



The Naturalist

The monthly newsletter of the Historic Rivers Chapter

Virginia Master Naturalist Program

www.vmn-historicrivers.org

A Monthly Newsletter

Volume 1 No. 4 June 2007

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President's Message

Greetings everyone!

As June rumbles in there is a lot of excitement to being a Master Naturalist. I was approached by Judy Hansen to think about beginning a "tenner" program in our unit. It sounds very neat, and it's rather simple.

Think of 10 birds, ferns (lists formulated just from Judy's backyard, Chain Netted Fern, Sensitive, Christmas, Cinnamon, add in Royal fern, New York from our field trip at Lafayette, Lady Fern, and you are almost there), plants, butterflies, you get the idea and share it with everyone. I think it could be a new column in the newsletter, a space on the web page, and anyone who wanted to share could.

So while on the Breeding Bird Foray I thought of something I would want to know more about, bird nests. Hugh Beard was sharing with me that Blue Gray Gnatcatcher makes its nest covered in lichens so it is incredibly hard to find. Doing a little more research I found that

the birds also use spider webbing or caterpillar silk and then cover the sticky surface lichens or bark flakes. The nest is then lined with grass stems, bark strips, plant down, hair, feathers, or other fine fibers. The nest is placed far out from trunk on tree limbs.

I happened to see a Great Crested Flycatcher when we were hiking elsewhere in York River State. I was looking in the wrong place when a female Great Crested Flycatcher carrying a piece snake skin perched on a knob, and then popped into a hole in a dead limb of a tree a good 40 feet off the ground. The Great Crested Flycatcher, it is believed, uses snake skin to keep predators away. The nest is made of twigs, leaves, pine needles, bark, moss, and rootlets and lined with soft materials like hair, feathers, and fur. I was hooked. I will work on this list when (if?) things slow down this summer in my life. But if any of you want to "tenner" something, please feel free and share with us. This is a fun way to expand our knowledge base.

Another comforting thought that has been ruminating in my mind is what a nice group we are. I am excited to be part of this enterprise and look forward to our bond growing stronger as our group does more stuff together.

My best to you all!
Cheers!

Kari Abbott, President
Historic Rivers Chapter Member
Virginia Master Naturalist

Upcoming Club Events

June 13: Scott Bruce and the Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater, 6:00 - 9:00 p.m. See next page!!

July 11: Dr. William Dimmock, Extension Agent, Agriculture and Natural Resources Horticulture, will speak to us from 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. on butterflies.

August 8: Speaker is TBD

September 5: Fall Cohort Training Class begins

September 12: ALL MEMBERS are invited to hear Hugh Beard, naturalist and award-winning science teacher, present our session on Taxonomy, Biology, and Citizen Science to our fall cohort. Start time is 6:00 p.m.

All events at Human Services Building, Olde Towne Road in Williamsburg.

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Alice & Seig Kopinitz, Outreach Committee

Seig Kopinitz, Webmaster

June 13 – Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater

Our regular second Wednesday program will feature Geologist Scott Bruce, who discovered the Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater.

Meet at 6:00 p.m. at the Human Services Building on Olde Towne Road in Williamsburg.

Scott is a Ground Water Characterization Specialist for the VA Department of Environmental Quality.

In 1993, Scott found evidence of these startling events. In 2000, Scott and two other scientists received the Thomas Jefferson Award from the Virginia Museum of Natural History in recognition of their discovery of the Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater. Research drilling and related studies have been conducted across the region since 1993.

For more information on the Chesapeake Bay Impact Crater, visit the following web sites:

[http://woodshole.er.usgs.gov/epubs/bohide/;](http://woodshole.er.usgs.gov/epubs/bohide/)

<http://marine.usgs.gov/fact-sheets/fs49-98/>

Don't miss this opportunity to listen to the expert and learn how he discovered exactly what happened 35 million years ago!

VIMS "After Hours" June 28

"Diamonds in the Rough: The Natural History and Status of the Diamondback Terrapins in Virginia"

Diamondback terrapins, once common denizens of Chesapeake Bay, face a number of ecological challenges, including habitat destruction, drowning in crab pots, nest predation, and unregulated harvesting. In many states, environmental conditions have degraded to the

point that terrapin populations are now classified as "threatened" or "at risk."

