



## **Friends of Mason Neck State Park**

### **July 2021 Newsletter**

**Register Now for the Friends' Annual Meeting**  
**2PM, Sunday July 11, 2021**



The Friends will hold their Annual Meeting virtually, in a Zoom-based program, on Sunday July 11 at 2 PM. The Friends' Board member Randy Streufert will present "What Lives in the Park?", an overview of the amazing variety of animals that call Mason Neck State Park home. The program will feature photographs of often-seen and not so often-seen resident critters, as well as a discussion of some of their interesting behaviors.



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. A few of his photos are on display at the park Visitor Center.



Ericka Jackson, the park's Chief Ranger for Visitor Experience, will provide a brief discussion of the Park's aging well water system that has for many years provided all the water for the Visitor Center, picnic area and on-site residences, and the plans for converting to the public water system.

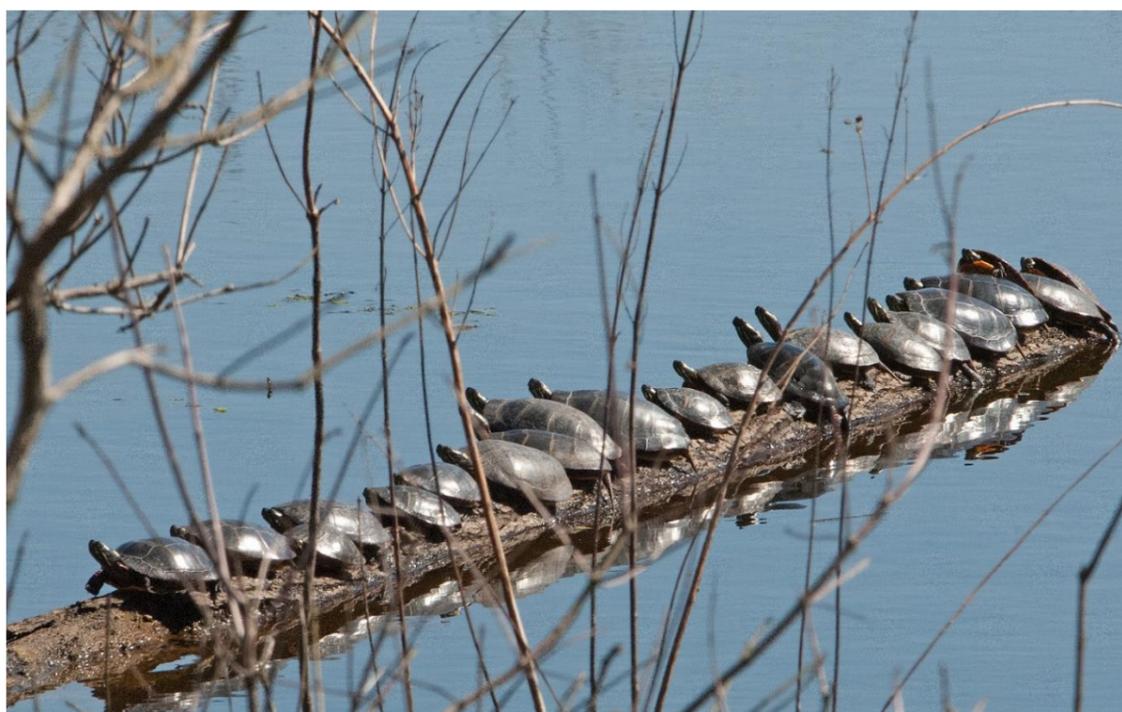
We'll begin the meeting with a short business session at which we elect a Board of Directors for the coming year and Friend's President Hillary Clawson will provide a brief summary of the Friend's recent and upcoming activities. You can review the bios of the current Board of Directors, all of whom are standing for re-election, [here](#).

The Annual Meeting is open only to current members of the Friends. Members can register for the event [here](#). If you're not a member, you can join for as little as \$20 per year [here](#). We'd love to "see" you at the meeting.

