

VOLUNTEERING TO TACKLE PHRAG IN A PHYSICAL-DISTANCING WAY

By Heather Sargeant, Georgian Bay Forever's Director of Communications

In GBF's last newsletter, we identified that there are 588 invasive *Phragmites* stands that have been mapped on the East Coast of Georgian Bay and that there is a 5 year plan to tackle the 344 untreated sites, plus reduce the already treated 201 sites, so they can all eventually join the 43 eradicated ones.

Phragbusters know each stand takes 2–5 years to eradicate, with each year getting easier and easier. The success of this 5-year plan counts on volunteer help every year to tackle the smaller and reduced stands, so GBF can get to the bigger ones and get them to a manageable volunteer size.

The world has changed since that winter newsletter. At GBF, we have altered volunteer instructions to match social-distancing public policy as of March 26th but the situation is very fluid. It is incumbent on each individual to monitor their own behaviour and volunteering activities to adhere to the latest Public Health Advisories as it relates to COVID-19 (Ontario and Canadian government, and your local municipality).

The changes to the volunteer *Phragmites* program to comply with (March 26th) public safety advisories on coronavirus are highlighted on page 2. **If your Georgian Bay household is in a position to help — we need you!**

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Protecting your water.



CONTROLLING INVASIVE PHRAGMITES ON SHORELINE PROPERTIES

What is invasive *Phragmites*?

Phragmites australis subsp. australis (also known as the European common reed) is an invasive grass that grows into dense monocultures that can grow as high as 5 m. Stands of *Phragmites* severely impair wetlands, threaten biodiversity, reduce habitat, damage municipal and private property, and impede access to recreational activities.

How can I distinguish the native plant from the invasive?

There are differences between the two; some that require experts or having the different plants side by side, which is rare. To find out more about identification and see more pictures, please visit GBF.org or this url: <http://bit.ly/IDphrag>.

One of the more obvious differences is seen at the base of the stalks in mature stands. Native *Phragmites* tend to have a red colour at the base, and be smooth. The plants in a native stand are often more scattered. Mature stands of invasive *Phragmites* are very dense, and the base of the stalks is beige in colour and feels a little rough.



Native *Phragmites*: Red shiny at base



Non-native Invasive *Phragmites*: Tan, dull at base

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

1. Change alert:

FIRST (Now to Mid-July). Call or email either your local community or cottage association leader on *Phragmites*, or email heather.sargeant@gbf.org to direct you. GBF has worked with many communities on a plan that identifies specific stands of small or medium size that can be tackled by 2 volunteers. Ensure that there are 2 of you that can volunteer from your household, with no one younger than 16 years old, and that the two of you have been isolating together and free from any symptoms of coronavirus for 14 days. You will be going out as a 2-person team (in Mid-July to late Aug) to tackle a stand or more by yourselves, to the location(s) indicated by your community leader. You will need a way to get to the spots by yourself. There can be no groups doing this work at the time of writing this article.

2. What do you need to do when you go to do the cut, mid-July to mid-August?

GBF and/or your community leader can take you through these steps in greater detail if needed. You will ensure that you are still complying with point 1. Then, here are the basic steps and rationale:

A. You cannot apply herbicides. Use a manual “selective” cut process where only invasive *Phragmites* stalks are removed. Again, GBF is only advising tackling small to medium stands as noted in point 1.

B. Gather this equipment from your own household: hand-held cutters, natural twine, scissors, heavy-soled shoes that can go in the water, gardening gloves, eye protection, a hat, sun-block and insect repellent, appropriate clothes that can get wet and protect from elements, PFD, and some yard waste bags. Note: a few people have gotten swimmer’s itch, wear a protective layer of clothes, but there is no fool proof way to avoid. If you can, bring your smart phone and take before, after, and during photos to share.

C. How to remove invasive *Phragmites*:

- **Timing:** The timing to remove the stalks is between mid-July and mid-August before seed heads emerge.
- **Location:** Tell someone where and when you are going, and when you expect to be back.

- **Cutting:** For safety tips, please review here: <http://bit.ly/safetyphrag>. You are responsible for your own safety. If there are seed heads, remove them first and put the heads into yard waste bags to be burned in a burn barrel.
- **To start:** Begin on the outside and work inwards. Cut each stalk underwater as close as safely possible to the sediment level (not just below the surface). You are only removing the stalks and attached leaves — do not try to disturb the roots — they are extensive, and uprooting them will contribute to the spread. Keep watch for floating pieces of *Phragmites* and gather them up as best you can to prevent spread.
- **Disposal:** Do not leave stalks and debris in or near the water. On the property, find a designated spot where cut stalks can decay (best with sunlight) far enough from the water edge that rising waters and storm waves and wind will not get to it. Wrap 20–40 stalks piled end to end in natural twine to prevent them from blowing away. Check the site next year to ensure that nothing has sprouted. It is unlikely, but it is very critical to monitor these sites, and dispatch anything that may grow. In Tay, there are other options for disposal, contact heather.sargeant@gbf.org to find out more.
- **Follow-up:** Report about what you’ve done by phone or email (with pictures optimally) to either your local community leader or heather.sargeant@gbf.org (community leaders and GBF share info). This is critical for us to understand where we are all in this important fight to restore coastal wetlands and remove **invasive *Phragmites***. We also want to make sure your effort is recognized, and it is not duplicated. Make sure you wash off when you get home (not in the lake where you might wash off a piece of Phrag), and we suggest drying out your clothes in the sun before washing them.

Where can I get more help and information again?

Contact Heather, your community leader, at heather.sargeant@gbf.org or (905) 880–4945 x 4. We are in contact with each other on the progress of this important project to save coastal wetlands in Georgian Bay. If you’re interested in more information generally on *Phragmites*, visit GBF.org or visit <http://bit.ly/1PgjnuO>.

THANKS AGAIN FOR YOUR HELP AND STAY SAFE.