



## **Friends of Mason Neck State Park December 2022 Newsletter**

### **Last Chance to Register for The Friends' Holiday Celebration: Swanfall All About Tundra Swans**



Photo: Randy Streufert

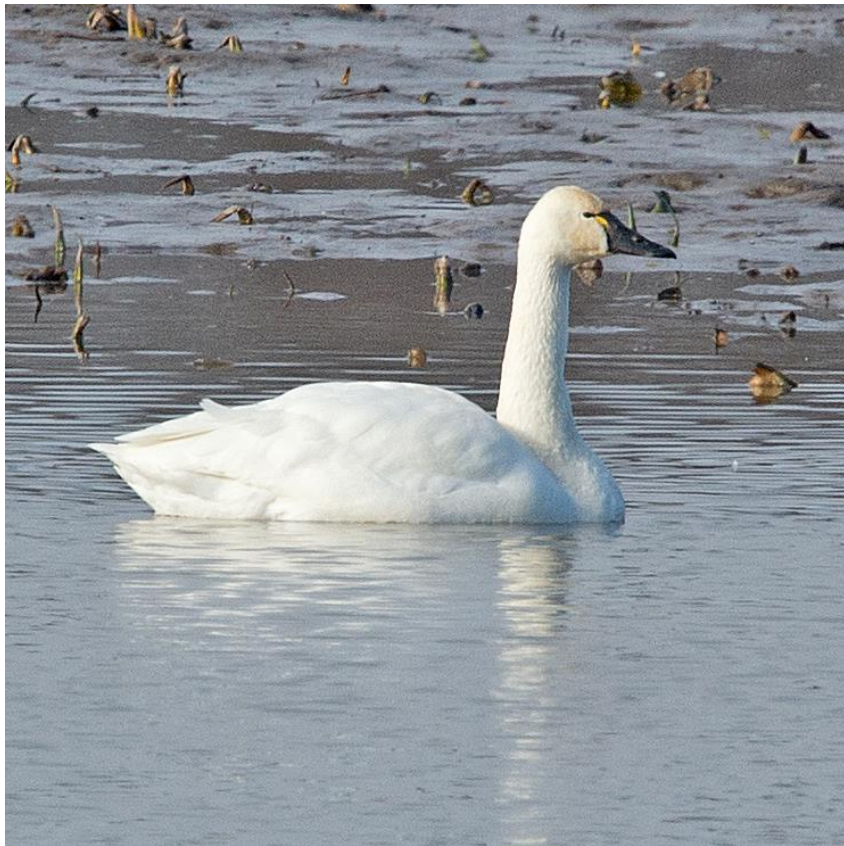
Registration closes on December 2 for the Friends' Annual Holiday Celebration, "Swanfall." Be sure to register right away!

We'll start at 2 PM with a great buffet of hors d'oeuvres and desserts.





At 3 PM Dr. Tom Wood, Ornithologist and Associate Professor of Integrative and Interdisciplinary Studies at George Mason University; and Tom Blackburn, Past President of the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia, will present a program on Tundra Swans. You'll learn about their lives, their long migration from Alaska and northern Canada to the coastal mid-Atlantic, as well as their close relationship to other swans.



Photos: Randy Streufert

Swanfall will be held in the Ann Mason Room of Gunston Hall, 10709 Gunston Road, Lorton VA.

Swanfall is open to everyone. Members and one guest can register for \$15 each. Nonmembers can register for \$20. You can register [here](#).

## Join the Park Staff for Guided First Day Hikes – January 1



First Day Hikes are the perfect way to start the year! Mason Neck State Park will lead hikes for children and adults all day long. First Day Hikes are an initiative that started in 1992 in Massachusetts, and in 2012 were adopted in all 50 states to promote a healthy lifestyle. Each trail in Mason Neck State Park is unique, and the hike leaders will offer information along the way. The Visitor Center will be open for more hands-on activities and to warm up if needed!



