

This online program will be presented by Carina Velazquez-Mondragon, the Visitor Services Specialist at the Potomac River National Wildlife Refuge Complex. With a B.A. in Film and Video, she is passionate about bringing storytelling and outreach through different forms of media to the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

The program is free, but registration is required. You can register for the program [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 last month's Virtual Eagle Festival. 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. Thanks!

Critter(s) of the Month – Snakes

By Randy Streufert*



A pair of Northern Watersnakes sunning themselves

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources has an excellent small book entitled *A Guide to the Snakes and Lizards of Virginia*. Its opening paragraph has this to say about snakes:

"SNAKE" The mere mention of the word evokes an emotional response. It may be wonder, exhilaration, shock, or even fear. Many of these responses occur because snakes appear and behave unlike any other animal we know. Others are deeply rooted in folktales and myths that give snakes extraordinary powers and abilities. Regardless of their source, misconceptions about snakes have made them among the most persecuted of all animals. A common reaction to an encounter with a snake is to kill it on sight whether or not it poses a danger. However, the fact is that most snakes are harmless, and even venomous ones would rather flee than fight.

Imagine the world from a snake's point of view – anything that moves is a potential threat except for those few things that are small enough to eat. With no appendages, a snake's only weapon is its bite, which is little deterrence to most mammals, small rodents being the exception. A snake's initial and primary reaction to an encounter with any animal larger than itself is to either hide or flee. Even the largest of our snakes respond that way because they are hunted by raptors, Herons and Egrets. Other snakes can also be a threat.



(left) A 4' Northern Black Racer devouring a 2.5' Eastern Gartersnake

(right) The Racer is almost finished with its meal

Throughout Virginia there are 32 native snake species, 17 of which may potentially be found in the park.

Many individual snake species look different as juveniles than they do as adults. Color variation within a species is also common.



Juvenile Eastern Ratsnakes



Adult Eastern Ratsnake

Our larger native snakes eat frogs, toads, skinks, mice, smaller birds and their young. The smaller snakes feed mostly on insects. One of the smallest, the Eastern Wormsnake, feeds on what it looks like – earthworms.



Eastern Wormsnake – about the size of a 12" pencil

All of our nonvenomous snakes share the common trait of a round pupil. That feature most easily distinguishes them from the Northern Copperhead, our region's only venomous snake. The Copperhead's pupil is vertical, like a cat's.



Northern Copperhead – photo by Bill Dunson



Northern Watersnake

The other venomous snakes in the state also have vertical pupils and are:

- 1) the Eastern Cottonmouth – not observed north of Colonial Heights (near Petersburg);
- 2) Timber Rattlesnakes found in the **mountains and piedmont areas;** and
- 3) the Canebrake Rattlesnake found in the southeast corner of the state.

Our region's snakes can only hold onto their prey with their mouths. Except for the Copperhead, which has large fangs to deliver disabling venom, the teeth of the nonvenomous snakes are fairly small and angled inward to prevent prey from pulling out – similar to the teeth of a hacksaw.



Northern Watersnake yawning – it's small teeth are barely noticeable

The Eastern Hog-nosed snake, often mistaken for a Copperhead, is unnecessarily killed because of its similar size and head shape.



Eastern Hog-nosed Snake – photo by Gary Myers

When and where are snakes seen in the park?

(everywhere)

Once the weather warms up snakes begin to get active. Some, like Eastern Ratsnakes, will often stretch out on High Point Road, either sunning themselves or just absorbing heat from the asphalt.

Northern Watersnakes can be seen swimming in Kane's Creek, the waters near Bay View Trail, along the edges of the marsh and in vegetation overhanging the water. The Virginia guide to snakes cited at the beginning of this article notes that these snakes are often misidentified as

“water moccasins” (Eastern Cottonmouths) and are unnecessarily killed. Watersnakes prey on frogs, salamanders, and toads as well as fish.



Northern Watersnake swimming



Northern Watersnake with a small Catfish

The northern Copperhead is occasionally seen by canoeists and kayakers within park boundaries on logs and rocks in or near Kane’s Creek.



