August 2023 Newsletter

It’s Time to Submit your Photos for the Friends’ “Picture the Magic” Photography Contest

It’s time to start taking pictures for the Friends’ photo contest. We are again looking for images that capture the magic of the park. There will be a 1st prize winner ($200) for youth (ages under 18), a 1st prize winner ($200) for adults (ages 18 and up), and a grand prize winner ($300).
Images must be in one of these three categories:

1) Park Staff in Action – images showing uniformed Mason Neck State Park staff interacting with the public, performing park maintenance, or other official duties.
2) Flora and Fauna – images taken in the park of native plants and animals.
3) Aquatic activities – images showing people enjoying Belmont Bay or Kane’s Creek in kayaks, canoes, or other non-powered water vessels.

Each photographer may submit up to three images. However, for any image to be considered, the photographer must submit at least one image in the “Park Staff in Action” category.

All images must have been taken inside the boundaries of the park or within 100 yards of the shore and, at any time in 2022 or 2023. The contest will be open for submissions until September 30, 2023. The submission form and contest rules are on the Friends’ website, here.
The Friends and Fairfax Master Naturalists Continue Working on the Park’s Pollinator Gardens

The Friends of Mason Neck State Park and the Fairfax Master Naturalists are continuing their work to rehabilitate the park’s pollinator gardens. Come by and see the big improvements they have made to the Meadows Garden and the Visitor Center Garden.

They have now turned their attention to the Woodland Edge Garden, with plans to completely redo it after many years of neglect. Weeds have been removed and the soil covered with black plastic to kill any remaining weeds. They will replant the garden when the weather cools a little in the fall.

Special thanks to Jerry Nissley, Sarah Mayhew and the other Fairfax Master Naturalists who have devoted their time to this project. And thanks, too, to Friends’ members Pam Cressey, Bets
Byrne, Randy Streufert, and Paul van Rijn, who have joined in this project.

Would you like to help make the pollinator gardens even better? Workdays are scheduled every two weeks from now through November. You can sign up to help here.

**Chick O’Dee Answers Your Mason Neck State Park Critter Questions**

Photos and reply by Randy Streufert

**Ten-year old Chrissy** recently asked: “I just saw posters in the park announcing the Friends’ photography contest. I’d love to win the $300 grand prize or even the $200 prize just for young photographers like me! What’s your advice on how to get a good picture?”

**Chick O’Dee’s reply:** Chrissy, there are a lot of variables with every photo opportunity, but here are a few basic tips that might help improve your picture taking in the park.

**Light:** Light is always a key element in any photograph. Too much sunlight will ruin an otherwise good shot every time. The best light is in the earlier morning hours and about an hour or two before dusk. From roughly 10 AM to 3 PM on a sunny day the light
can be much too bright. Fortunately, the park has many places shaded by its trees that enable good midday images to be taken.

Along the beach just off Bayview Trail, morning sun comes in behind the photographer, putting Bald Eagles, Osprey, Herons, and other birds flying over the bay in good light.

The afternoon light comes from across the bay providing good light for the many species of dragonflies and flowers only a few yards from the water’s edge. It’s best to walk on the beach at low tide to keep your feet and camera dry.
Some of the park’s flowers, like Common Sneezeweed, Swamp Rose Mallow, and Cardinal flowers are only seen near the water along the beach and typically bloom from July to September.

Overcast days often provide perfect light that naturally enhances the colors of the park’s flowers.

**Eyes:** If your subject is an animal, be sure to have its eyes in focus. It may not matter if its other body parts are a bit fuzzy; but if the eyes are out of focus the shot won’t be any good. For some animals, the optimum shot has the animal looking directly at the camera. Compare these two images of the same Gray Ground Squirrel. The image of the squirrel looking directly at the viewer tends to evoke a stronger positive reaction.
But that direct look may not work as well with us birds because our distinctive beaks can seem to disappear in the image. With our heads slightly turned, our beaks are visible, and we look even more adorable (especially Carolina Chickadees like me).

**Camera height:** Have your camera at the same level as the subject, whether it’s a person or animal. Obviously, that’s not possible for birds flying overhead. Getting down on the ground was needed for these two images.

![American Toad](Image)

![Painted Turtle hatchling](Image)
Points of View: For some subjects, try different points of view to get very different perspectives.
**Action:** Images of animals doing something such as flying, eating, carrying food, or vocalizing are often more difficult to take, but they are usually much more interesting than an image of them just sitting or standing still.

![Beaver eating bark](image1)

![Common Buckeye taking off](image2)

![Carolina Chickadee with moss for its nest](image3)

![Red Fox Kits interacting](image4)
Reminder: All the rules for the photography contest are on the Friends website, [here](#). Keep in mind that photographers may only submit up to three images, but at least one must be of a park staff member conducting a program, assisting park visitors, or performing park maintenance.
Chrissy, thank you for your interest. As you saw when you were there, the posters advertising the contest are there for everyone visiting the park. But since you sent in your question, maybe you’ll have an advantage because these photo tips will only be seen by those like you who read the Friends’ Newsletter.

**Have a question for Chick?**  To send in your inquiry, use the “Contact Us” tab on the homepage of the Friends website. We’ll do our best to answer it in our next newsletter.

**The Friends Will Support Field Trip for Lorton Community Action Center Youth**

The Park will host 12 youth from the Lorton Community Action Center for a field trip on August 16. LCAC provides low-income individuals, senior citizens, and families residing in Fort Belvoir, Lorton, Newington and other portions of southeast Fairfax County with access to basic needs and the opportunity to empower
themselves through self-sufficiency programs. Depending on the weather, they may enjoy a guided hike by a park ranger, kayaking, a visit to the turtle pond and possibly archery. There will be things for them to do in Explorer Hall as well. The Friends will treat them to lunch and send them home with a snack for later in the day. We'll make sure that park staff gets everything they need for the programs, serve as volunteers for the event, and make a donation to LCAC to help with transportation costs. If you’d like to help on that day, please email the Friends’ President, Hillary Clawson, at hillary.k.clawson@gmail.com

The Friends of Mason Neck State Park Board of Directors Is Seeking Advisors

The Board of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park works hard to fulfill the Friends’ mission of identifying and promoting activities to
conserve, enhance, and interpret the natural, educational, recreational, cultural, and historic resources of the park. However, we feel we need more input from the community to ensure that we are fully considering the needs and interests of the people who use the park. Would you like to help by serving on an advisory committee that would meet to discuss the park and the Friends’ role in supporting it? We’d like the committee to represent all the park’s visitors, including younger people, people of color, different nationalities, and underserved communities in the area. Please email the Friends’ President, Hillary Clawson, at hillary.k.clawson@gmail.com if you’d like to join the advisory committee or learn more about this opportunity.
August Programs at Mason Neck State Park

The Park has scheduled programs about insects, trees, animal tracks, a survival campfire, and more in August. You can learn about the events at the park in July on the park’s [website](#). Just scroll down until you see the list of upcoming events and click on “More events at this park.”
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, including funding initiatives that improve the accessibility of the park.

If you aren't a member, or your membership has lapsed, you can join the Friends here. You can also donate to the Friends here.