**Under the Stairs with Jen Ricker-Feak of the**

**Iron Baraga**

**Conservation District**

# By Vicki Browne

**Iron County Lakes & Streams Partnership** CRYSTAL FALLS — Under the stairs in the oldest section of the Iron County Courthouse, there is a small office packed with desks. Inside, Jen Ricker-Feak and the staff of the Iron Baraga Conservation District offer services and implement programs that maintain and improve the environmental quality of our community.

Iron-Baraga is one of 75 Conservation Districts in Michigan dedicated to natural resource management of water, wildlife, soil, farms, forests and dunes.

The Michigan Association of Conservation Districts’ website reads: “We're also your neighbors, helping fellow Michiganders conserve their lands and waterways so our environment can be a cleaner, healthier, and economically

stronger place to live, work and grow.”

Ricker-Feak is the district manager. She is also the co-coordinator of the Western Peninsula Invasives Coalition along with Mike Zukowski. Ricker-Feak says she works to keep the funding flowing and Zukowski manages efforts in the field.

Roughly a couple of decades ago, there was just one person. Gail Dalpra kept the Conservation District running voluntarily when there was no funding available. Fortunately, today the Conservation District can fulfill its mission to help residents of both counties keep our land and water healthy.

According to Ricker-Feak, she never says, “I can’t help you” without following up with, “but I might know who can.”

During the winter months when operations slow down, there are just four staff who alternate working from home and being onsite. The two additional year-round employees are funded through the Forestry Assistance Program and the

Conservation Technical Assistance Initiative.

When summer hits, that small office is home to 11 seasonal staff members — employees who wear many hats as WePIC invasive strike team members, pesticide applicators, drone pilots, boat wash operators, outreach coordinators and more. The majority of Iron Baraga Conservation Districts' warm weather efforts, helping to accommodate a shortage in office space.

Ricker-Feak’s upbringing formed her into the ideal conservation specialist. She was raised in the northwest suburbs of Illinois by a mother who turned their backyard into an organic garden and helped start the first recycling program in their town, and a father who loved to get the family on the road each summer in their ‘77 cargo van to see the U.S., and grandparents who ran their own farmette. She started working for the Conservation District in 2013.

Ricker-Feak says her favorite part of the job is being on the lakes. Frequently she finds herself in those lakes — on purpose, but also by accident. Her passion is invasive species.

“A non-native species is a plant out of place, but an invasive species is one that is also a threat to human health, the food web or economy of the community,” she explained.

Ricker-Feak is a huge proponent of education.

“The more educated people are, the more they want to do the right thing,” she said. “It’s not about laws, it’s about

learning.”

Ricker-Feak used the example of two duck hunters who camouflaged their boat with invasive phragmites plants and then drove to a nearby lake. Before they could launch, a staff member saw them and told them about the damage phragmites causes. The hunters readily switched their camouflage.

Ricker-Feak is offering a training workshop in June about the Midwest Invasive Species Information Network.

MISIN describes itself as a “regional effort to develop and provide early detection and response resources for invasive species,” on its website. “Our goal is to assist both experts and citizen scientists in the detection and identification of invasive species in support of successful management.”

Having many eyes looking for invasive species is the best way to protect native habitats.

Ricker-Feak described looking for invasives as being a bit like geocaching with a very important outcome — preventing invasive plants, animals and diseases from overrunning the land or water. If invasive species are spotted, volunteers can upload photos and GPS coordinates to the MISIN website.

Ricker-Feak also had lots of practical advice about preserving the natural beauty of Iron County.

* Leave the natural landscape as close to what it originally was as possible.
* Choose native plants.
* To support fish habitats, allow trees that fall into the water become natural fish cribs.
* Cooperate with friends and neighbors to follow best practices and effective ways to manage invasive species.
* Boats and gear must be disinfected after visiting a lake. Since 2019, the law requires boaters to clean and drain their watercraft and equipment. If no boat wash is available, plan to use a car wash, disinfectant solution or a hose at home. Never travel with muck- or plant-covered boat or trailer.
* Don’t dump or discard things onto the ground or into the water. Throw unused bait in the trash.

“And here’s a good rule of thumb,” Ricker-Freak said.

“Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.”

To learn more about the Iron-Baraga Conservation District, visit their website *ironbaragacd.org* or call the small office under the stairs at 875-3755 Monday through Thursday between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m.