Join Dr. Randy Chambers, Director of the Keck Environmental Field Lab at the College of William and Mary, as he explores the natural history and status of these



ancient creatures in tidewater Virginia.

Date: Thursday, June 28

Time: 7:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Location: McHugh Auditorium, Waterman's Hall, VIMS, Gloucester Point, VA.

Registration for this free public lecture series is required because of limited seating space.

Call 804-684-7846 or on line at: <http://tethys.vims.edu/events/registration.cfm>

Invasive Mitten Crabs found in the Bay

Native to Asia, the mitten crab first arrived in Europe nearly a century ago. Since then, it has invaded numerous waterways, damaging riverbanks and it may threaten local habitats. Museum scientists are currently assessing whether these crabs can be controlled by fishing.

Our friend at VIMS Virginia Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, Vicki Clark, has alerted us to the discovery of the Chinese Mitten Crab in the Chesapeake



Bay and the Delaware Bay. According to Vicki, this crab is unusual in that it inhabits fresh as well as saltwater, so it is possible that

it could make its way up into the tributaries.

According to Greg Ruiz, Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, "We are now actively working to document the distribution, abundance, and status of this crab in the mid-Atlantic region (and along the broader US east coast), and we especially wish to know whether this is a reproductive and established population.

Some recent analyses suggest that Chesapeake Bay provides very suitable environmental conditions for colonization and that the crab could spread to other estuaries as well.



“We wish to ask for your help in documenting any occurrence of the mitten crab by posting and/or distributing this Alert. Many folks may encounter these crabs in their routine business or recreational activities on the water, potentially allowing us to better understand the current status of this crab.

In general, we are hoping to establish a Network, which can both provide information and respond to (verify) new reports as they occur. At this stage, we are asking people to report directly to us (Mitten crab hotline and website) or a local/state resource manager. We are also asking people to take digital photos when able, since it is possible to share information and confirm sightings over distance, which provides an efficient avenue for tracking new records.”If you find one of these crabs this summer, report it to: www.serc.si.edu/abs/marine_invasion

Big Meadows’ Meadow

Written by Larry Riddick, Photos by Patty Riddick

Patty and Larry recently returned from an annual spring trip to Shenandoah National Park. One of our traveling companions was nursing an Achilles tendon injury, so our normal hikes of moderate difficulty had to be curtailed. This led us to try one of the ranger guided “meadow

walks” that we had passed up for greater challenges in past years. We were rewarded with a very interesting and informative experience.

Big Meadows gets its name from a large meadow at mile 50 on the park’s Skyline Drive. The meadow was once about 500 acres in size. It is now maintained at about 130 acres by the park service. It is not known how it was originally carved out of the forested mountains that surround it. Some believe Native Americans created it to grow crops; others speculate that natural fires were the source; still others believe that the early settlers cleared it for farming. It is known that the mountain people grazed cattle there until they were forcibly relocated in the 1930s.



The bright green areas highlight where the last controlled burning occurred.

Several years ago the decision was made to keep some of the meadow from reverting to forest, thereby preserving a unique habitat for a variety of flora and fauna in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The meadow is managed on a three year rotating cycle. Annually, one-third is burned; one-third is mowed; and one-third is left fallow. It was easy to see the third that had most recently been burned. It was by far the greenest.

A group of about thirty of us was led out into the meadow by Ranger Sue, being serenaded by a song sparrow as we walked. We learned that this melodious bird, its equally sonorous cousin the field sparrow, and the woodcock all make their nests on or near the meadow floor.

In fact, the meadow is host to a variety of wildlife. Several turkey vultures eyed us from perches in trees as we approached,

evoking predictable comments from our group like “Keep moving so they don’t mistake us for dinner”. A few whitetail deer lounged in a copse of trees contentedly chewing their cud. In the distance, we spotted a doe sauntering along with her fawn. It was obvious by the size and tenuous gait of the fawn that it was only days, perhaps hours, old. Another encounter with a very pregnant doe confirmed that fawning season had arrived in the park. As we waded through the fresh green vegetation we could see where last year’s controlled burning had uncovered meadow vole tunnels. A barn swallow skimmed overhead chasing some hapless insect. Cowbirds, unfortunately, were ubiquitous. Numerous milkweed shoots and old pods hinted at an abundance of monarch butterflies in the months to come.



