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Volunteer groups help monitor water, wetlands in Cobb

by [Geoff Folsom](#)

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*Simon Lacke, of Kennesaw, center, takes a water sample at Larry Bell Park in Marietta as part of a bacterial monitoring class where environmental program specialists from Cobb County certify individuals for one year to monitor bodies of water for bacteria, especially E. coli.
Photo by Jon-Michael Sullivan*

MARIETTA — Volunteers are helping Cobb County keep tabs on local streams, ponds and wetlands as part of the Watershed Stewardship Program.

Cobb's Adopt-A-Stream, overseen by the Cobb County Water System, has been around for 10 years and includes 75 active groups of volunteers. Participants can check for potential problems in the water by three methods, with some using just one and others using all three, said Rachel Small, environmental program specialist with the Cobb water system.

Small said volunteers have notified the county about sewage leaks and illegal dumping before county field crews discovered them.

"They really help out, not only Cobb County, but the state," Small said. "Volunteers ... become the voice of the stream to let local government and state government know if something is going on."

All volunteers must first be certified in chemical monitoring, in which they take water samples and check their pH and dissolved oxygen levels, as well as temperature and conductivity. The tests are intended to gather information on the aquatic habitats and their ability to sustain life. After attending a workshop, volunteers adopt a water site and check it monthly, with an eye on building up enough samples to compare the results over time.

Once they are trained in chemical monitoring, volunteers are eligible to try for the bacterial program. In that program, they check for high levels of E. coli, which can mean a sewage leak or other problems with feces in the water.

The biological monitoring program deals with finding aquatic insects, which offer an indication on the water quality, Small said. Volunteers must pick a body of water and test it four times a year.

Another watershed program is separate from Adopt-A-Stream, but can be useful as well, Small said.

In anuran monitoring, volunteers check for sounds from frogs and toads around streams, lakes, wetlands and other sources. Small said the volunteers check for changes in the frog sounds over

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time because the amphibians are more sensitive to chemical changes than other animals. And since they are both predators and prey, what happens to frogs can have an impact on the food chain in an area.

"Basically, we're using this as a sign if something is starting to happen in the ecosystem," Small said.

Kennesaw resident Simon Locke, 58, said he got involved in the watershed program because he never lost his childhood love of playing in a creek. He came to training for biological monitoring Thursday at Larry Bell Park in Marietta because he heard there could be high E. coli levels at Butler Creek near his home, which he said is caused by the high number of pets in Kennesaw.

Luckily, Locke said he hasn't found anything to be concerned about with his water samples. But it has given him a chance to attend the Georgia Adopt-A-Stream Confluence, where volunteers from around the state gather in Buford.

"I came to find out that Cobb County has one of the best programs in the state," Locke said.

At the Thursday workshop, Small and environmental programs specialist Mike Kahle gave Locke and seven other volunteers training on how to identify E. coli colonies in water samples and determine if there is enough bacteria that it needs to be reported to the county. They even ventured onto the banks of a tributary of Rottenwood Creek to learn how to take water samples.

Bacteria monitoring volunteers receive several items to assist them with their studies, including gloves, Petrifilm plates on which to study the samples and an incubator in which to store them. Small said the incubator warms the E. coli colonies, allowing them to grow so they will be easier to identify.

Volunteers for chemical monitoring receive kits including chemicals to conduct the experiment with and collection vials in which to study them.

Those in biological monitoring get field guides and nets to catch aquatic insects in. Small said the insects are usually stored in ice trays.

While its rare that volunteers discover a significant problem, Small said the watershed program serves additional purposes.

"It's a great way for you to get more awareness and appreciation for nature and get your family, friends and yourself outdoors," she said.

For information on becoming a Watershed Stewardship Program volunteer, call (770) 528-1482 or visit www.cobbstreams.org.

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As a teacher, I have worked with this program for 6 years now. The Cobb Water System has been a terrific partner for us and lends us monitoring kits for the children to use to conduct their chemical tests on the water. I am NOT an environmentalist but DO want to