---

## Critter(s) of the Month – Turtles

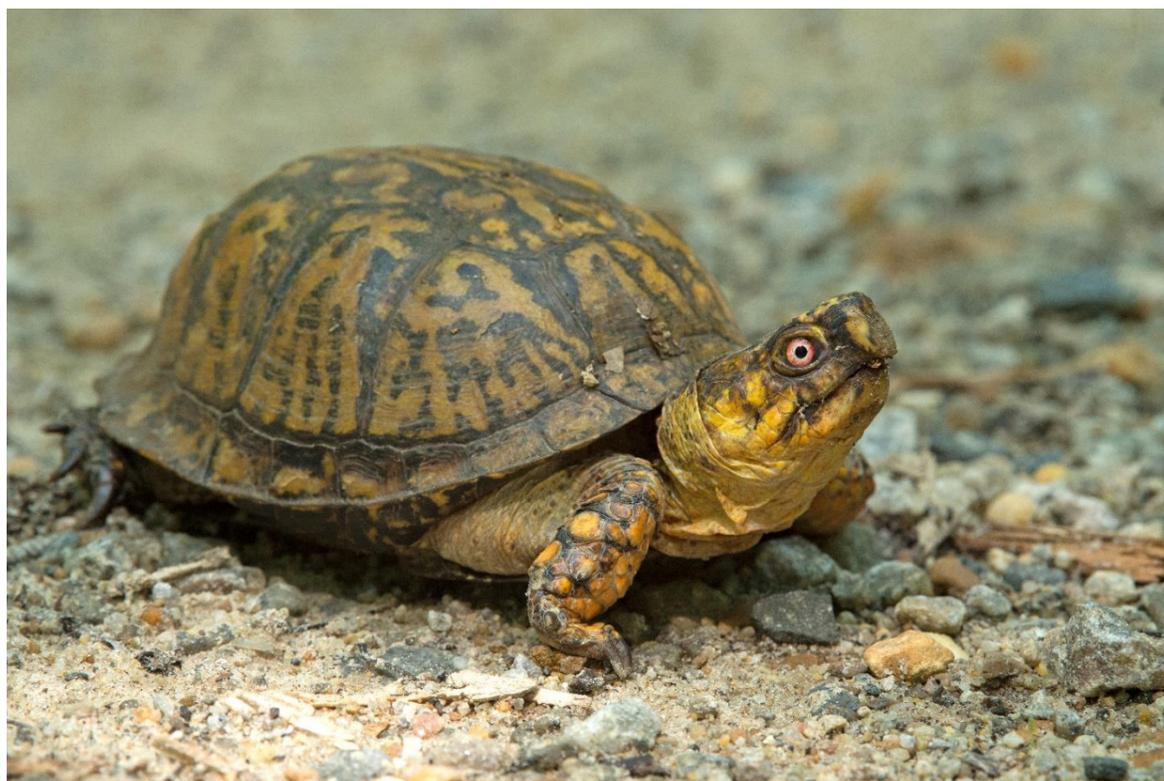
Text and photos by Randy Streufert



21 Eastern Painted Turtles enjoying a warm day in early March

Who does not love turtles? Unlike their reptilian cousins (snakes, crocodilians, and lizards), nearly everyone finds them appealing. According to paleontologists, turtles, tortoises, and terrapins have inhabited the earth for 220 million years and are virtually unchanged since the days of dinosaurs.

Turtles are most famous for their longevity; many of us have heard of giant tortoises being over 150 years old. What may be surprising is that Virginia's native Woodland Box Turtles have an average life span of 50 years, and a significant percentage live over 100 years. Yes, those turtles many of us stop to help get safely across the road can be older than our grandparents.



Woodland Box Turtle

The Park is home to several species including Snapping Turtles, Spotted Turtles, Eastern Painted Turtles, Northern Red-bellied Cooters, Southeastern Mud Turtles, and Woodland Box Turtles.