Eastern Copperhead – photo by John White

Nearly all other snakes are found in the park's forests, meadows, and woodland edges. They tend to remain out of sight since to them, people are a threat.



Northern Rough Greensnake – photo by Jan Post



Northern Brownsnake



Common Ribbonsnake



Eastern Gartersnake

If you come upon a snake in the park, whether on the road or along the trails, remember that you are in its home. Keep your distance, but take the time to note the beautiful patterns and colors many of them have. Allow it to go about its business of looking for food and avoiding being something else's food.

The park's Visitor Center often has copies of *A Guide to the Snakes and Lizards of Virginia* for sale.

*All photographs were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.



Join Us at the Mount Vernon District Supervisor Dan Storck's 3rd Annual Environment Expo

For the third year, the Friends of Mason Neck State Park will participate in Mount Vernon District Supervisor Dan Storck's annual Environment Expo. In addition to having an exhibit, we will be sponsoring two programs by Secret Garden Birds and Bees featuring live owls. They are always a favorite at the Mason Neck State Park Eagle Festival and at the Friends' Owl Moon event.

The theme for this year's Expo is "Get Outdoors! Learn and Do." It will be held on Saturday, June 26th, from 8:00am until noon at Fort Hunt Park in Alexandria. Activities include workshops, exhibits, nature walks, an electric vehicle display and much more.

You can find more information about the Environmental Expo [here](#). Registration for the event is recommended but not required.

Romeo and Juliet (A Love Story)

Article and photographs by Terry Head



Yes, this is a love story. However, it is not the play written by the young playwright William Shakespeare, nor is it probably the storyline you expected. This love story is for the birds, or more appropriately, about birds. To be more specific, this love story is about a pair of ospreys that choose to nest each spring and summer near our home in the Gunston Manor neighborhood on Mason Neck.

*Allow me to first address some scientific information about the ospreys and set the stage for our story. Wikipedia describes the Osprey, or more specifically, the Western Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) - also called sea hawk, river hawk and fish hawk as a diurnal, fishing-eating bird of prey. It's a large raptor, weighing in at about three to four pounds at maturity and reaching more than 24 inches (60 cm) in length and 71 inches (180 cm) in wingspan. Adults are brown on the upper body parts and grayish on the head and underparts. It is the second most widely distributed raptor species behind the peregrine falcon. Ospreys are usually found around water and appear on every continent except Antarctica, although in South America it occurs as a non-breeding "migrant," but we'll come back to this last point later in our story.*

So on with the story. My wife, Laura, and I live on the northeast side of The Neck, facing Maryland. When I had our dock built 15 years ago, the contractor also installed a dolphin or what's commonly referred to as an icebreaker. The icebreaker typically consists of three to four dock poles banded together with heavy steel wire with a large piece of angle iron attached near the top and driven into the riverbed on the upriver side. The dolphin, which stands about 15 feet from the dock, is used to protect docks and wharves from possible impacts by vessels or, in our case, a potential ice thaw after a winter freeze or debris flow after upriver flooding.

My next-door neighbor had the idea to place a 4x4 foot wooden platform on top of the dolphin in hopes that it would attract eagles, osprey or some other type of large nesting birds found along the Potomac River. The nesting platform lay idle for several years until one spring about ten years ago we saw one osprey performing what I would describe as touch and go landings checking out the place. And then there were two! How excited we were that we might finally be hosting a nesting pair of ospreys.



After days of observations watching the ospreys interact with each other it became pretty obvious that these were younger, inexperienced birds or, as we like to think, newly-found lovers fully enthralled with the soon-to-be-learned courtship rituals. It was during this time we tagged them with the names Romeo and Juliet.

Ospreys usually take a mate after maturing three to four years. In some areas (like the Chesapeake Bay watershed) where there is a denser osprey population, and/or proper nesting sites are hard to come by, an osprey may wait up to seven years of age before linking up with a mate. But when they do choose a mate, it is for life or until one of the pair dies or can no longer breed due to injury or other circumstances.

