bark lice. Bark lice are members of a primitive order of insects, the Psocoptera. The order name comes from a Greek root and translates to *gnawing insect with wings*. They are very small insects, the largest is 7 mm. They have long filamentous antennae, a prominent head with a constriction behind it and well-developed eyes. They hold their wings roof-like over their body. Bark lice are found on tree trunks or on shaded rock outcroppings. They graze on lichens, mold or fungi or they may scavenge on detritus. A unique characteristic they share with lice is that they are able to extract atmospheric moisture through their pharynx of the foregut.

Nymphs of some species gather in groups or herds—leading to the name of tree cattle for the group. While a popular insect field guide says to look for these herds in the spring, we have only seen them in the late summer in the Cache. One of our favorite places to spot them is on tree trunks along the Limekiln Slough trail. Upon first glance they resemble a dark spot on the bark, but close observation reveals a cluster of these insects. Be a careful and cautious observer as these cattle will *stampede* or scatter if disturbed.

(Photograph of a herd of tree bark lice on a tree trunk—Psocoptera—at Limekiln Slough—tree cattle. August 25, 2016 by Michael Jeffords)

A Fossil Fish Returns: Alligator Gar Reintroduction into the Cache River by Mark Denzer

On June 4, 2025, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) released 81 alligator gar into the Cache River wetlands in deep southern Illinois—a symbolic milestone in the effort to restore one of North America's most ancient and misunderstood fish. Once declared extinct in Illinois, the alligator gar is now returning to its historic range, thanks to years of work by the IDNR, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service hatcheries, and private partners such as the Cordova Hatchery in central Illinois.

The alligator gar once thrived as far north as the lower Illinois River Valley. But decades of overfishing, habitat loss, and flow alteration from dams, dikes, and dredging drove them to near extinction. By 1990, the species was officially listed as extirpated from Illinois waters. A turning point came in 2009, when IDNR biologists began a long-term reintroduction plan in partnership with hatcheries. Stockings since then have occurred at Powerton Lake, Sanganois, Horseshoe Lake, and the Kaskaskia River.

This year's release into the Cache is especially meaningful. The last known gar caught in Illinois came from this watershed in 1966. With its quiet bayous, swamps, and oxbows, the Cache remains one of the most suitable habitats for this ancient predator. The young gar, just over a year old and raised at Cordova Hatchery, were reared to a size large enough to evade most predators. If successful, they will grow to maturity, reproduce in the backwaters, and reestablish a self-sustaining population.

Living Fossils with a Purpose

Alligator gar are often called *fossil fish*, virtually unchanged for over 150 million years. Their armored, diamond-shaped ganoid scales and long snouts packed with sharp teeth make them perfectly adapted for sluggish waters like the Cache. They can even breathe air, allowing survival in oxygen-poor environments where other fish cannot.

Despite their fearsome appearance, alligator gar are not a threat to people or sport

fish. Instead, they play a vital ecological role, feeding primarily on rough fish such as gizzard shad and invasive carp, helping restore balance to altered river systems. Unfortunately, public misunderstanding of gar persists. Once regarded as nuisances, they were even targeted by bounties in the 1800s. Today, outreach is critical to emphasize their importance as apex predators and keystone species.

One unusual trait sets them apart: their eggs are toxic to mammals, birds, and humans. While harmless to fish and some reptiles, the eggs are dangerously poisonous if consumed—an adaptation that likely protects them from egg predators in shallow spawning grounds.

Rearing and Partnerships

Alligator gar are stocked only when large enough to avoid predation, with the hope that restored populations will eventually reproduce on their own. Cordova Hatchery has been instrumental in this effort since 2011, working alongside IDNR biologists to raise fry provided by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Beyond stocking, the hatchery engages in education and outreach, helping the public understand why these *fossil fish* belong in Illinois waters once again.

Cultural Significance

The alligator gar's story isn't just ecological—it's cultural. Native American peoples used their scales as arrowheads and armor, and gar remains are common in archaeological sites throughout the Mississippi basin. Today, they are still celebrated as prized trophy fish in parts of the South.

Looking Ahead

Fewer than 100 gar will be released in carefully chosen areas of the Cache River at a time. Biologists will monitor growth, movement, and survival, with the goal of building a naturally reproducing population. Radio tags implanted in some individuals will help track feeding behavior and habitat use.

As I watched the young fish slip into the Cache River, it felt like watching history come full circle. The reintroduction of this ancient predator is more than a conservation milestone—it is a reconnection to the natural heritage of the region. The gar's return signals hope for the Cache River's biodiversity and a future where this remarkable species once again thrives in the waters it has called home for millions of years.