This pregnant doe, below, probably had an early June due date.



Predatory cowbirds, below, prefer open wood lines to deep forests.

At one point we came upon a rocky depression devoid of vegetation. We were informed that in years with more normal rainfall, this would be the site of a vernal pool, teeming with tadpoles and salamander larvae. Our guide pulled out a

tape recorder and treated us to a chorus of spring peepers that she said could often be heard across the fields on spring nights.

Of course, one associates meadows with wildflowers, and they abound at Big Meadows. As we stepped around patches of nascent blueberry and maleberry shrubs, we found that a late spring had delayed some species, but others were in full bloom. These included the white flowered wood anemones, and blue tinted bluets, the purple blooms of wild geraniums, and the yellows of winter cress, golden ragwort, and common cinquefoil. The conical buds of fly-poisons promised to burst into panicles of white flowers in just a few days.



The blooms of the wild geranium, above, and the golden ragwort, below, will soon yield to later blooming flowers such as the fly poison, shown in the lower photo.



Left to its own designs, the meadow would undoubtedly revert to a predominately oak forest within a few decades. While park biologists ensure that won't happen, the meadow is not devoid of trees. Some trees are painstakingly protected during burning and mowing operations. A specimen gray birch stands alone with its many boles looking like an inverted crab. The Blue Ridge Mountain range is just about the southern extreme of the gray birch. Nearby, is a small grove of hawthorns. Ranger Sue explained that the fruit of the hawthorn is avoided by birds and mammals until winter temperatures render them edible. Then they are a welcome early spring food source, available long before the fruits of other plants appear. Among other species of trees found in the meadow are Virginia pine, black cherry, and, of course, some oaks.



The gray birch stands as a lone sentinel.



The fruit of these hawthorns will provide sustenance for many birds and mammals early next spring.

Although Big Meadows' meadow would not persist without human intervention, it is a good example of a habitat that could be created by natural fire. As such,

it provides a home for a wide variety of wildlife that would struggle to exist in the surrounding forest. Patty and Larry feel that it is worthy of the effort that goes into maintaining it and an excellent way to spend an hour or two in the park.

Hooray for the Foray

Breeding Bird Forays

By Bill Williams, Director of Education, Center for Conservation Biology and Board Member, Williamsburg Bird Club

From 3:45 a.m.-3:15 p.m. (DST) we managed to get 63 species at York River State Park June 5. Black-and-white Warblers were a real neat find. Kari Abbott nailed the nesting Great Crested Flycatchers. We also had some neat Fence Lizards, one Five-lined Skink, a nesting Painted Turtle, an incredible "hidden" Luna Moth, and a grand day all around. Participants at various times today: Kari Abbott, Mary Apperson, Hugh Beard, Anne-Marie Castellani, Tom McCary, Alice and Seig Kopinitz, Susan and Alex Powell.

Big misses-Downy Woodpecker, Green Heron, Prairie Warbler, Great Horned and Barred Owls, Wild Turkey, Chimney Swift.

Check Out Our Web Site

www.vmn-historicrivers.org

Seig Kopinitz, Webmaster, has loaded up our web site with great documents, links, photos, and references. There's even a "members only" section. If you have not yet logged in with your magic password, plan on clicking over there soon and book mark that page. He's looking for feedback too, so let him know your ideas.

A Born Naturalist

Continued from May newsletter

By Clyde Marsteller

[In last month's issue we learned about Clyde's pet skunk, Clara Belle Peebody. The story continues.]