Our new young lovers seemed to be coy or just downright awkward about the courting rituals. At first, there would be airborne displays where the dashing young Romeo would show off his flying, diving, and fish catching capabilities, an obvious prerequisite for the young and desirable Juliet in choosing a mate.

Ospreys have unique characteristics that make them adept at fish sightings and capture, which makes up over 99% of their diet. They have vision that is well suited for detecting under water objects from 30-130 feet above the water. After hovering above its prey, the osprey will dive almost straight down adjusting its flight angle for the distortion caused by the water, then plunge feet first, talons extended into the water, oftentimes disappearing below the surface only to reappear with prize in hand. The birds have closable nostrils to keep water out during their dives and have evolved to have reversible toes with sharp, scaly backwards-facing talons to better hold their prey, a trait shared with some species of owls. They have dense and oily plumage to prevent their feathers from becoming waterlogged and have extremely strong wings to break the suction of the water to regain flight.

In all mating pairs, the female is the larger of the two birds. This is the case with Juliet, but it is only easy to make distinctions between her and Romeo when they can be viewed side by side on the nest.

The actual act of mating involves the male mounting the back of the female but only, of course, with her permission. He stays mounted for about 10-15 seconds, all the while flapping his wings or until the female loses her patience. A successful mating process can go on for days.

