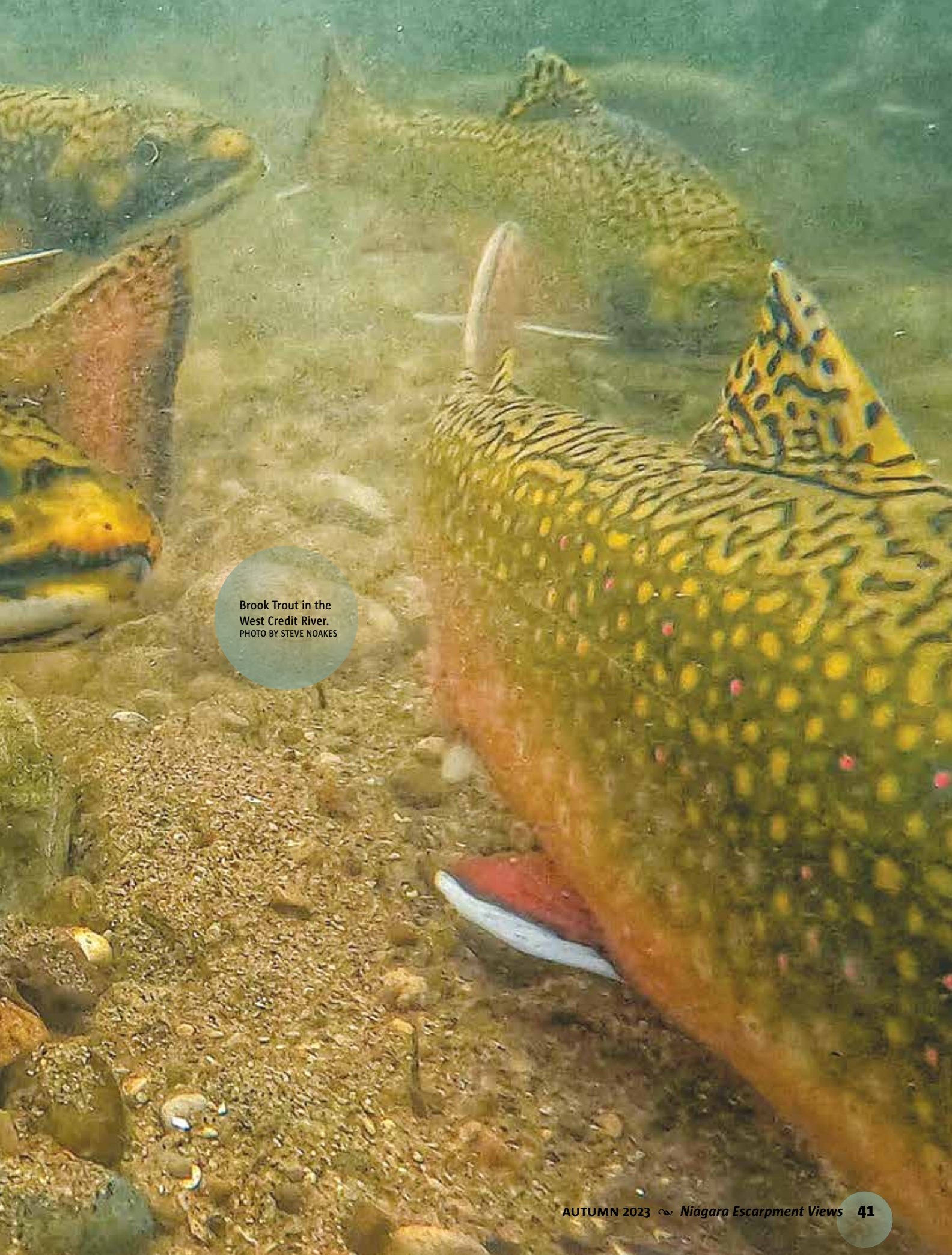


BATTLING ERIN TO **SAVE** **West Credit** **River**

WRITTEN BY DAN O'REILLY | PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE DAVIS EXCEPT WHERE NOTED.

At the crux of the battle are fears that a new sewage-effluent discharge and corresponding water temperatures will irrevocably damage the river's Brook Trout, considered one of the last remaining native Brook Trout populations in southern Ontario.



