



Friends of Mason Neck State Park February 2022 Newsletter

**Join Us On-line at 2 PM on February 12
for a Special Program on
Shad Fisheries on
Mason Neck and the Potomac River
and Our Annual Meeting**



American Shad were once a critical part of the economy of the Potomac River and Mason Neck. In 1607, Captain John Smith reported that the fish were so abundant his crew attempted to catch them with frying pans. In 1823 alone, 110 million pounds of shad were harvested along the Potomac. Observers reported that the river was so filled with fish during their annual migration that it seemed as if you could cross the river without getting your feet wet. On Mason Neck, one fishery used a 2-mile-long net powered by a steam engine to harvest the shad in the early 20th century.



Unfortunately, by the 1970s water pollution, over-harvesting, and the blocking of spawning habitat by dams led to steep declines in shad populations all over the East Coast. In 1995, the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB) began an 8-year American shad restoration program, with the assistance of local watermen from Mason Neck and the involvement and support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

Jim Cummins, a biologist and river ecologist who has played a key role in the efforts to restore the Potomac River's shad population, will present a Zoom-based talk on the history of shad fishing on the Potomac and Mason Neck and the progress in restoring shad populations in the Potomac and other rivers.

Jim's talk will be preceded by the Friends of Mason Neck State Park's brief Annual Meeting at which we'll summarize our activities for the year and elect a Board of Directors.

The Annual Meeting and Shad Program are free and open to everyone. You can register for the program and meeting [here](#). When you register, you'll receive an email with the Zoom login information. You can see our current Board of Directors, all of whom are seeking another one-year term, [here](#). You can read our 2021 Annual Report [here](#).

Grasses for the Masses: Help Restore the Health of the Potomac and Chesapeake



There are still a few more opportunities to participate in orientation programs for Mason Neck State Park's Grasses for the Masses program. Volunteers in the program grow wild celery, an important underwater grass, in their homes and then plant it at the park to help bolster aquatic grass populations. Underwater grasses are a vital part of the health of the Potomac and the Chesapeake. They provide food for waterfowl, oxygenate the water, filter pollution, reduce erosion and provide safe spaces for newly-hatched fish.

To participate in the program, all you need to do is attend an orientation session at the park Visitor Center and pick up your supplies. The Park will hold orientation sessions where you pick up your supplies on February 5, 6, 12, and 13. There is a \$25 charge for each Grasses Kit. You'll grow your grasses at home, then plant them at the park on Planting Day, May 22.

Please call the Park Visitor Center at 703-339-2380 or email at MasonNeck@dcr.Virginia.gov if you would like to register, have any questions or would like to participate but cannot attend any of the orientation sessions.

Critter of the Month: North American River Otter

By Randy Streufert



River Otter in one of Mason Neck's wetlands

Have you seen a North American river otter in the park or elsewhere on Mason Neck? They are here, just not often very visible.

River otters are one of the most enjoyable species of wildlife to see in the wild, when and if you get the chance. They are very common, occupying virtually every stream, wetland, and pond in Virginia. However, their secretive and mostly nocturnal nature makes them elusive and difficult to observe.



River Otter with a catfish

North American river otters have long whiskers, which they use to detect prey in dark or cloudy water, and clawed feet for grasping onto slippery prey. They can stay underwater for as many as eight minutes. They are very flexible and can make sharp, sudden turns that help them catch fish. On land a river otter can run at speeds of up to 15 miles an hour—they can slide even faster.

A river otter can grow three to four feet long including its tail and weighs between 11 and 30 pounds. Males are generally larger than females. The tail makes up about a third of their total length.

They have short, dark brown fur that appears almost black when wet and a white chin and throat. Their body is torpedo-shaped, long and muscular, with a powerful tail and short legs. They move gracefully through the water using their webbed feet and an undulating body motion for propulsion and their large, muscular tail as a rudder.



River Otter walking on an ice-covered marsh

River otters are expert fishers, living on a diet of fish, frogs, crayfish, turtles, and snakes. River otters are also known to eat birds' eggs, birds and aquatic plants and to prey on other small mammals such as muskrats and rabbits. They have a very high metabolism, so they need to eat frequently. They are preyed upon by bobcats, coyotes, raptors, and other large predators.