Mark Denzer is the Natural Resources Coordinator at Little Grassy Fish Hatchery in Makanda, Illinois, where he gives daily tours to the public. Born and raised in Champaign, Illinois, Mark has made his home in southern Illinois for 30 years where he can be found foraging, fishing, paddling or exploring a creek. During the last year and a half, he has enjoyed revitalizing the visitors center at the hatchery with new exhibits, new aquariums and new displays and engaging youth with his new program referred to as *Fish Journeys*.

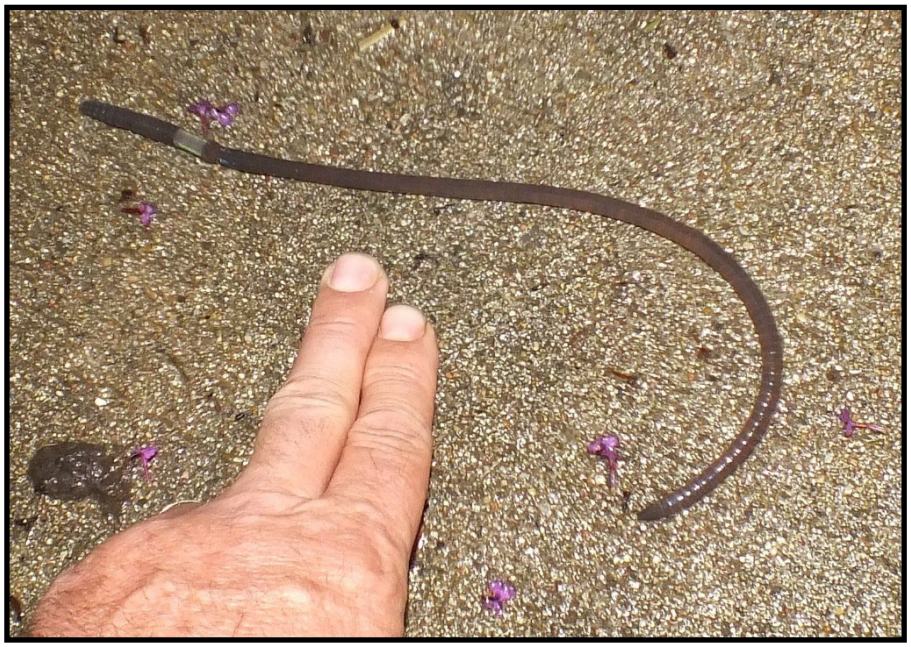
Public tours of the hatcheries are available by appointment by calling (618) 529-4100 or emailing Mark at mark.denzer@illinois.gov.

Who Am I? (Answer on page 12)

You most often see me in damp areas around ponds and lakes, although I can also be found just out in overgrown field and prairie areas. My flowers are small and not particularly noticeable, but my bright orange or yellow vine colors are really distinctive. It might almost look like some kids have had a fun time with some *silly string*, but the other plants I'm growing across rarely find it to be much fun. Who am I?

(Photo by Tony Gerard)

Invaders! Asian Jumping Worms by Tony Gerard



Several years ago, I went out one rainy night after dark to shut the chicken coop. As I walked back to the house, I suddenly became aware that the entire yard looked like it was moving! Hundreds of larger earthworms were crawling everywhere. While I knew that my yard had been invaded, until that evening I didn't know just how bad the invasion was. The invaders were Asian Jumping Worms.

