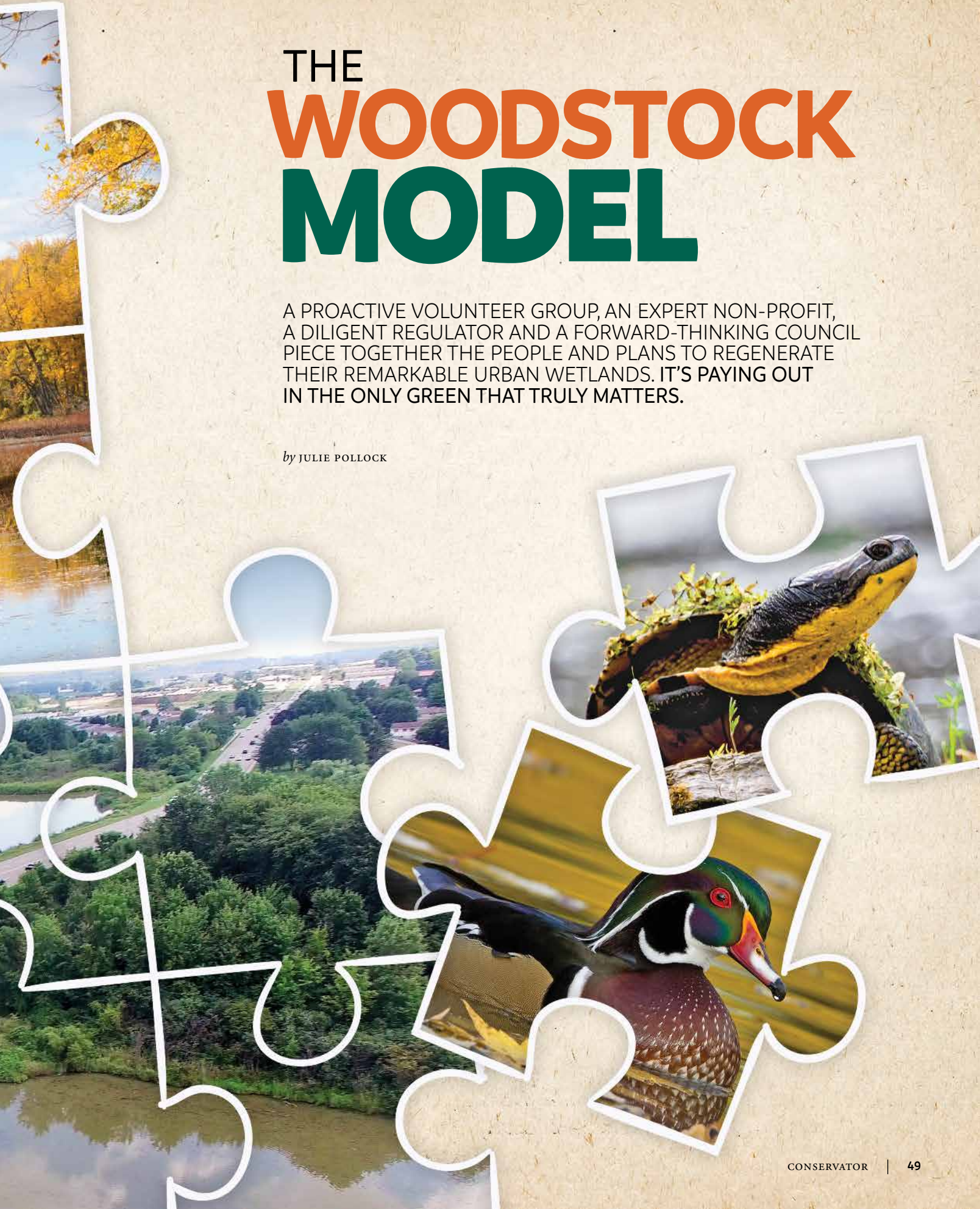




THE WOODSTOCK MODEL

A PROACTIVE VOLUNTEER GROUP, AN EXPERT NON-PROFIT, A DILIGENT REGULATOR AND A FORWARD-THINKING COUNCIL PIECE TOGETHER THE PEOPLE AND PLANS TO REGENERATE THEIR REMARKABLE URBAN WETLANDS. IT'S PAYING OUT IN THE ONLY GREEN THAT TRULY MATTERS.

by JULIE POLLOCK





Through restoration work by DUC and its partners, Cedar Creek has reverted to its original watercourse and its bed has been strewn with rocks and logs that shade fish and give turtles places to bask.



LEFT : © UPPER THAMES RIVER CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

Woodstock is a city of about 40,000 people, located in Oxford County on a busy transportation corridor in southern Ontario. With several large employers in town, it's a place where people want to live.

But it started small, when two villages, Blandford and Town Plot, came together in the mid-1800s. The settlements were divided by a spring-fed swamp and the town grew up around it. The waterways that still run through the city today are part of the headwaters of the Thames River.

So, what happens in Woodstock's watersheds does not stay there. The Thames River winds its way southwest across a prosperous agricultural landscape—including the City of London, nearly 400,000 strong—before entering Lake St. Clair and the Great Lakes system.

"Woodstock is very successful at attracting development," says Phil Holst, a Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) director and lifelong resident of Oxford County. "This watershed is being steadily urbanized but, thanks to planning, our grandchildren will stay connected to the urban creeks and wetlands, reaping the health benefits of clean water and time spent in nature."

What do you need to green the heart of a city?

For Woodstock, it took years of planning and partnerships among Stewardship Oxford, DUC, the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, Oxford County and the City of Woodstock to restore these wetlands to their full potential. Add to this successful mix years of work by Holst, creating momentum for large-scale changes.

