



Friends of Mason Neck State Park

August 2021 Newsletter



Register for

The Friends' Owl Moon Program

7:00 PM, Saturday, September 18, 2021

The Friends of Mason Neck State Park will hold their annual Owl Moon program as an in-person event at 7 PM on Saturday, September 18. Secret Garden Birds and Bees will present "A Year in the Life of an Owl", and you'll have an opportunity to have up-close views and photos of these rarely-seen birds. Admission to the program is \$10 per person. Members of the Friends can register now, and registration will open to non-members on September 4, subject to availability. Members can register [here](#). If you're not a member, you can join for as little as \$20 for up to two people [here](#).



The Friends' Held Their Annual Meeting

On Sunday July 11



The Friends of Mason Neck State Park held their Annual Meeting as a Zoom-based event Sunday July 11. The Friends' Board member Randy Streufert presented "What Lives in the Park?", an overview of the amazing variety of animals that call Mason Neck State Park home; and Park Staff presented short videos explaining the Park's well water system and the wide variety of events available at the Park. You can watch the entire program [here](#).

The Friends also elected a Board of Directors for the current year. You can review the bios of the current Board of Directors [here](#).

Critter of the Month – Beavers

Text and photos by Randy Streufert



The beaver is North America's largest rodent. Adult beavers normally weigh 40 to 50 pounds but can get up to 80 pounds. They range in length from 35 to 50 inches, including the tail, which normally is about 10 inches long.

Beavers are important because they create habitats that benefit a variety of other animals. Their dams slow the flow of moving waters and allow other wildlife and plant species to colonize this modified ecosystem. Ducks and other waterfowl, as well as many reptiles, amphibians, and aquatic insects, are attracted to beaver ponds. Several western states, including Nevada, import beavers to help create natural water reservoirs.

Beavers and muskrats are often mistaken for one another, especially when swimming. Muskrats are roughly one-half to two-thirds the size of a beaver and have a rat-like tail.



Muskrat (rat-like tail)



Beaver (flat tail)

The contribution beavers make wasn't always recognized. In the years leading up to the early 1900's, beavers in Virginia were heavily trapped and killed for their fur. In 1911, records from the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources indicated there were no beavers seen anywhere in the state.

Later in the 20th century the vital role beavers play in maintaining wetlands was recognized, and they were imported and released back into the state. Because of those efforts, the population of beavers in Virginia is currently estimated at 100,000 and they are present in every county.

Today they are either welcomed or strongly disliked depending on whether their activity adversely affects a property owner's land. Farmers often have to break up beaver dams that cause croplands to flood. They don't endear themselves to road maintenance crews either. When beavers build dams in front of culverts (pipes) that carry water beneath a road, the road often floods and at times the embankments wash out.

Compared to many other rodents, a beaver's brain has a smaller hypothalamus in relation to the cerebrum. Biologists believe this indicates a relatively advanced brain with higher intelligence. An article in the July 2015 edition of the National Wildlife Federation attests to their brain power. The article, entitled "Beavers: Masters of Downfall" (available on-line [here](#)), documents how they bring down trees to fall as close to the water as possible. Beavers vary the height and side of their chewing when the tree is on a slope. If the slope faces the water, they chew on the opposite side and low on the trunk. If the slope faces away from the water, they chew high on the trunk and on the side facing the water.

Beavers are herbivores. During the spring and summer, they mainly feed on plant material such as leaves, roots, herbs, ferns, grasses, water lilies and cattails. During the fall and winter, they eat more bark and the cambium of woody plants.

Beavers build a lodge in the water, usually well away from land. They construct an opening below the water line, requiring them to swim to get in, which helps to keep out predators.



The above two photos are of the beaver lodge in the marsh next to the park's Bay View Trail. The image on the right reveals the "paths" the beavers create through the marsh vegetation.

Several trees in and around Bay View Trail have been felled and others exhibit extensive chew marks. Many of the park's remaining trees in the marsh are wrapped with wire to prevent beavers from taking them down.



Beaver teeth marks on a Beech Tree limb



Chewed-off Willow branch

Beavers' dam-building skills are extensive, as this author learned first-hand while volunteering at the Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Woodbridge. While beavers appear to cause no problems at Mason Neck State Park or in the neighboring Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck NWR, their dams have resulted in undercut and washed-out roads at the Occoquan Bay refuge, and sometimes the dams had to be removed.

Normally, all that is visible of a beaver's dam is mud. However, when attempting to break an opening in a beaver's dam, one quickly discovers that it is a mass of interconnected branches, reeds and sometimes rock, with mud applied to seal any openings. On occasion, a backhoe was needed to break apart one of their dams.