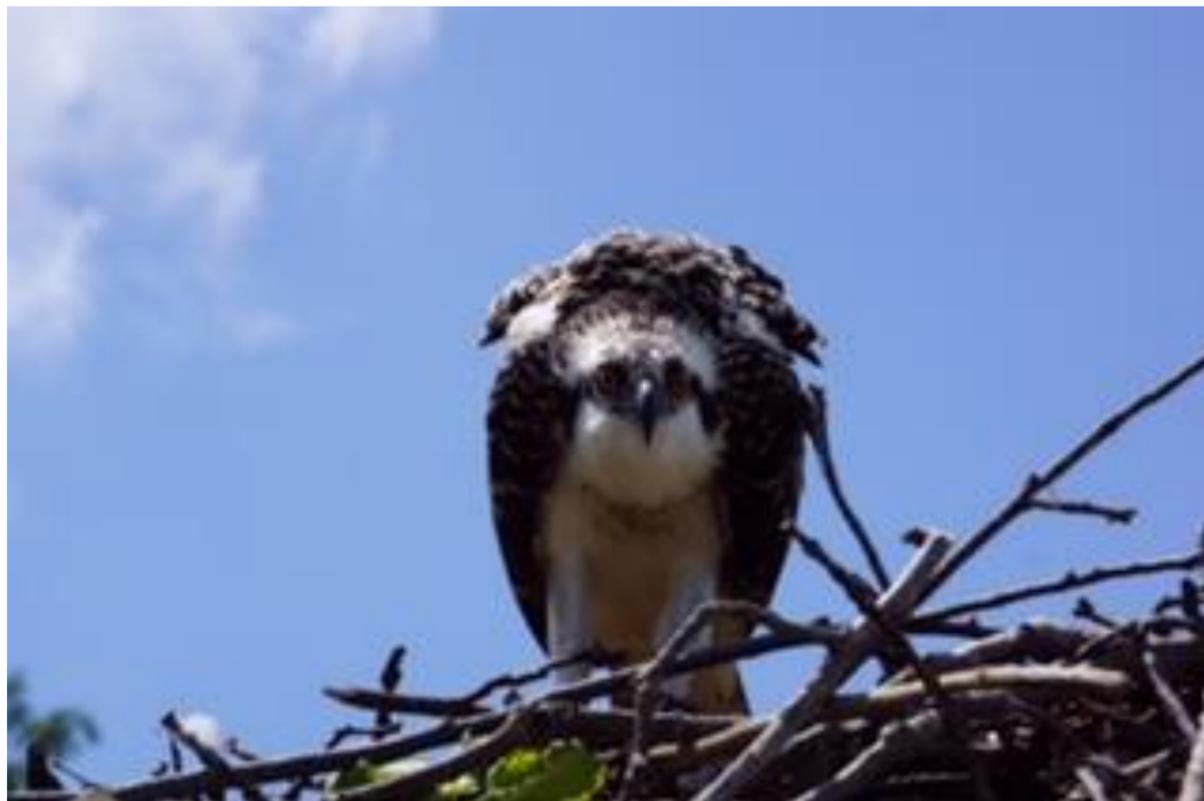


During their first year together, a considerable amount of time was devoted to the building of the nest. This too was interesting to watch, as Juliet appeared quite particular about what sticks and branches Romeo could bring for his contribution to the effort. As often as not, Juliet would move the sticks around; and if they didn't seem to fit the arrangement she had in mind, she would knock the stick off the platform and Romeo would have to go off searching for another, or another, or another branch until Juliet was satisfied. In osprey pairs, as is often the case with other species, the female seems to be in charge, or as they say, "rules the nest."

Our young lovers spent so much time and effort in building the nest that first year, or perhaps were not as skilled in the lovemaking as they thought, that there were either no eggs laid or the incubation was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, that first year the childless Romeo and Juliet stayed around until early September seemingly enjoying each other's company and becoming more familiar with the area and the other wildlife, particularly the bald eagles with whom the ospreys share the river as a food supply.

Even though Mason Neck is quite well-known for its population of bald eagles, the ospreys and eagles do not get along. I've witnessed countless encounters where Romeo's flying prowess and bravery drove off the larger and more fierce-looking bald eagle. That is even true when a pair of eagles try to penetrate the "no fly zone." Juliet will leave the nest to join her mate in successfully convincing the eagle pair to seek their meal elsewhere.

As mentioned, the ospreys leave in September. Although they mate for life, Romeo and Juliet, as well as all osprey pairs, spend about five months apart. This long winter break is perhaps their secret to a happy and long-lasting relationship.



Those that breed and summer along the Eastern USA are thought to normally winter in parts south such as Florida and the other gulf states, but they're known to migrate as far as Argentina. A few years back, an osprey nesting along the Anacostia River in Washington, DC, was electronically tracked all the way to Venezuela. The birds are capable of flying 160-170 miles per day with a recorded maximum range of 268 miles in a single day.

My wife and I spent that first winter wondering if and when our lovebirds would return. Through research, we knew it would typically be in early March. Sure enough, they reappeared that first week of the month with Romeo showing up first and Juliet arriving only a few days behind. And so, the courting and mating began again in earnest and with a seemingly more serious attitude in repairing the nest. Within about a week or so, Juliet was obviously sitting on eggs.

Ospreys usually lay 2-4 eggs per clutch. The eggs are an off-white with speckles of reddish-brown and are 2.5-1.75 inches and weigh about 2.25 oz. The eggs are incubated for about 30 to 45 days.

Juliet is a devoted mother and rarely leaves the nest, all the while turning and repositioning the eggs to ensure they maintain the proper level of heat. While Juliet nests, Romeo is ever watchful and on-guard in a nearby tree. Numerous times a day he'll fly in with a fish for Juliet, who sometimes will eat at the edge of the nest or fly up into the trees to enjoy her meal break. On those rare occasions when she does leave, Romeo will cautiously position himself in the nest to maintain the heat level and ensure no interloper comes after the eggs.

The second year, we, I mean Romeo and Juliet, successfully hatched two chicks that we named Hansel and Gretel after the fairytale characters.



Newborn chicks weigh about 1.75 to 2 oz., but grow amazingly fast. Romeo is kept quite busy flying in with fish that Juliet will tear apart and feed to the chicks. It seems only a matter of days before you will see the tiny heads popping up over the edge of the nest. The chicks fledge in about nine to ten weeks, but in the meantime, make their presence known through constant chirping and screeching unless Romeo or Juliet signals danger is near, and then all heads are lowered and they're silent until the all's-clear signal is given.