Brook Trout in the
West Credit River.
PHOTO BY STEVE NOAKES

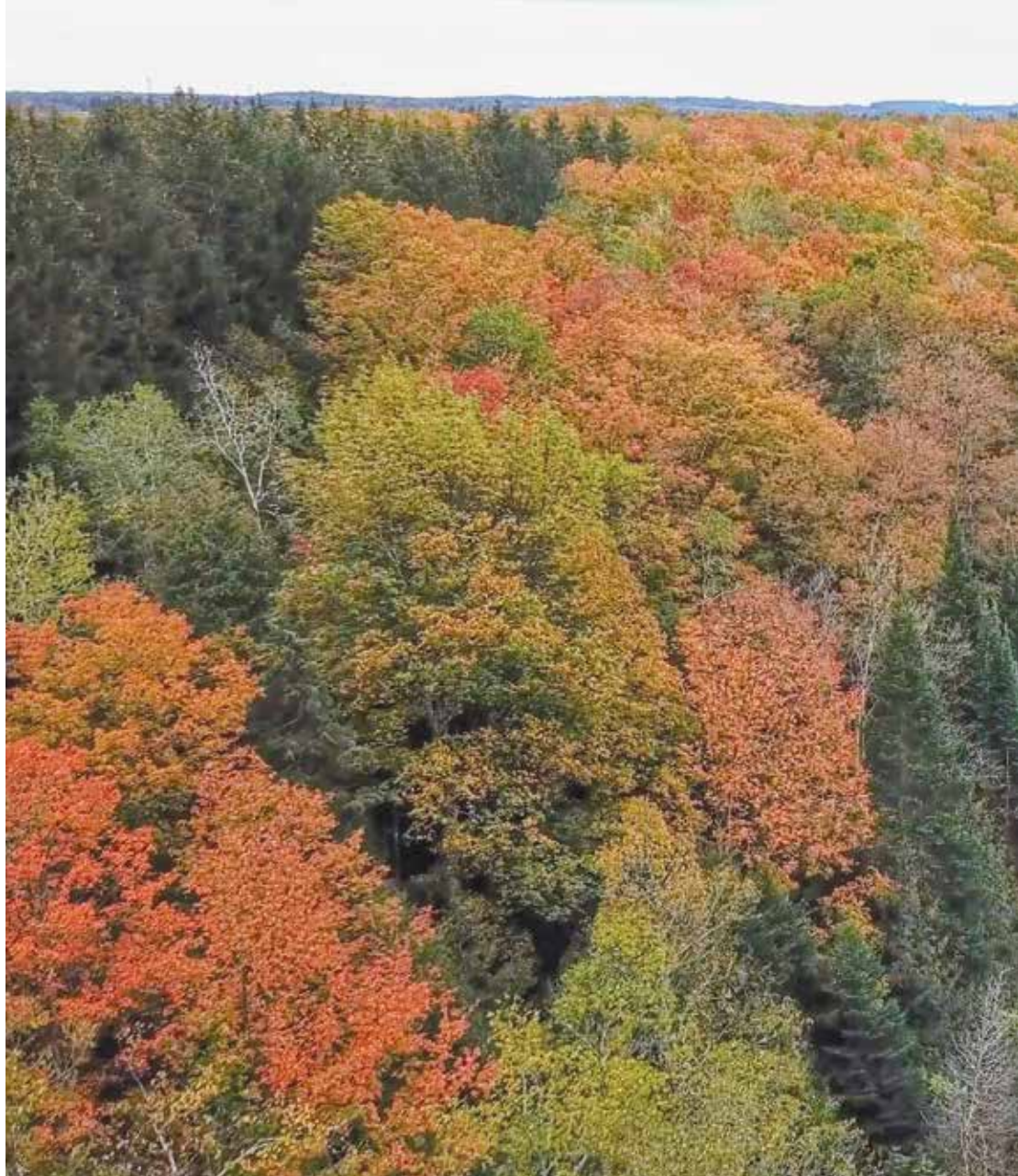
Rising in Wellington County, the West Credit River flows east across the Erin/Caledon boundary and then rapidly cascades down the Niagara Escarpment to merge with the main Credit River at the Forks of the Credit, one of the Escarpment's most scenic spots and tourist destinations.

"Its water formed a rugged valley that cuts through the Niagara Escarpment creating a wild refuge for nature and providing a respite and a connection with the natural world," says Belfountain resident Ann Seymour, whose property straddles the river.

But Ann, her neighbours, and many others maintain the West Credit is under threat from the construction of Town of Erin's new \$114-million wastewater treatment plant which, when Erin's population is maxed out, will release 7.2 million litres of sewage effluent daily into the river. It is intended to facilitate new growth, and existing homeowners, most of whom are on individual septic tanks, would have to pay connection charges to hook into it.

For the past four years the Coalition for the West Credit River, comprised of the Belfountain Community Organization and four environmental organizations: Ontario Streams, Ontario River Alliance, Trout Unlimited Canada, and the Izaak Walton Fly Fishing Club, has been waging a dogged campaign to, if not stop the project, at least mitigate its impact.

Several of the coalition's concerns include the fact that the plant could service a population equivalent to 24,731, a 550 per cent increase from Erin's current population of 4,500, and what it perceives as the undue influence of developers. Vaughan Ontario-based Solmar Development Corp., one of a number of



► John Monczka, left, and Dean Latham fly fishing for Brook Trout in the West Credit River. Fly fishing uses hooks with no barbs, and fish are immediately released after being caught.





▲ Aerial view of West Credit River.
PHOTO BY STEVE NOAKES.



► Coalition members John Monczka, member of Greg Clark Chapter, Trout Unlimited, Dean Latham of Izaak Walton Fly Fishing Club and Ann Seymour of West Credit River Watch.





▲ Dean with a just-caught Brook Trout. He handles the fish with a wet hand, easily removes the hook from the fish's mouth and instantly returns the fish to the river.

developers paying the upfront costs, sold land for the site to the town for \$2.