The Woodland Box Turtle is Virginia's only terrestrial turtle, spending the vast majority of its time on land. Occasionally, one will be found swimming in a flooded area of the forest or crossing a stream or pond.

All other turtles in the park are aquatic, spending almost all their time in the water. Since Turtles are ectothermic (cold-blooded), aquatic turtles are most often seen when basking on a log to soak up warmth from the sun.



Southeastern Mud Turtle



Snapping Turtle

From May to July, park visitors often see a single Southeastern Mud, Eastern Painted, and/or Snapping Turtle near the road. These are the females that leave the safety of the water to lay their eggs.

All three species exhibit similar behaviors for their egg-laying. The female drinks as much water as she can, crawls up the bank and searches for a suitable place for her nest – ground unlikely to flood and exposed to the sun. The ground next to the park's roads often meets those criteria.



Southeastern Mud Turtle



Female Eastern Painted Turtle

Once she's selected her spot, she urinates and starts digging a hole with her hind feet. Her urine softens the ground, turning it to mud, which is easier for her to dig.

When the hole is as deep as she can reach down, she lays her eggs. The Southeastern Mud and the Eastern Painted turtles lay about six eggs. Snapping Turtles lay an average of 20 to 40 ping-pong ball sized eggs, but as many as 100 have been recorded.



When the female is finished, she fills the hole back up, covering the eggs with mud. Then she makes the area look as natural as she can by removing visual evidence of the nest site.



Female almost finished filling the hole back in



Nest site immediately after the female finished.

The only evidence of her work is the damp, slightly darker ground.

All her work is done with her hind feet. She never sees the hole, never sees her eggs, and never even looks at the spot after she's finished!

If crows see where the female laid her eggs, they will swoop in as soon as she leaves and dig in the still-soft earth for a meal of the eggs.

If undisturbed, the eggs will hatch in late August to mid-September and the hatchlings will make their way out of the hole and crawl to the water.



Eastern Painted Turtles hatching



Snapping Turtle hatching



Just-hatched Eastern Painted Turtle



Just-hatched Southeastern Mud Turtle – A Daddy Long Legs happened to walk over it as the photo was taken.



If you ever want to see a happy turtle, allow one to get into your garden and feast on a tomato.

While driving into and out of the park, please be especially mindful of the small hard-to-see turtles that may be crossing the road.

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries publication titled *A Guide to the Turtles of Virginia* was the primary source for the information in this article as was the author's experience photographing the turtles here.

---

# **Please Help Support Mason Neck State Park By Joining the Friends' Board of Directors**

Do you like what the Friends of Mason Neck State Park do for the Park? Would you like to help us continue supporting it? The Friends have sponsored online programs throughout the Pandemic, including the June 12 History Program and the Virtual Eagle Festival in May. We pay for all the programs for the Park's annual Eagle Festival and provide extensive volunteer support. We support the annual Park After Dark event and we sponsor several Friends programs at the Park, such as Owl Moon and Swanfall, our annual holiday event. We've also been instrumental in obtaining additional state funding for the Park, including funding for additional Park Staff, and provide funding to enable underserved youth to experience Park programs.

The Friends need additional Board members if we are going to continue to work on behalf of the Park. Do you have some time to help us continue our efforts? If you are interested in joining the Board, please send an email to [FriendsofMasonNeckStatePark@gmail.com](mailto:FriendsofMasonNeckStatePark@gmail.com). Thanks!

---

## **The Friends Participated in the Mount Vernon District 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Environment Expo**



Several members of the Friends staffed the Friend's tent at the Mount Vernon District annual Environment Expo on June 26. We featured Board member Randy Streufert's photographs of wildlife in the park and provided information on the park's programs. The Friends also sponsored two programs by Secret Garden Birds and Bees featuring live owls and a hawk, and Friends' Board member Pam Cressey led a Meditation Walk.