**9:30 a.m.** Kane's Creek Trail and Eagle Spur Trail. A 3.8 mile hike. Packed dirt with stairs. Not wheelchair or stroller friendly.

**12 p.m.** Dogue Trail hike and roll. Wheelchair Accessible. Approximately .85 miles, packed dirt trail.

**1:30 p.m.** Tundra Swan Hike at the Woodmarsh Trail at Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge. Approximately 2.5 mile loop. Not wheelchair friendly. Recommended for ages 8 and up. **There is limited space for this hike only because of limited parking facilities. Registration is REQUIRED for this hike only.** You can register [here](#) or call Mason Neck State Park at 703-339-2385. If there's no space available on this hike, there are several other guided hikes to see the swans in December and January. See the article further down in this newsletter.

**3:00 p.m.** Family-friendly hike on Bay View Trail. Approximately 1.25 miles with stops and hands-on opportunities for adventure and exploration.

## Mason Neck State Park Critters of the Month:

### The Park's Three Small Woodpeckers

By Randy Streufert

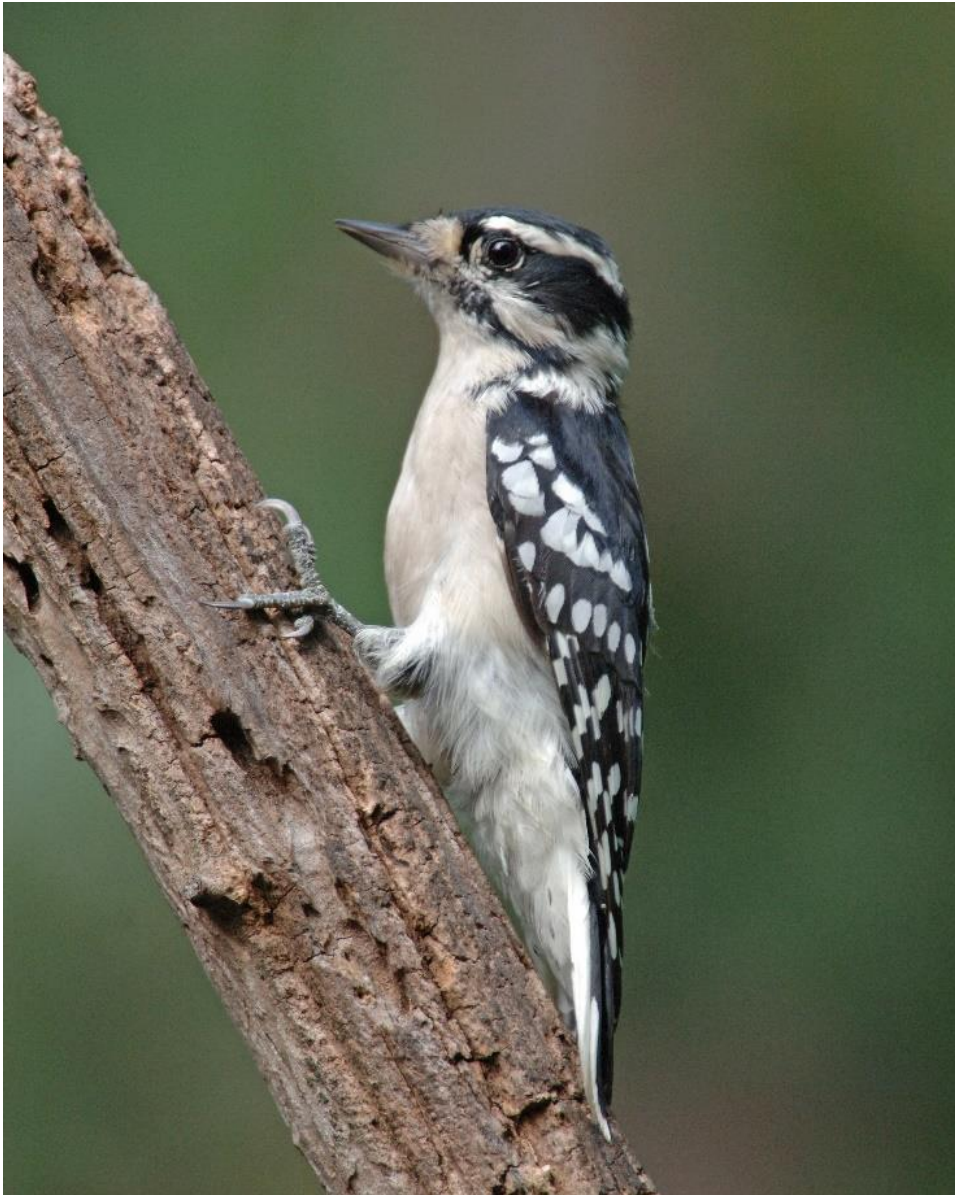
You can see and hear seven woodpecker species in Mason Neck State Park. They range in size from the Downy at 6.25" long to the Pileated at 16.5" long. Six species are year-around residents, and the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker spends the summer months further north.