Beavers sometimes bring the material for dams by holding it in their mouth and other times with their front feet. They've also been observed hauling mud on the back of their tail.

As the photos below reveal, beavers are very dexterous. While eating, the beaver rotated the branch at the same time it scraped off the bark.



The camera recorded an elapsed time of 93 seconds from the 1st to the 3rd image.

The next time you walk Bay View Trail and pass over the inlet from the bay into the marsh, look towards the marsh. You can see their dam about 20 feet away. It will be much more visible in the late fall when not covered in vegetation.

QUIZ



Is this a beaver or a muskrat?

The answer will be in next month's newsletter.

Let Us Know if You're Interested in a Class on Nature Photography!

During our recent annual meeting, a member asked whether the Friends would hold a class on nature photography. If there is sufficient interest, the Friends will be happy to do so. Randy Streufert will lead the class. Randy was the grand prize winner in the 2019 National Wildlife Federation's *Gardening for Wildlife Photography* contest and has had three of his photographs on the cover of *Virginia Wildlife* magazine. Randy takes most of the photos on our web page and in our newsletter, and a few of his photos are on display at the park Visitor Center.



The photography class would likely be a single day event lasting two or three hours, held outside at the park on a Saturday.

If you would like the Friends to plan a nature photography class, please send an email to: Friendsofmasonneckstatepark@gmail.com. If there's enough interest, we'll schedule a class and advertise it in the September newsletter.

Thank You to the Volunteers from



Last week, 15 energetic employees from various MOM's locations spent a morning volunteering at the park. They showed up with tools in hand, ready to go to work.

While you might think of MOM's as an organic market, a visit to their website explains that their primary purpose is to "Protect and Restore the Environment.". The Friends of MNSP are one of their partners in that mission, and you'll find a link to us on their website as well.

Working on two of the pollinator gardens, one group pulled enough weeds and invasives to fill up an entire dumpster. Another group headed off to the playground where they spread a massive quantity of rubber mulch, ensuring soft landings for the children who play there regularly.



As delighted as we were to have them volunteer, they thanked us profusely for giving them the opportunity to do so. What a great partnership!

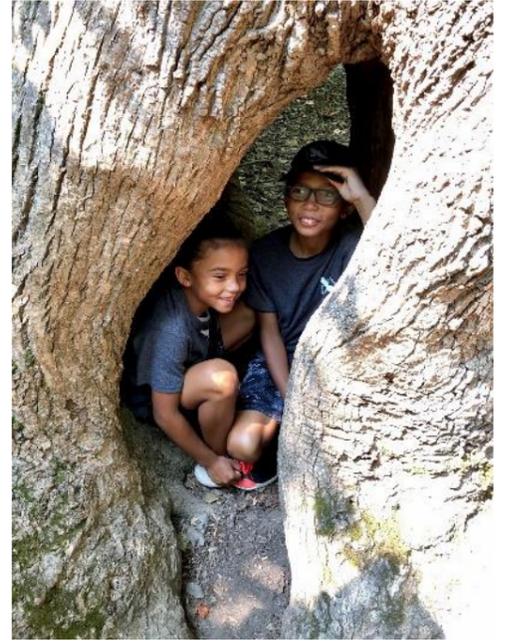


The Park Held Two Summer Camps for the Lorton Community Action Center

In July, Mason Neck State Park held two summer camps for youth from the Lorton Community Action Center. Twelve children ages 10 to 16 attended a three-day Junior Watershed Warriors Camp where they kayaked, hiked and used dipnets to discover the variety of animals that live in the water.



Ten children ages 8 to 12 attended a three-day Wilderness Survival Camp. Park Staff took them canoeing and hiking, demonstrated campfire basics with s'mores and helped them learn to build shelters. All the activities were designed so the youth would learn basic survival techniques.



The Garden Club of Fairfax donated \$2200 for the camps, making it possible to provide lunch and a take-home snack bag for the campers each day. The Garden Club's donation also enabled the Park to provide 200 activity bags full of at-home activities for the youth who could not attend the camp.

