

The **Balsam Branch** that flows into **Wapogasset Lake** near **Amery** is a small but important natural stream in the region's watershed. It plays a key ecological and hydrological role in feeding the lake and supporting surrounding wetlands and wildlife.

### Overview

- **Type:** Small stream/river (often referred to as a “branch” or tributary)
- **Location:** Polk County, northwestern Wisconsin
- **Flow direction:** Generally flows **south from the Balsam Lake area toward Wapogasset Lake**
- **Watershed connection:**
  - Balsam Branch → Wapogasset Lake → Wapogasset Branch → Apple River → St. Croix River basin.

It is actually **the primary inflow to Wapogasset Lake**, delivering a large portion of the water entering the lake.

### Natural Character

The stream runs through classic **glacial terrain** typical of Polk County, moving through forests, wetlands, and small agricultural areas.

Typical features include:

- Clear water flowing over **gravel and rocky bottoms**
- **Moderate current** with shallow gravel bars
- Occasional **rock gardens and small rapids**
- Wooded banks with mixed **conifer and hardwood forests**

Because of these conditions, the stream can support fish such as **smallmouth bass** and other cold-water species.

### Balsam Branch Wildlife Area

Near the north end of Wapogasset Lake, the stream passes through the **Balsam Branch Wildlife Area**, a protected **180-acre wetland and prairie preserve** managed by the Wisconsin DNR.

This area contains:

- Marshes with cattails and sedges

- Prairie grass fields and oak savanna
- A small central pond and surrounding wetlands
- Habitat for **waterfowl, deer, turkey, and migratory birds.**

The wetland system helps **filter runoff and sediment** before the water reaches Wapogasset Lake, which is important for maintaining lake water quality.

### **Recreation and Local Use**

While small, the Balsam Branch area is used for several quiet outdoor activities:

- Canoeing or kayaking in higher water
- Fishing
- Bird-watching and wildlife viewing
- Hiking and hunting in the wildlife area.

Locals often describe the north end of Wapogasset Lake where the branch enters as a **quiet, marshy, wildlife-rich area** with wild rice, lily pads, and abundant birds.

### **In short:**

The Balsam Branch is a scenic, relatively small river that drains the Balsam Lake region, flows through wetlands and forest in Polk County, and supplies much of the water entering Wapogasset Lake—making it an important ecological artery for the lake system.

### **Where the Balsam Branch Flows**

The **Balsam Branch** is the **main inlet to Wapogasset Lake**, entering the lake from the **north end** near Amery.

### **Simplified Flow Path**

1. **Balsam Lake**
  - The branch begins as the **primary outlet of Balsam Lake.**
2. **Flows south through Polk County**
  - Passing wetlands, forests, and small agricultural areas.
3. **D.D. Kennedy Park**
  - The stream flows through this park, where a historic dam and millpond were located.

#### 4. **Balsam Branch Wildlife Area**

- A protected **180-acre marsh, prairie, and forest preserve** with a small pond that drains into the branch.

#### 5. **North end of Wapogasset Lake**

- The stream spreads into a **marshy delta with lily pads, wild rice, and tamarack trees** before entering the lake.

From there the water eventually flows **Wapogasset → Apple River → St. Croix River → Mississippi River.**

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#### **The Kennedy Mill Area (Local History)**

The area around **D.D. Kennedy Park** sits along the Balsam Branch and preserves the location of an early **water-powered mill site.**

In the late 1800s:

- The branch powered a **small grist and sawmill** serving early settlers.
- A **dam created a millpond** that still exists today in the park.
- The surrounding area became known as **Kennedy Mill.**

Today the park preserves the corridor with:

- Walking trails along the branch
  - A fishing bridge and pier
  - Prairie restoration and wildlife habitat.
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#### **What the Branch Looks Like Near Wapogasset**

At the north end of the lake the Balsam Branch changes character:

- Narrow, winding stream upstream
- Opens into **wetland channels and backwaters**
- Shallow areas full of **wild rice, lily pads, and aquatic grasses**
- Heavy wildlife activity (cranes, eagles, ducks, swans, beaver)

It's one of the **quietest and most natural parts of the lake system**, and many people canoe or kayak through the marsh channels.

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✓ **Interesting local detail:**

Because the branch drains **Balsam Lake**, heavy rain or high water levels up there can noticeably affect the water entering Wapogasset.

The lakes and rivers around **Amery, Wisconsin**, including **Wapogasset Lake**, have a much deeper history than the modern cabins and resorts. For thousands of years before European settlers arrived, this area was used by several Native American tribes who depended on the lakes, wetlands, and rivers for food, travel, and seasonal camps.

### **The First People of the Area**

Archaeological evidence shows that Native Americans have lived in what is now Wisconsin for **more than 10,000 years**, beginning after the last glaciers retreated. Many of the lakes in Polk County—including Wapogasset—were formed by those glaciers and quickly became important sources of fish, waterfowl, and wild rice.

Several tribes used the region over time, most notably:

- **Ojibwe (Chippewa)**
- **Dakota (Sioux)**
- **Menominee Tribe**

These groups often moved seasonally through the area rather than building permanent towns on the lake itself.

### **Why Lakes Like Wapogasset Were Important**

The chain of lakes around Wapogasset and Bear Trap sat along natural **travel corridors** connecting rivers that eventually flow to the **St. Croix River** and the **Mississippi River**.

For Native communities, these waterways functioned like highways.

They used **birch-bark canoes** to travel between:

- fishing areas
- wild rice marshes
- hunting grounds

- trading routes.

Wetlands like the modern **Balsam Branch Wildlife Area** would have been especially valuable because they produced **wild rice**, fish, turtles, and waterfowl.

### **The Meaning of “Wapogasset”**

The lake name itself likely comes from a **Dakota (Sioux) word**. Historical sources suggest it may derive from a word similar to **“Wahpuggsiee”** or **“Wakpuggaser.”**

Two commonly suggested meanings are:

- **“White Pelican”**
- or a reference to fish abundance (the lake was once called **“Sucker Lake”** by early settlers).

Like many Native place names, the spelling changed when English speakers tried to write the sound of the original word.

### **Life Around the Lakes**

Native families typically used this region as **seasonal camps** rather than permanent villages.

Typical seasonal patterns looked like this:

#### **Spring**

- Fishing spawning runs in rivers and creeks.

#### **Summer**

- Camps near lakes for fishing and gathering berries.

#### **Late Summer / Early Fall**

- Harvesting **wild rice** from marshes.

#### **Winter**

- Moving inland to forest hunting camps for deer, elk, and small game.

The marshy north end of Wapogasset—where the **Balsam Branch enters the lake**—would have been exactly the type of environment used for rice harvesting and waterfowl hunting.

### **Early Encounters with Europeans**

The first Europeans to reach northern Wisconsin were **French fur traders in the 1600s**. They established trade networks with tribes across the region.

Native people traded:

- beaver pelts
- deer hides
- maple sugar
- wild rice

for items such as:

- metal tools
- guns
- cloth
- kettles.

By the **mid-1800s**, treaties between tribes and the U.S. government forced many Native groups to move to reservations, and Euro-American settlers began establishing mills and farms around lakes like Wapogasset.

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**✅ A fascinating local detail:**

Many historians believe the **north marsh of Wapogasset Lake looked very similar 500 years ago**—the same wetlands, rice beds, and wildlife that would have supported Native camps along the **Balsam Branch**.