Harm to Brook Trout

Brook Trout, present in the West Credit River, are found in cold, clear streams fed by groundwater and their survival relies on stream temperatures no greater than 19°C to 20°C for any sustained period of time, according to aquatic ecologist, watershed scientist, and former Trout Unlimited Canada biologist Jack Imhof.

In its battle, the coalition has written numerous letters to various regulatory agencies, appeared as delegates to various provincial departments and municipal governments, and marshalled massive documentation to challenge the Town of Erin's position that the Brook Trout won't be harmed, says engineer Dean Latham, a member of Izaak Walton Fly Fishing Club.

It is particularly critical of Erin's stand that the effluent temperature will be no warmer than the 19°C threshold. That position is based on a 2017 thermal assessment of the river conducted by Hutchinson Environmental Services Ltd., the Town of Erin's consultant.

But 2017 was an unusually cool summer and Erin is also not taking into account the warming impact on rising stream, effluent, ground, and groundwater changes, says Dean.

In order to refute Erin's position, coalition members placed temperature loggers into the effluent discharge of five nearby wastewater treatment plants, Fergus, Georgetown, Shelburne, Orangeville and Acton. "The temperatures were well above 19°C," adds Dean.

A temperature limit criteria was considered in the town's draft Environmental Study Report, a sub-



▲ Not in my county. Looking upriver into Erin, this is the planned location for Erin's effluent from the sewage treatment plant to be discharged into West Credit River, at the border of Wellington County, right where the river flows into Caledon under Winston Churchill Road.





▼ West Credit River, flowing here under Shaws Creek Road in Caledon, passes through the Niagara Escarpment, a UNESCO biosphere reserve, and is planned to contain Erin's sewage treatment plant effluent.




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▲ Erin's wastewater treatment plant under construction.

section of the overall project environmental assessment. But there was no reference to such a limit in the final report, which in 2019, was approved by the-then Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks, Jeff Yurek.

There have been other setbacks such as Erin's refusal to consider in-ground infiltration, where treated effluent would be directed to the area's large sand and gravel deposits and, in the process, cool it and remove ammonia and phosphorus. The federal government also rejected the coalition's application for a federal environmental Impact Assessment.

Some Successes

However, there have been some successes. The town has to adhere to a Ministry environmental compliance permit which stipulates the need for a cooling system to reduce the effluent temperature, plus writing a system's operations plan in consultation with the Ministry and the Credit Valley

Conservation Authority, says Dean.

"We're thankful we got that (the cooling system requirement), although it is not what we wanted," says Dean, referring to the coalition's preference for the in-ground infiltration option. The coalition will be monitoring the design of the cooling system.

The fact that four prominent environmental organizations coalesced to support the Belfountain Community Organization (BCO) is also telling, says coalition chair and former BCO president Judy Mabey. "It was a very lonely battle for us in the beginning," says Judy, referring to a handful of Belfountain residents who began sounding the alarm after learning about the project almost by happenstance.

Although the river flows through Belfountain, just six km from the plant site, the hamlet is in Caledon and residents there didn't receive any public consultation notices.

"The only way we heard

about the project was from notices in Erin grocery stores," says Judy, emphasizing that the Town of Erin wasn't actually forthcoming with information for its own residents, including a lack of mandatory consultation with Erin property owners living downstream from the planned effluent discharge pipe.

In 2020 the Canadian Association of Journalists awarded Erin its "Code of Silence Award for the Most Secretive Council in Canada."

But last fall's municipal election led to major mayoralty changes in both Erin and Caledon. Former pro-plant Erin mayor Allan Alls did not seek re-election and was replaced by Michael Dehn in a two-way race. "He (Michael) is 'willing to work with us,'" says Judy.

In a similar two-person contest, Annette Groves was elected mayor of Caledon, replacing retiring long-time Mayor Allan Thompson, who Judy describes as "very neutral" on the issue.

This past February,

coalition members met with Mayor Groves and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation Chief Stacey LaForme, both of whom have agreed "to support our work to protect these waters and ecosystems. Still, there are a number of uncertainties."

Jack Imhof, aquatic ecologist and watershed scientist, says that without due care and innovative planning, development in Erin will have a major impact on some of the Niagara Escarpment's critical functions, such as recharge for local and regional aquifers and the water supplies they provide, plus the release of clean, cold water to streams. "The Niagara Escarpment is not just a feature but a landscape system that provides critical functions to downstream communities." **NEW**

To contact the Coalition, go to CWCR.ca.

Dan O'Reilly's last feature for this magazine was "A Deep-Rooted Attachment: Protecting Property from Developers' Dollars," Spring 2022.



▲ Solmar Development Corp. is supporting Erin's wastewater treatment plant.



▲ A popular swimming hole, this part of West Credit River at Shaws Creek Road is downstream of Erin's planned effluent discharge.



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Vineland:

Grand Oak Culinary Market, 289.567.0487
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Burlington: A Different Drummer,
905.639.0925

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Rosemont General Store, 705.435.6575

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Heathcote: Blackbird Pie Company,
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