Chick O'Dee Answers your Mason Neck State Park Critter Questions

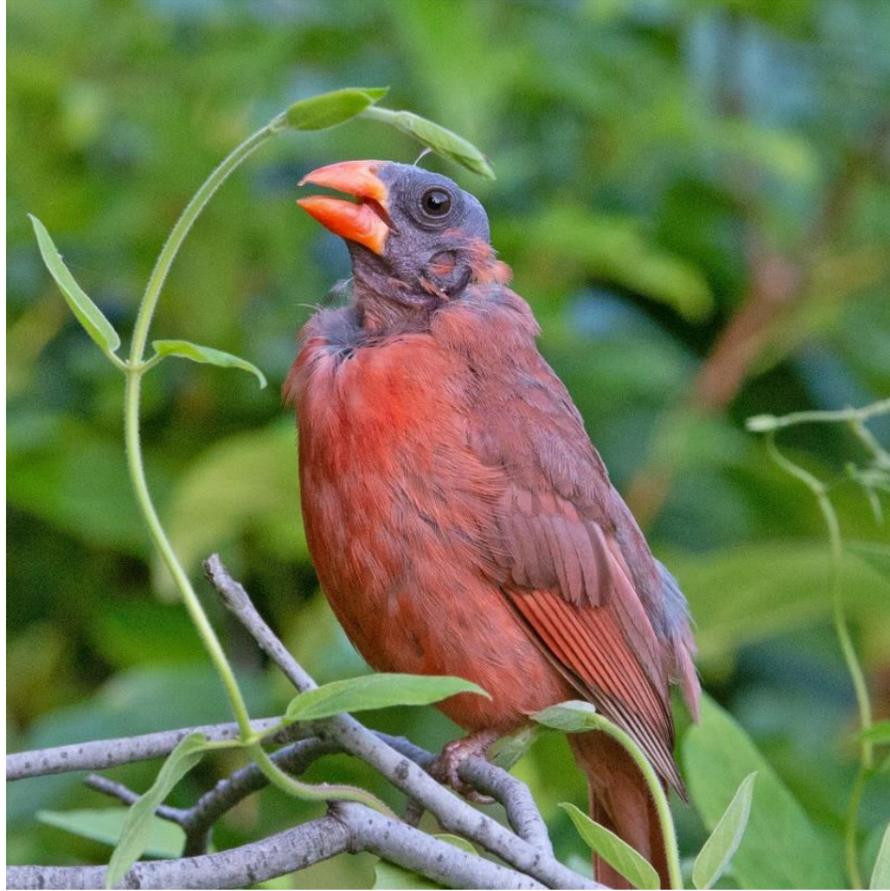


Thirteen-year-old Tommy asked: Not long ago I read a notice from the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia recommending that bird feeders be taken down, cleaned and not put back up for a while. The notice was related to a mystery infection that's been killing birds in this area. The hope seems to be that reducing bird interactions at feeders will reduce the spread of the disease; that made sense, so I took down my feeder. I read that the symptoms birds experience include swollen and crusty eyes and neurological symptoms like seizures or loss of balance.

Does that disease have milder effects, especially on Cardinals, that causes them to lose their head feathers? Because if it does, that infection has been here before and I've recently seen it.

Chick O'Dee replies: What a great question Tommy and thank you for paying attention to the advice offered by our wonderful friends at Audubon. Even after several months, scientists have yet to determine the cause of the sickened and dying birds. However, loss of head feathers is not a reported symptom.

If what you are referring to looks like what you see in the below photo, have no concern.



This is the time of year when many songbirds molt their feathers – just like mammals shed their hair and fur.

Since the male Northern Cardinals are normally especially beautiful, if something is amiss, it will be immediately noticed, just like you did. This is the perfect time for them to lose head feathers. It's long past when they have to impress a female to get a mate and also past when they need to assist with raising and feeding fledglings. The weather won't yet be cold enough that they would risk losing body heat. Before very long those bald Cardinal heads will again be covered in red feathers. So, this time next year, expect to see more bald Cardinals and likely some of their songbird friends.

Thank you, Tommy, for sending us your great question!

Have a question for Chick? Just send it in via email to:

Friendsofmasonneckstatepark@gmail.com

Join Us at 6:30 PM on October 16 for Mason Neck State Park's Park After Dark Evening



Park Staff and the Friends will join forces on October 16 to present "Park After Dark", a unique opportunity to experience the park after the sun goes down. Younger children will walk through the Enchanted Forest, where they'll have an opportunity to meet and learn about some of the animals that live in the Park. Teens and adults can experience a "lights out" hike where they'll learn how their senses quickly adapt to a dark environment. Everyone will enjoy a campfire, warm drinks and s'mores. Look for more information in the September newsletter!



Please Help Us Support Mason Neck State Park!



If you are already a member of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park, **Thank You!** Your membership dues and donations help us to support the Park's activities, and also enable us to fund special events such as our Owl Moon evening each fall and the annual Swanfall Holiday Program at the Jammes House each December. We've had to replace our in-person activities with virtual programs for the past few months, but we'll return to in-person events soon.

If you aren't a member, or your membership has lapsed, you can become a member at [Join the Friends of Mason Neck State Park](#).

You can also donate to the Friends [here](#).