---

## **The Friends Supported the Park's Youth Conservation Corps Team**

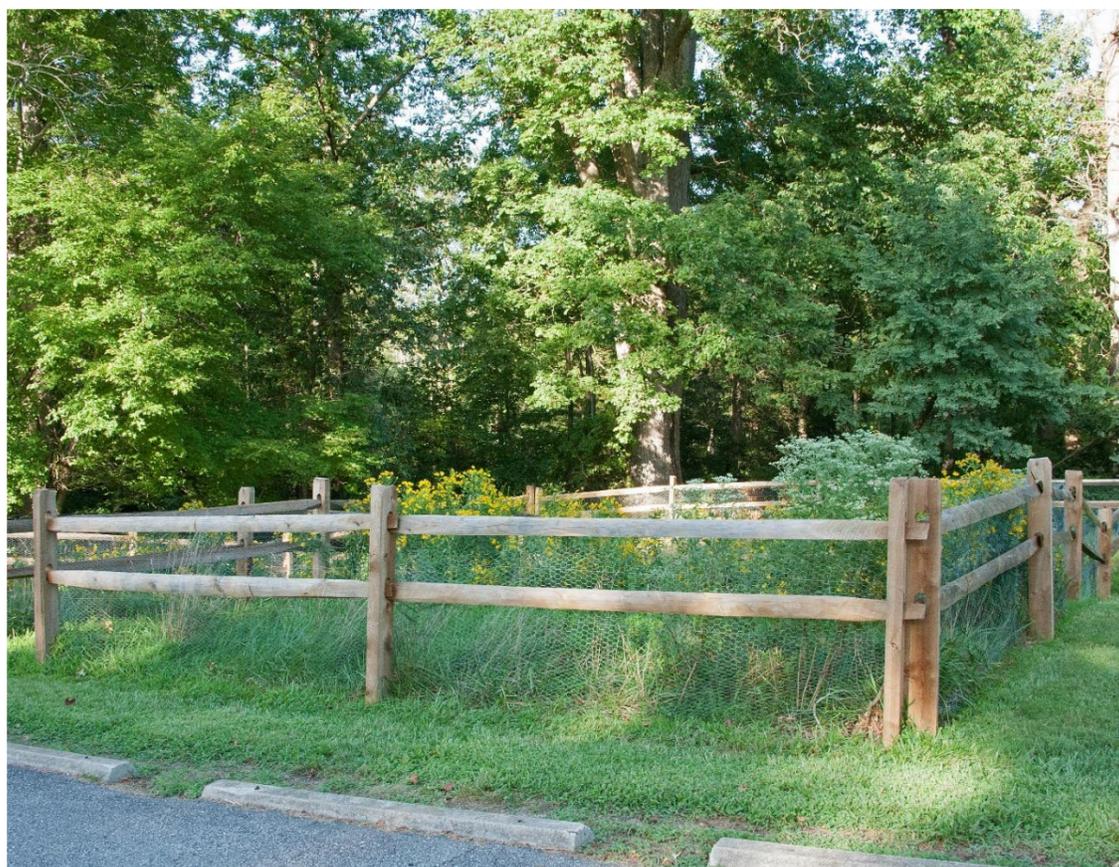
Eight Youth Conservation Corps high school students and two counselors arrived at Mason Neck State Park on June 21 to begin three weeks of work improving the park. They'll be working on fence repair and spreading mulch at the picnic area and the Visitor Center.



The Friends provided lunch to the team and Board member Randy Streufert gave them an orientation to the park.

---

## **Help the Friends Maintain the Park's Pollinator Gardens!**



Mason Neck State Park's pollinator gardens are important to helping to sustain the insects that are vital to our ecosystem. However, the gardens need caretakers to keep them in good shape. Are you able to help out in the gardens from time to time? Send us an email at [FriendsofMasonNeckStatePark@gmail.com](mailto:FriendsofMasonNeckStatePark@gmail.com) and we'll contact you about how you can help to keep the gardens beautiful and useful.

## 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](#).