They have a unique habit of sliding or "tobogganing" down icy or muddy stream banks. Families of otters have been observed repeatedly climbing steep banks and sliding down on their belly with their feet and legs turned backward. Their playful snow and mud sliding, tail chasing, water play, and snow burrowing activities also serve other purposes—they help strengthen social bonds and let young otters practice hunting techniques. People aren't the only creatures who know how to have fun.



River Otter about to enjoy a fish

Although river otters are now common throughout the state, in 1978 Virginia's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) listed the river otter as state endangered. The clearing of stream banks, pollution, and overharvest all contributed to their near eradication from the western portion of the state. DGIF (now the Department of Wildlife Resources) initiated efforts

to improve riparian and stream habitats and supplement the natural migration of otters back to western Virginia with restocking. Numbers of otters have since rebounded and the state removed the species from the endangered list in 1990.



They can thrive in any water habitat as long it has an adequate food supply. River otter dens are along the water in abandoned burrows or empty hollows. The dens have entrances underwater so the otters can easily access them from the water.



In the Park, you are most likely to see river otters in or near the marsh along the Bay View Trail and from the termination points of the Eagle Spur and Marsh View trails at Kane's Creek. The best times to see them during park open hours are early mornings and late afternoons.

*Information from the National Wildlife Federation and the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources was used for this article.

The Friends Are Co-sponsoring a Special Program, “Bald Eagles: A Conservation Success Story” March 2, 7PM via Zoom



Photo by Randy Streufert

The Friends of Dyke Marsh are presenting a program on Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles by Jeff Cooper, a Virginia Department of Wildlife Biologist. Cooper will discuss eagle biology, recent research, the recovery of Bald Eagle populations, and the importance of the Chesapeake Bay region to Bald Eagles. The program is free, but registration is required.

You can register for the program [here](#). The program is co-sponsored by the Friends of Mason Neck State Park, the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia, the Friends of Huntley Meadows and the Northern Virginia Bird Club.

The Friends Chick O'Dee Answers Your Mason Neck State Park Critter Questions



Seven-year-old Abigail recently asked: With Valentine's Day coming up this month I was wondering if any birds are romantic?

Chick O'Dee replies: Abigail, that's an interesting question, since we birds don't have the kind of emotions you people do.

There are many, many songbird parents that spend a lot of time together building nests, feeding their chicks, and taking care of them after they've fledged – Northern Cardinals, Eastern Bluebirds, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and Carolina Chickadees, to name just a few. But that's parents working together to raise another generation – probably not the kind of romance you had in mind.

However, there are some birds that can appear to be romantic, especially at this time of year. Two of our local hawk species often perch close their mate for an hour or more.

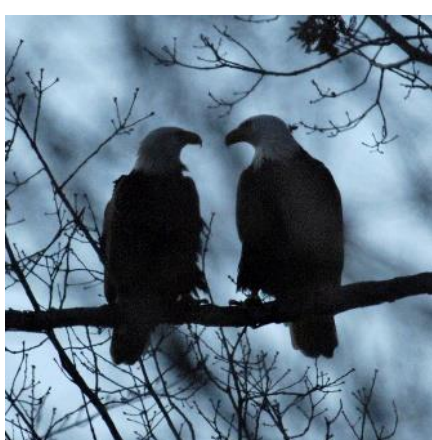


Red-shouldered Hawks



Red-tailed Hawks

But the winner in the romantic category would have to be Bald Eagles. Mated pairs spend a lot of time perched together – they really seem to enjoy each other's company all year long.



For your excellent question, Abigail, here's your Bald Eagle Valentine's Day card.



Have a question for Chick? To send in your inquiry, use the [Contact Us](#) button on the homepage of the Friends' website. We'll do our best to answer it in our next newsletter.

Photos and story by Randy Streufert

Programs at Mason Neck State Park



Mason Neck State Park Staff host more than 20 programs and events each month, led by the Park's excellent, trained interpreters. You can find their calendar of events on the Park's [website](#). Just scroll down to 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 special events such as 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 [Join the Friends of Mason Neck State Park](#).

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