In the late spring of 1952, a pair of Blue Jays built a nest in the black willow by the creek and raised a family of four nestlings. Bird nests and small boys are irresistible to each other. One afternoon I gingerly climbed the willow to see the babies. Mother and Daddy Blue Jay dived bombed me and knocked me out of the tree. With all the commotions, one of the babies fell out too. We both hit the ground at the same time. I couldn't get back up to the nest to put him back so I put some grass in a cardboard box and put him in. The parents continued to feed him during the day and at night I brought him in the house and played with him until he fell asleep. Knowing what I know now, I realize he "imprinted" on me and I became part of his family. During the summer he grew into an adult and learned to fly. It was fun to throw him gently in the air and watch him fly until he could fly up into the willows and stay there all day. At night he would fly down to me and stay in the house overnight. He would sit on my shoulder as I read or listened to the radio. When he fell asleep he would tuck his head under his wing. When he woke up he would stretch one wing at a time and yawn. Dad made him a perch out of an old floor lamp and a beer tray. He was so mischievous and full of the Old Nick I named him Satan. In the morning he would fly from the kitchen where his perch was into my bedroom and land on my head and peck me or pull my ear until I got up and let him out for the day. He

would play in the neighborhood until I got home from school. When I got off the school bus at Brown Crossing's Road, he would fly from the top of the willows and land on my head and jump down to my shoulder. As we walked home he tell me how glad he was to see me and how his day was. If the day was rainy, he would spend it inside the house.

Unfortunately, he and Grammy never got along although he loved Grandpop (he ignored Floyd). He loved to pull clothes pins off the wash line and watch the clothes drop. If Grammy washed bed sheets he just knew where his toilet was. Grammy used to chase him with a broom and he would dive bomb her.

Mamie, the raccoon, just knew that Satan was really meant to be her dessert and was constantly trying to catch him. Satan, on the other hand, loved to tease her and would pester her until she fell asleep. He would land near her and pull out a few hairs. One night when I was sitting on the couch, Satan was on my shoulder and Mamie was curled in my lap. Satan decided to fly down to the floor. He landed on a throw rug that promptly flew out from beneath him and he fell on his back. In a flash, the raccoon pounced on him. Mamie ended up with a mouthful of blue tail feathers and Satan ended up with a short tail and his pride injured. After that, Satan left Mamie alone. He stayed with me for three years. The Morning Call came down and did a story about us (November 1, 1953 -- Sunday Call Chronicle). That winter Satan caught pneumonia and God took him to brighten up heaven. I cried over him for many days. He taught me a great deal about love and responsibility. I learned that wild creatures really belong in the wild. It is wrong to cage them or try to make pets out of them.

There is one more story about Satan. His perch was in the kitchen by the windows and the table. When he was thirsty he would fly to the sink and sit on the faucet. I would turn on the water and he would dip his bill in the stream of water. If I left it on he would hop in the sink and wash

himself. At supper time he would sit on his perch next to Dad and hop on his shoulder and walk down to his plate. Of course, Dad would feed him. Satan loved mashed potatoes, peas, and corn. One Sunday we had mashed potatoes, gravy, peas, and pork. Dad also had a mug of beer. Satan did his thing and then jumped on the beer mug. He proceeded to drink his fill of beer. Before we realized it, he was drunk and fell into the gravy bowl. He hopped out and left little birdy footprints all over Grammy's good linen tablecloth. We washed him off, dried him, and let him sleep it off.

One of the funniest events of my childhood occurred when I was about 16. I loved high school biology and had to prepare science fair project. I decided on a butterfly/moth collection. To make it as nice as I could, I decided to collect cocoons and chrysalises so that I would have perfect specimens when they hatched. I knew where there were cocoons of large moths (Polyphemus and Cecropia). Of course I managed to pick up a couple of Praying Mantis egg masses and some Golden Garden spider egg bags. I put them in a shoe box in the family closet. They stayed there all winter. One morning in March I woke up to hear Grammy screaming. Dad was in bed laughing so hard he was crying. Flopping around their heads were about half dozen huge Cecropia moths and on the walls and bed were hundreds of baby mantises and spiders. There was a Praying Mantis on Grammy's nose and she was looking cross-eyed at it as she screamed. Needless to say, I spent a couple of days with Grammy until things cooled down and the creatures disappeared.