Over the past ten years or so, Romeo and Juliet have faithfully returned to each other and in most years have successfully hatched their offspring. The second year they again had two chicks which we named Jack and Jill. In other years we've had as many as three, which we named after the three Musketeers and Snap, Crackle and Pop. The year there was only one chick, we jokingly referred to it as Han Solo. Sadly, we once had a hatching of an unknown number of chicks because we believe they drowned in the nest during a prolonged period of torrential rain. And finally last year, during the pandemic, we had two chicks which we dubbed Covi and Pan.

Covi was a bit of a problem child all the way through his rearing, always hogging food and just downright nasty to his sibling and parents. Out of all the chicks raised by Romeo and Juliet, Covi was just not normal. Pan fledged and learned to fly and eat on his own in the normal period of time, but not Covi. Covi refused to leave the nest and screamed constantly for food to be brought to him.



Romeo and Juliet put in extra effort and attention to prepare Covi for their departure and parting of ways. It was well into September, long after the osprey have normally left the area,

when we noticed one morning that the nest had been completely pushed off the platform. The only thing left was Covi himself. All the other birds were gone. Covi hung around for a few more days, but ultimately he was gone as well, to where or what fate we will never know.

I worried that the destruction of the nest was a sign or omen. Had their time together run its course? Would Romeo and Juliet return?

Over the winter I learned that osprey pairs will periodically destroy their nests to get rid of parasites and germs that buildup over the years due to the remnants of dead fish and excrement.

Sure enough, with hope restored, Romeo showed up again the first week of March 2021 on the same day as Juliet. They rapidly went about courting, mating and rebuilding the nest, all of which was accomplished surprisingly quickly. Juliet sat on eggs for several weeks now and now seems to be feeding chicks, but we will have to wait just a little longer to count heads and come up with the appropriate names.



We have enjoyed countless hours of entertainment over the years watching the chicks grow and exercise their wings, and ultimately learn to fly and catch fish on their own. That's a story unto itself, and perhaps saved for another day. But I will say, not being a parent myself, that I have tremendous respect for Romeo's and Juliet's patience as nurturers and teachers, properly preparing their offspring to go off and make their own way in the world, continuing the cycle of life.

After a strange year of COVID and a long, lonely winter of wondering what comes next, everything seems to be getting back to normal and the love story of Romeo and Juliet continues to be written.

The End - or just another beginning.

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 and we'll contact you about how you can help to keep the gardens beautiful and useful.

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



Fourteen-year-old Elizabeth asked: I've read that this year's tick season is supposed to be really bad, especially with the diseases they carry. Can't birds eat enough ticks to reduce their numbers?

Chick O'Dee replies: Elizabeth, I'm sorry to report that we birds don't eat many ticks. As you know, ticks are very small and good at staying out of sight. If we see one, of course we'll grab it up, but they hang out near the tops of tall grasses and other vegetation. Those are places where even the smallest of us have a hard time clinging to look for prey.

Right now, we songbird parents need to find between five and seven thousand meals to raise just one brood of young before they fly off on their own. So we do look for anything that moves. But, with having to make so many foraging trips, we go for the easiest to find and biggest food sources – like crickets, grasshoppers and our favorite, caterpillars.



Prothonotary Warbler with caterpillar and grasshopper



Chickadee with caterpillar



Common Yellowthroat with praying mantis

But this spring we have the readily available and extra big crop of cicadas - we'll be feasting until they are gone.

No, Elizabeth, don't count on us birds to reduce the tick population, especially this year.

However, there is a tick-eliminating hero we should all appreciate. Take a look at the story by Amber Kanuckel in the on-line Farmers' Almanac. Its entitled: *Seven Fascinating Facts About Opossums*. One of those listed facts is that Opossums kill and eat far more ticks than any other animal, leading scientists to estimate that just one opossum eats, on average, 5,000 ticks in a single season.

They are our heroes since by doing so they reduce the spread of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases.



Thank you, Elizabeth, for your great question!

Have a question for Chick? Just send it in via email to:
Friendsofmasonneckstatepark@gmail.com.

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 having on-line programs instead.

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](#).