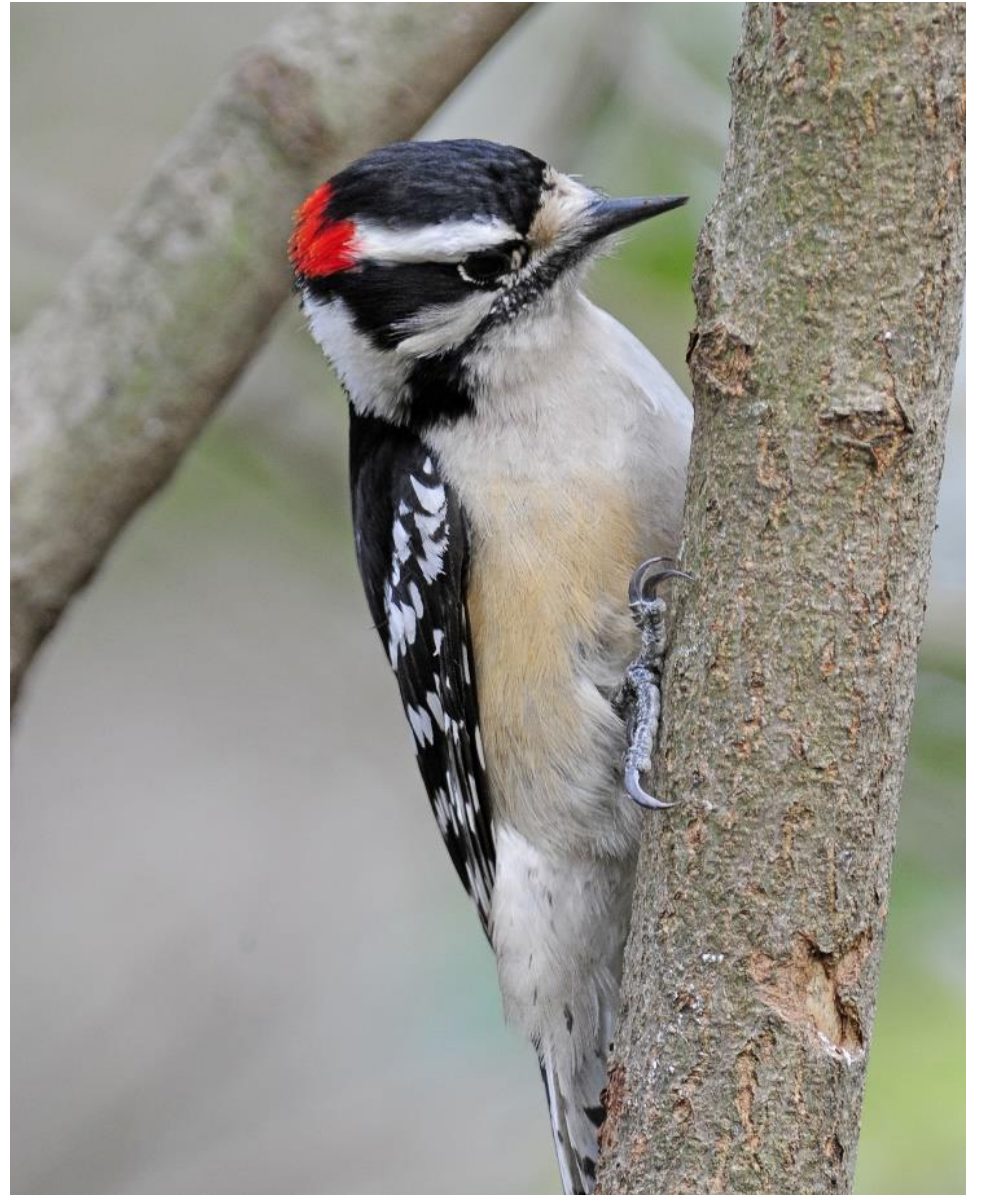
Male Downy Woodpecker



The smallest of the park's woodpeckers is the Downy. Unlike the females, males have a red patch on the back of their heads.



Female Downy



Male Downy

Arthropods (insects, arachnids, and