



## February 2021 Newsletter

### Meet Eric Percival -- The Park's New Chief Ranger



Eric Percival began work as Mason Neck State Park's Chief Ranger on January 25. Eric will help to relieve the burden on other park employees resulting from high numbers of visitors and a chronic shortage of staff. Eric's chief function will be law enforcement, but he also expects to help out on park maintenance issues and preserving the park's natural resources.

Eric is well-suited to the job. He was born in Woodbridge, earned a degree in Forestry from Pennsylvania College of Technology in Williamsport, PA, and worked at Leesylvania State Park before becoming a police officer at Dulles Airport. Eric's wife Sarah formerly was employed as the Chief Ranger at Leesylvania State Park.

Eric, Sarah and their two children will live on the park property, where they'll have an unmatched opportunity to experience all that the park has to offer. Next time you're at the park, keep an eye out for Eric and welcome him to our beautiful slice of nature.

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# Save the Date:

## Mow Less Grow More

### Zoom Program, March 7



The Friends of Mason Neck State Park will host a special program, "Mow Less, Grow More, at 3 PM on Sunday, March 7. Our speaker will be Tami Sheiffer, who works for Fairfax County Park Authority's "Watch the Green Grow" education and outreach initiative.

Learn how you can protect neighboring parks and natural habitat through your yard care by mowing less and growing more. Tami will discuss how to use native plants to expand wildlife corridors and stream buffers as well as help solve landscaping problems such as areas of erosion or poor drainage where grass will not grow.

The program is free, thanks to the generosity of the members and donors of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park. Registration is required, so we can send you the Zoom link for the program. You can register for the program [here](#).

# Mason Neck State Park

## Critters of the Month:

### Our Smallest Winter Birds

Text and photos by Randy Streufert



Mason Neck State Park hosts only one year-round species of bird under 5 inches long, the Carolina Chickadee (above left). Averaging only 4.4" long, those of you with bird feeders know them as that little bird at the bottom of the pecking order who must yield its place on feeders to virtually every other bird species.

The various species of sparrows in the park, those little brown birds seen in flocks flitting along the roadside, ground and in bushes, are large by comparison averaging 5" or more long. A Savannah Sparrow is pictured above on the right.



From April to September the prize for being the smallest bird in the park goes to the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. At just 3" long and weighing only .1 to .2 ounces, our native hummingbird is in a class by itself and will be the sole subject of an upcoming article.



When the weather conditions further north result in a poor food crop, like they did in 2020, Red-breasted Nuthatches, another small bird at just over 4" long, spends the winter here. In most years they do not venture as far south as Mason Neck.

Every year from October to April the park routinely hosts three small bird species. While their diminutive size and secretive behavior make them a challenge to find, each is well worth the effort.



The Winter Wren, pictured above, averages just 3.3" long. Their brown color makes them easily lost when moving among dead leaves and grass. Winter Wrens eat variety of insects, caterpillars, millipedes and spiders, among other things. They hop slowly on the ground inspecting crevices, decaying wood, upturned roots, and vegetation for food. They capture prey by picking it off surfaces or by probing in decaying bark. They move more like a mouse than a bird as they hop and scamper through the forest understory.

These energetic birds often bob their entire bodies as if doing squats while they nervously look for food.



In the park they are most often found on or near the ground close to a water source. In flight they rapidly beat their tiny wings to move short distances between cover. Spotting a Winter Wren is a treat because they are not so easily seen.

The park's other two winter-time small bird species are Kinglets – the Ruby-crowned and the Golden-crowned (pictured below). They average less than 4.3" long.



Both Kinglet species can be seen right now in the park, but like the Winter Wren, not easily. Neither one sits still for more than a split-second or two. They make Chickadees look almost sluggish in comparison. These tiny birds are seemingly overflowing with energy.

Kinglets prey on spiders and many types of small insects, including aphids, ants, and bark beetles. They forage in trees, hovering and pecking in order to glean insects from the surface of leaves and branches. They also eat a small amount of seeds and the pulp of dogwood berries.

Both species will sometimes shift where they're feeding to avoid competition with Carolina Chickadees or Tufted Titmice.



The Ruby-crowned Kinglet forages almost frantically through lower branches of shrubs and trees. They are restless, acrobatic birds that move quickly through foliage, typically at lower and middle levels. They flick their wings almost constantly as they go. (Note the slight blur of the bird's feathers in the picture above on the left).



The species gets its name from the ruby colored crown sported by the male. Since that distinctive crown is often kept completely hidden, distinguishing the genders is almost impossible.



Golden-crowned Kinglets are somewhat smaller and search for food in places similar to their Ruby-crowned cousins. They are only slightly less active.



Both sexes have a golden crown, but the males have an orange crest that, like the male Ruby-crowned's crest, is hidden most of the time.

Some of the male's orange crown is visible in the photo above on the left.

Would you like to look for these tiny birds before they leave in the spring? Birders advise that if you want to attract a kinglet closer for a better look, try making a phishing sound to bring them in along with, possibly, chickadees and warblers.

Information Source: Cornell Lab of Ornithology website.

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# Mason Neck Had a Record Number of Visitors in 2020



The overflow crowds that visited the park for First Day Hikes on January 1, 2020 were just a hint of what was to come for the rest of the year. As county and regional parks in Northern Virginia closed down in the spring due to the pandemic, visitors flocked to Mason Neck State Park, one of the few outdoor spaces that remained open. Even after the other parks reopened, attendance at Mason Neck State Park remained high as people sought the peace and open spaces of the park to relieve the stress of day-to-day living.

In 2019, the park had 84,714 visitors. In 2020, attendance virtually exploded, reaching 244,867 visitors for the year -- nearly three times the visitors in 2019.

It's wonderful that so many people are taking advantage of the park's quiet beauty. But remember that increased numbers of visitors place increased stress on the park. Please be careful to treat the park respectfully. Stay on the trails, take your trash with you, and do your best to not disturb the wildlife. If you can, visit in the mornings and on weekdays, when there are fewer people in the park. You'll find the park is at its most enjoyable when there are fewer people there.

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## 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

suspend our in-person activities for the past few months, but we're offering online programs and are hopeful of being able to resume our many activities at the park in the near future.

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](#).