Roger Boyd chairs Stewardship Oxford, a volunteer-based council that connects landowners with conservation programs. "Getting a rehabilitation project started takes the right mix of political will, statutory approval, community engagement and volunteer support. With the patient yet dogged persistence of Phil Holst, mainly, we're on our way to a much more interesting place."

Woodstock's Triple Crown: A how-to of urban watershed renewal

Jeff Krete oversees DUC's projects in south-central Ontario. "We've been working in Oxford County for the past couple of decades," says Krete. "Woodstock sets an example of what can be done with restoration work planned over years."

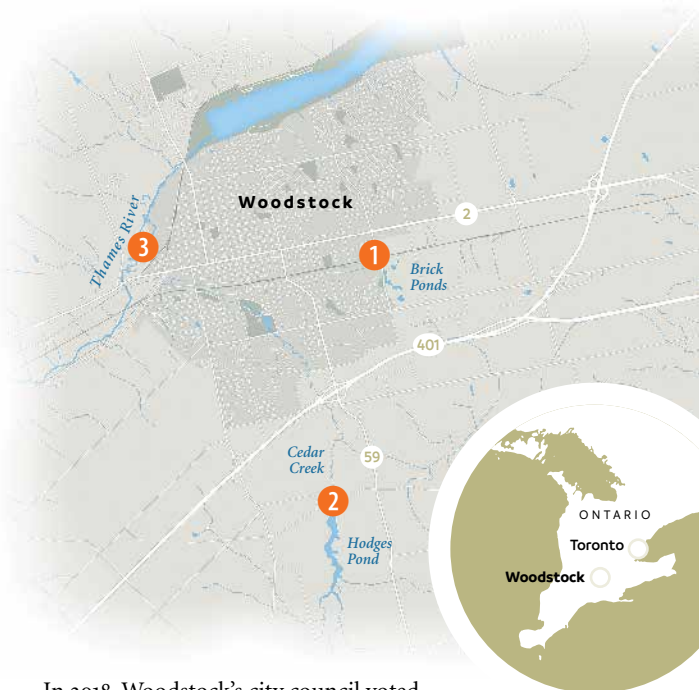
Recently, Krete has worked with the Woodstock partners on large, publicly owned sites including a series of wetlands on the Thames River, the Hodges Pond renewal, and the latest project: restoring Brick Ponds, an urban brownfield.

"Public projects pull people together," says Krete. "Phil has often led the way, backed by DUC's expertise and funding support. It's really just the beginning, but it's a good start toward sustainable water quality in these watersheds."

1 Brick Ponds

In the mid-1800s, Brick Ponds was mined for clay to make red bricks that built the town, including heritage buildings like Old St. Paul's Church. As decades passed, the resulting wetlands deteriorated and dense stands of invasive reeds, called phragmites, squeezed out native vegetation.

Roger Boyd commuted past Brick Ponds for nearly 20 years. "I saw many changes over that time," notes Boyd. "Early on, a controversial subdivision intruded on one corner of the property, removing plant cover and destroying a known blue-winged teal nesting site. Runoff often turned the water brown. Phragmites became common along the pond margins and turtles were routinely crushed crossing the busy thoroughfare."



In 2018, Woodstock's city council voted unanimously to support the Brick Ponds renewal and one of the largest urban wetlands in Canada began a journey from brownfield to gathering place. This summer, work commenced to reshape the degraded basin into shallow wetlands that help to filter water, shelter wildlife and retain spring floodwaters.

"Recently, I saw Caspian terns circling there," says Boyd. "Even before the restoration, herons and egrets hunted whenever there was open water and all kinds of waterfowl staged there in migration seasons."

2 Hodges Pond & Cedar Creek

It's been a couple of years since a former millpond just south of Woodstock was restored, prompting the recovery of Cedar Creek, a small tributary of the Thames River.



LEFT: © UPPER THAMES RIVER CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

Above: In 2018, Woodstock city council voted unanimously to support the renewal of Brick Ponds, and one of the largest urban wetlands in Canada began its journey from brownfield to gathering place.

The shallow water of Hodges Pond had taken on a heavy load of sediment since its long-ago days of active service. Warm, murky water flowed over the millpond dam and native fish once active in the creek were seen less and less.

In 2016, the Woodstock partners opened up the millpond dam and kicked off ambitious naturalization projects for the stream and surrounding landscape. The change is literally life-giving.

Cedar Creek has reverted to its original watercourse and the creek bed has been strewn with hand-placed rocks and logs that shade fish and give turtles places to bask in the sun. The excavation of decades of accumulated silt transformed the pond into a series of connected pools budding with native plants.

Classrooms from local schools are planting trees here. The community experience is important for Woodstock's kids, says teacher Nicole Steele of Algonquin Public School. "They will be able to come back in the future and see what they have done. Maybe they can tell their own kids they helped plant these trees and make this space as beautiful as it is."

3 Thames River Wetlands

Leaving town, the Thames River heads southwest through a series of recently restored wetlands crafted from old meander scars on the floodplain. The naturalized habitat draws wildlife to the river corridor.

The land is owned by Oxford County and they've made it part of the region's trail network. Woodstock's families hike and stroll here, stopping in the rest pavilion to watch the river and the birds among the trees.

No wonder it's a place where people want to live.

Wetland projects by DUC in the Woodstock watershed were funded by Intact Financial Corporation and Cowan Foundation, along with the Province of Ontario, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service via the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, and other local sources.

"We need to raise awareness among Canada's urban populations about wetlands.

One of the best ways to show people what wetlands can do is to build them in their own backyards. That way, people can see and enjoy them, and then they see that wetlands actually work for them as natural infrastructure."

— PHIL HOLST
DUCKS UNLIMITED CANADA DIRECTOR