caterpillars) are the primary main food source for all the local woodpeckers.

Downies can be observed on very small branches and weed stalks as well as the trunks of large trees.



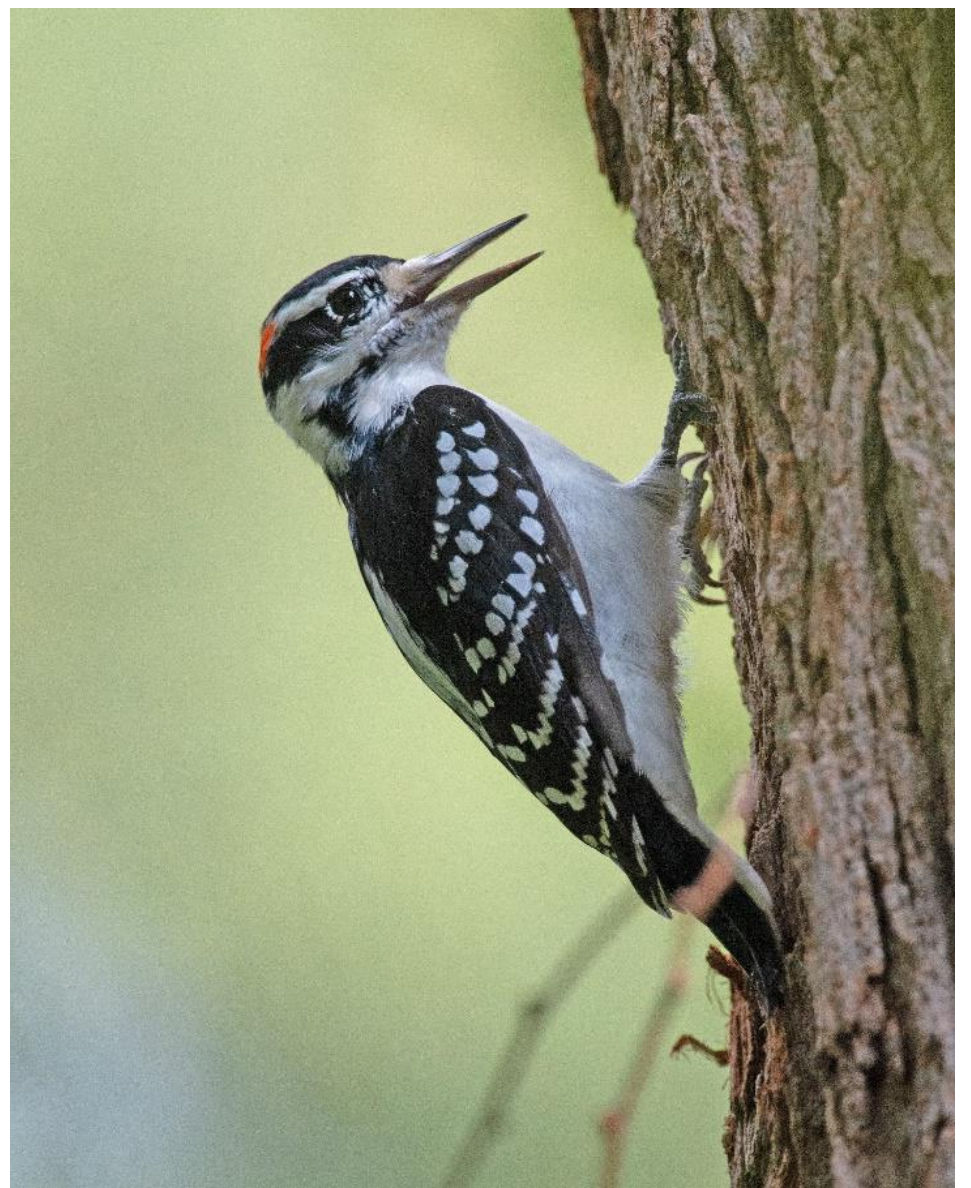
Male Downy feasting on Praying Mantis eggs



