



## Hitting the Streams with Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk

This month, brava's roving fitness writer Anne Connor casts a line with Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk.

**M**y husband has a saying: Fish don't live in ugly places. I agree. I believe he's right. This is a boon for people who love to fish, as they get to spend their downtime in some of the most beautiful natural settings in the world. The best part? Wisconsinites, who pride themselves on conservation and stream restoration efforts, can claim some of the biggest

bragging rights in the arena of beautiful streams and rivers.

Recently, I spent a few hours in this idyllic world with Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk, a longtime conservationist and a proud protector of Wisconsin's lands. We gathered at Black Earth Creek in Cross Plains, an area in which she has fought to preserve the coldwater stream known for its fabulous trout fishing and abundant wildlife.

"Trout need cold water to survive," Falk says, and if we let business build right up to its shores, it will change the

eco-system and drive the trout, not to mention the fly-fishermen who come from miles around to experience its beauty, away.

No stranger to controversy, or conservancy

As Dane County Executive, Falk takes her responsibility of protecting our lands seriously, but this is no new passion. When she was 11, Falk started the Waukesha County Conservation Club, made up of nine girls ranging in age from 11-13 who pledged to conserve, preserve and educate neighbors about the wonderful world around them. A full-page write-up in the July 1, 1965 issue of the *Waukesha Freeman* detailed the girls' organization, which gave badges for saving injured animals, learning more about their environment, and keeping others abreast of the eco-health of their state. Keep in mind, this was before the public worried openly about the ozone layer or global warming. Heck, this was before most of the general public knew what the ozone layer *was*.

The Conservation Club's pledge — "I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully defend from waste, the natural resources of my country, its soil and minerals, its forests, water and wildlife" — is not far from the mantra Falk lives by today.

Finding solace in the streams

Falk says that fly-fishing, a passion she discovered more than a decade ago, is one of the few things she can do that requires so much concentration that it can transport her from the rigors of her job to the beauty of the world around her.

When we fished, she was attentive, not just to my questions but to the stream, our shadows and the bugs in the air and on the water (you want to use flies that closely match what's on the stream that day). We talked about everything from casting to families to where the fish hide, and although we have no fish tales to tell — there were very few bites — it was as physical yet relaxing a day as I'd had all month.

Please join us as we talk more with Falk about her passion for fly-fishing and her commitments to conservation, both in the water and out.

Anne Connor: Let's start with the basics. What do you like to be called? Kathleen?  
 Dane County Executive Falk?  
 Kathleen Falk: [Laughs.] Kathleen.

AC: Tell me a bit about your family.  
 KF: I'm the oldest of four children. My three younger siblings all like the outdoors. I'm also the mother to Eric, 26, a wonderful guy. Four years ago I married another great guy, Peter Bock [a fellow Democrat and environmentalist].

AC: Where are you from originally?  
 KF: Milwaukee. I grew up in Waukesha County.

AC: In a 1986 issue of *Milwaukee Magazine*, George Vukelich quoted you as saying you got into environmentalism because growing up, your world was "all fields and the whole outside was our playground." Most children appreciate that, but few understand that that way of life might change. How was your view shaped differently?

KF: My next-door neighbor was the outdoor writer Mel Ellis. He wrote for the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Field and Stream* and a lot of other publications. His daughter was my best friend and we spent a lot of time together, most of it outdoors. It seems I've always been aware of our presence on the land.

AC: How long have you been fly-fishing?  
 KF: Oh, 10 to 15 years. I started after



attending a seminar for women put on by the local chapter of Trout Unlimited.

AC: What do you love about the sport?  
 KF: I like being in the middle of a stream with the water, the bugs and being able to look at the rolling farm fields and cows.

AC: Do you consider fly-fishing a "sport"?  
 KF: Actually, I think of sports as being competitive against other people. I don't view fishing in that way. It's something you can do alone or with one or two other people. It's actually considered rude if you're fishing in a certain spot and someone comes up and casts right next to you.

AC: What is the best thing about fly-fishing? Is it the physical workout that you get after a long day outside or the mental benefits?  
 KF: Definitely the mental benefits. It's the one activity I do where I'm so focused on what I'm doing that I can forget about work and my other responsibilities for a while.

AC: You've been deeply involved in conservation issues since being elected Dane County Executive. Why are these important to you?

KF: I've been deeply involved all my life. I grew up loving the outdoors and learning from mentors like my grandparents and Mel Ellis. Being a product of the 1960s, I was there for the very first Earth Day.

I believe the government should be doing a better job at protecting our natural resources. That belief influenced my career and I became an environmental lawyer. I practiced environmental law for more than 20 years before I ran for public office.

AC: I know that you love fly-fishing. What other sports do you participate in?  
 KF: I like doing lots of sports that take place outdoors. I hunt, too. My son and I played on the same softball team for many years, and my husband and I do a lot of cycling.

AC: Do your son or husband fly-fish?  
 KF: No ... my husband has bad ankles and this [pointing to the rocks in the stream] would be murder for him.

AC: How do the other activities you participate in compare with fishing?  
 KF: They're very different, but the common ground is that I get to be outdoors in Wisconsin's gorgeous natural resources.

AC: Where is your favorite place to go fly-fishing?  
 KF: Southwest Wisconsin. ➤



## More on Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk

Born: 1951, Milwaukee, Waukesha County, Wisconsin

Education: B.A., Philosophy, Stanford University, 1973; J.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School, 1976

Lived in Madison since: 1973

Elected to position as Dane County Executive: 1997, 2001, 2005

Prior roles: Served as co-director and general counsel of Wisconsin's Environmental Decade, a statewide non-profit citizens' environmental protection organization, from 1977-1983.

Served as an assistant attorney general in the Wisconsin Department of Justice from 1983-1997. From 1983-1995, she also served as Wisconsin's public intervenor, a role in which she was authorized to take legal action to protect the public's natural resource rights.

Greatest accomplishment while in public service: Falk proposed setting up a conservation fund to preserve prized county land and streams in perpetuity. At the polls, an overwhelming 75 percent of county voters agreed with her and dedicated \$30 million over 10 years for preserving special places in Dane County. In 2002, she received a Community Open Space Partnership Green Ribbon Award for her initiative.

Greatest personal accomplishment: Falk is emphatic: "My son, Eric. He has a real sense of the world and the challenges before us — from poverty to war. He is highly motivated to do his part to change things and is wisely pragmatic about how to do that. I am very proud of him."