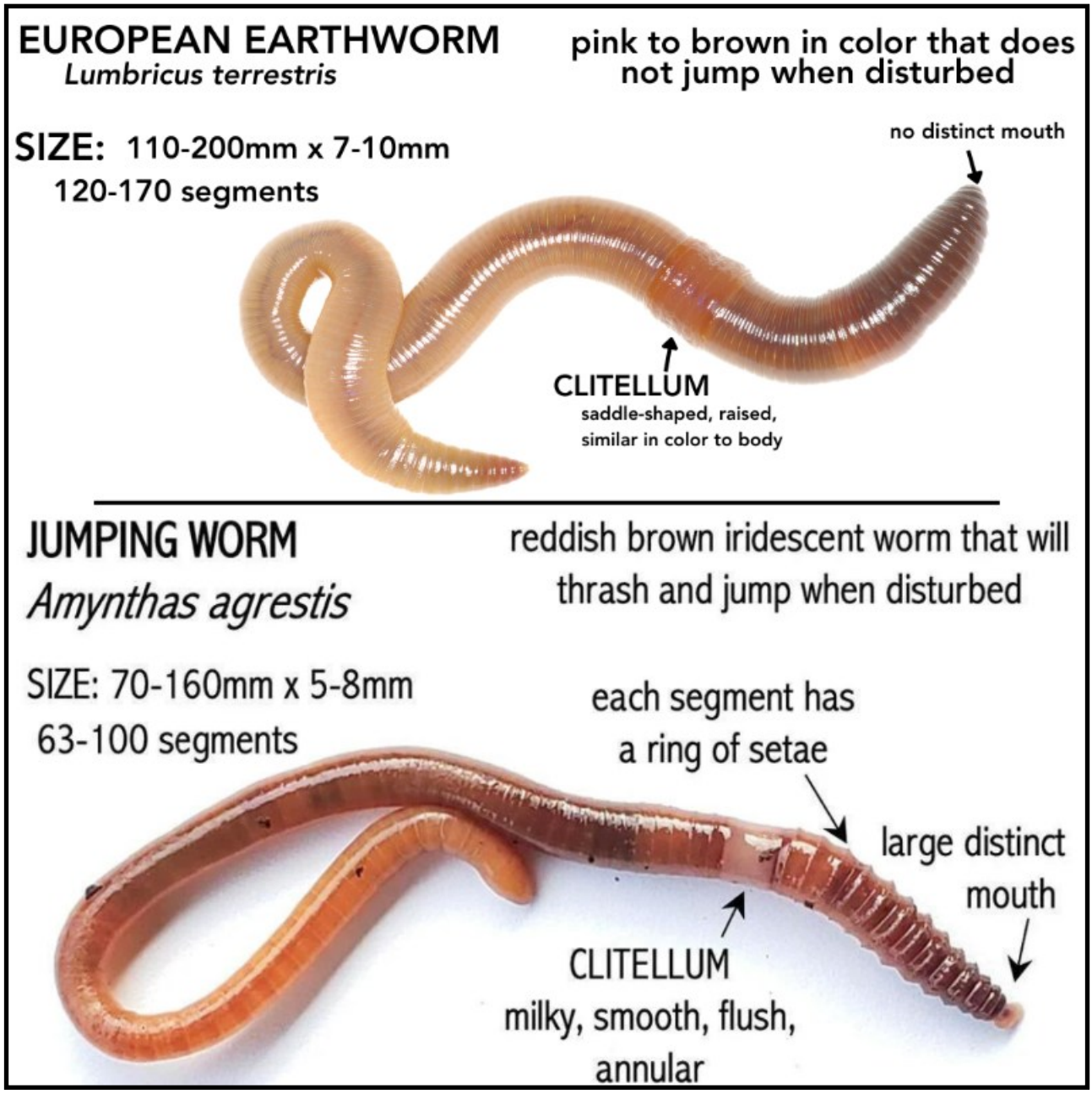
The name Asian Jumping Worm is applied to several members of the genus Amynthas. Other common names include Crazy Worms and Snake Worms. The name comes from the frantic trashing exhibited by these worms when threatened. Sometimes they even fling themselves off the ground. Folks with more worm knowledge than me have identified the species in my yard as *Amynthas carnosus*.

Most folks are unaware that many of the earthworms we commonly see are older invader species. The common nightcrawler is actually native to Europe. Worms within the genus Amynthas reproduce and develop quicker than their European counterparts. We commonly think of Earthworms as beneficial to the soil. Asian Jumping worms are different. They are super consumers of leaf litter, which impacts species diversity of the native soil. Removing the organic materials in top soil damages soil structure, making it retain less water, stunting the growth of plants. The lack of leaf litter makes plants more susceptible to being washed away by rain. Asian Jumping Worms are shallow burrowers and mostly remain in the topsoil. This means they do not contribute much to soil aeration compared to other common earthworm species.

Asian Jumping Worms appeared in the US sometime in the 19th century, but the invasion has gained momentum in recent decades.

So how do you know (other than the jumping behavior) if that large worm you found is an Asian Jumping Worm or a European Night Crawler? You look at the Clitellum. The Clitellum is that section of segments that is usually a bit different than the rest. On many earthworm species the clitellum is typically a pinkish color and is often raised above the other segments. On the Asian Jumping Worms the clitellum is often flush with the other segments and a pale whitish or grey color.

(Photos by Tony Gerard)



Answer to *Who Am I?* *(From page 9)*

I'm Dodder. Not many plants are parasites. What kind of jerk would you have to be to want to steal your food when you can make it on your own through photosynthesis? Well, a few plants are that kind of jerk, and I'm one of the few! In fact, I'm been a parasite so long now that I've lost my ability to photosynthesize. I parasitize the other plants I grow across to get my nutrition.

(Photo by Tony Gerard)

As a Friend of the Cache, you'll receive our newsletter, invitations to members-only events, such as the popular annual Moonlight Paddle, a 10-percent discount on all Friends Store items at the Wetlands Center, volunteer opportunities, and more.

Please consider becoming a friend or renewing your membership by sending in the form below or going to our website: friendsofthecache.org and clicking *Join*.

The Barkhausen Cache River Wetlands Center is closed until the Natural Resource Coordinator position is filled.

Become a Friend of the Cache River Watershed

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To remain budget and environmentally friendly, most communications are by e-mail.

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All contributions are tax-deductible. Please make checks payable to Friends of the Cache River Watershed and mail to 8885 State Route 37 South, Cypress, IL 62923.