The Downy is often confused with the somewhat larger Hairy Woodpecker. The colors, markings, behavior, and feeding preferences of both species are very similar. The most distinctive difference between the two species is the relative size of the beak. The beak of a Hairy Woodpecker is proportionally much longer than that of a Downy.



male Downy – 6.75" long

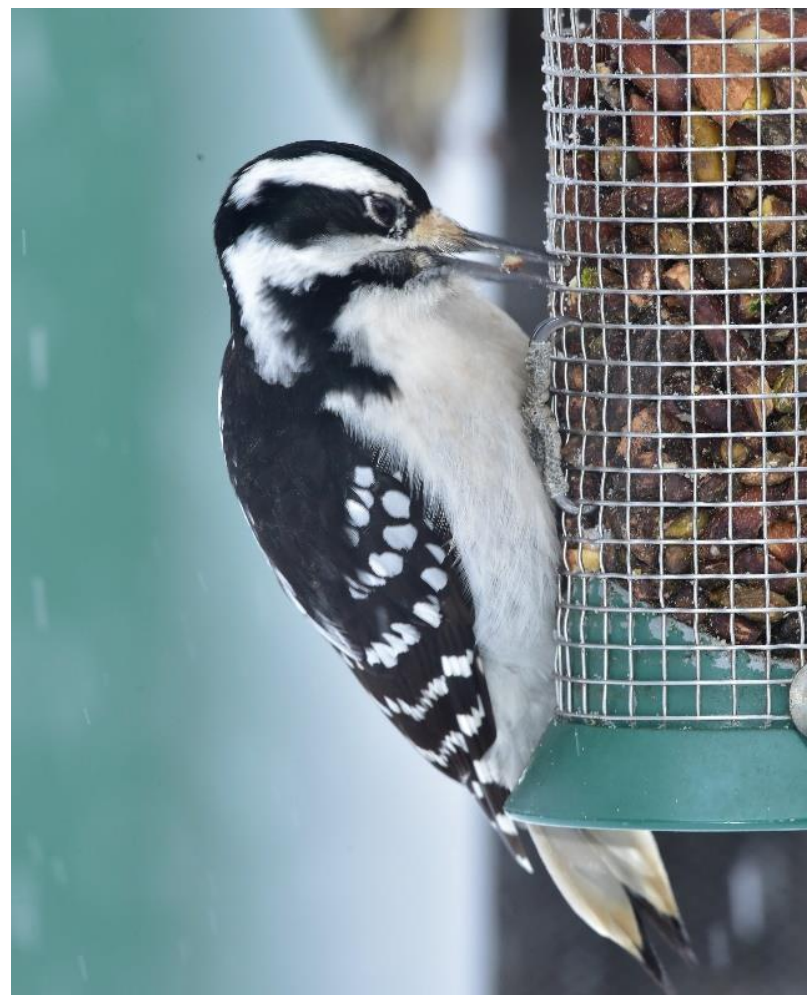


male Hairy – 9.25" long

Hairy Woodpeckers are most often observed on tree trunks and larger branches. Like Downies, Hairy Woodpeckers are frequent visitors to bird feeders and show a preference for nuts and suet.



Male Hairy Woodpecker



Female Hairy Woodpecker



The third of the park's small woodpeckers is the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. (Yes, Virginia, that's a real bird!) At 8.5" long, it's slightly larger than the Downy and slightly smaller than the Hairy.



Male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Male Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers have a red patch on their head and on one their neck under the beak. Females also have the red patch on their head but lack one on their neck.

They get their name from their behavior. They drill tiny holes in tree bark, usually in neatly spaced rows, and then return to periodically to feed on the sap that oozes out. They also eat bits of cambium and other tree tissues, as well as insects that are attracted to the sap. In addition to drilling sap wells, they also glean insects from tree trunks in more typical woodpecker fashion and occasionally catch insects in the air. They will eat berries and fruits in any season but may concentrate on fruiting wild trees in winter when insects are scarcer. \*



Sapsucker and its drill holes





Sapsucker looking for insects in traditional woodpecker fashion



The Sapsucker's beak is long, like that of the Hairy

The next "Critter" article will cover the park's larger woodpeckers.

\*Source: National Audubon Society website



## **The Friends Are Working with Park Staff to Improve Accessibility at the Park**

The Friends are continuing their efforts to make Mason Neck State Park more accessible to people with disabilities. Earlier this year, the Friends purchased gravel for ADA-compliant paths to wheelchair-accessible tables in the picnic area.

We are very fortunate to have the assistance of Kris Gulden, a wheelchair user, who is literally “testing out” the accessibility of the park’s trails and facilities. As an advisor to the Board, Kris has rolled with park staff and board members to assess various trails for wheelchair users, has made recommendations to improve restrooms, and has noted that access to a water view (one of the highlights of coming to the park) would be highly desirable.



The Friends are now working with park management to evaluate the construction of an accessible path next to the visitor center as well as an accessible overlook platform that would provide wide views of Belmont Bay.



# The Friends Honored Dick Kennedy with a Bench at the Park



Photos: Randy Streufert

Dick Kennedy is one of the founding members of the Friends of Mason Neck State Park. He was co-president when the group was formed and was a member of the Board of Directors from 2013 through 2021. He has long been a supporter of the park and the Mason Neck community. On November 4, the Friends honored Dick by unveiling a bench recognizing his support. Dick, his wife Sally, and his dog Rider were the first to try out the bench.

## December Programs at Mason Neck State Park: Swans, Swans, and Swans

The Tundra Swans are back in the Great Marsh, and the Park has lots of activities that will help you enjoy and learn about them.



Photo: Randy Streufert

You can join the Park Staff for guided walks on the Woodmarsh Trail to see the Tundra Swans on December 11 and 18 and January 15 and 29, plus a special First Day Hike on January 1 by reservation only. You also can join the staff for guided walks to see the swans on the fully-accessible Great Marsh Trail on December 17 and January 14 and 28. The park will also have family-friendly talks and Tundra Swan-themed crafts on December 31 and January 22.



You can learn more about the hikes and activities [here](#). Information also is available 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's activities and enable us to fund events such as the Eagle Festival each May, our Owl Moon evening each fall, and the annual Swanfall Holiday Program each December.

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