



The Naturalist

The monthly newsletter of the Historic Rivers Chapter

Virginia Master Naturalist Program

www.vmn-historicrivers.org

A Monthly Newsletter

Volume 2 No. 3 March 2008

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President's Message

Greetings to you all!

February seems to want to hang on to winter and yet my daffodils are blooming. March came in like a lion. Yes, I have been in the halls of school where students still learn such things. The Master Naturalists did a presentation at Matoaka Elementary School in February. It was great! The people who participated had a good time, as did the children. Matoaka is about technology, so I was glad there were a group of us to remind the children that outdoors is important also. It was a good exercise in reminding me how important the No Child Left Inside initiative is. I also was impressed with their conversations, how they answered questions, how excited they were to be wandering around looking at deer tracks. Children these days are getting smarter, which keeps those of us visiting them on our toes.

This was one of many of our service projects. There is lots to choose from, and a variety of types of projects. I hope there is one that will meet your passion for nature, and bring you satisfaction in participation -- a project you can excel in.

My best to you all,

Kari Abbott, Member and President

Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist

Remember March 15 Program -- Winter Botany, 9 a.m. - noon

Saturday, March 15, 2008, 9 a.m. - 12 noon. Winter Botany will be our focus when Charlie Dubay, science teacher at Jamestown High School, opens his classroom to us to discuss identification of trees in winter. Then we will walk the Greensprings Trail and use our skills to identify trees and other plants. Jamestown High is on Route 5 west of Williamsburg.

A Craney Island Adventure

By Clyde Marsteller, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member and Major, Medical Service Corps, US Army (retired)



On Wednesday, February 20, 2008, we were the guests of Professor Ruth Beck, our gracious host, guide and Ornithologist Extraordinaire on a service project trip to Craney Island, Portsmouth. Our intrepid band of both seasoned and neophyte birders include: Kari Abbott, Shirley Devan, Seig and Alice Kopinitz, Felice Bond, Jordan Westenhaver, Patty Riddick and myself. When you see the area for the first time it looks like an utterly barren and windswept moonscape. Suddenly you realize there is an abundance of life swimming, floating and diving in waters surrounding it. Eagerly the spotting scopes are set up and those black specks turn into a gluttony of beauty. You grab your field guide and start to identify Canvasback ducks, American Widgeons, Buffleheads, Black Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Ruddy Ducks, Cormorants, Green-winged Teal, and hundreds of gulls. With each sweep of your binoculars and the spotting scopes new waterfowl are revealed. You look at the color prints in your field guide and realize they are pale imitations of the living jewels you see in nature. *Continued on page 6.*

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NOTES FROM THE BOARD

At the January 21, 2008 Board meeting, the board voted that dues will be \$25 for this year. We are required by the bylaws to provide the membership 60 days to ponder this action. Dues will be voted on in the April 9 Membership Meeting, thus another reason to attend the membership meeting in addition to the wonderful speaker, (Chris Asaro on Invasive Species and Forest Health.) Your comments are welcome -- email, call, talk at the meetings. These funds are used to support our service projects and operating expenses.

The board reminds all members that the meetings of the Board of Directors are open to all members. The next meeting is March 17 at 6:00 p.m. at the Williamsburg Regional Library, Scotland Street, Williamsburg.

Patty Riddick reminds all to turn in their hours for February 2008. Send them to: pattyridnick@cox.net

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Upcoming VIMS Events

[VIMS After Hours lecture series is approved for Advanced Training hours.]

**New Technologies to Monitor the Chesapeake Bay
March 27, 2008 -- 7:00 p.m.**



Recent advances in marine and communications technology promise to revolutionize the way that researchers monitor the health of Chesapeake Bay and the ocean. Join VIMS Associate Professor John Brubaker as he explores how scientists and citizens can use real-time data from a new generation of data buoys to "take the pulse" of the Bay.

All lectures are held in McHugh Auditorium in Watermen's Hall on the VIMS campus in Gloucester Point. For more information, visit, www.vims.edu/afterhours/index.html or call Sarah McGuire at 804-684-7878.

Monthly Programs Count as Advanced Training

Monthly chapter meetings are open to ALL -- cohort I and cohort II. **Members earn Advanced Training Hours by attending monthly program meetings.** Mark your calendars:

March 15, 2008 -- Winter Botany -- Saturday @ 9:00 a.m.

Saturday, March 15, 2008, 9 a.m. - 12 noon. Winter Botany will be our focus when Charlie Dubai, science teacher at Jamestown High School, opens his classroom to us to discuss identification of trees in winter. Then we will walk the Greensprings Trail and use our skills to identify trees and other plants.

April 9, 2008 -- Forest Health and Invasive Species

Wednesday, April 9, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building on Olde Towne Road. Chris Asaro, Forest Health Specialist, VA Dept. of Forestry, will describe the Impact of Invasive Species on Forest Health in Virginia.

May 14, 2008 -- Aquatic Insects and Water Quality

Wednesday, May 14, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building on Olde Towne Road. Charlie Dubai, Jamestown High school will present a program on Aquatic Insects – Predictors of Water Quality.

June 11, 2008 -- Chemical Warfare in Plants

Wednesday, June 11, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building. Dr. Jim Perry from VIMS will be our guest speaker.

July 9, 2008 -- Sea Turtles

Wednesday, July 9, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building. Jack Musick from VIMS will be our guest speaker.

August 13, 2008 -- Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory

Wednesday, August 13, 2008, 6 - 9 p.m. At the Human Services Building. Brian Taber, a Founder and current President of the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory will share with us the history, mission, and achievements of the CVWO.

More Advanced Training Opportunities

Each Master Naturalist needs 8 hours of Advanced Training to become certified and then another 8 hours each year after that. 2008 is well underway so most of us need 8 hours of advanced training. Check out these opportunities and mark your calendars. If you discover an event that you believe would qualify as Advanced Training, send information to Clyde Marsteller, Chair of the Advanced Training Committee, clydecedm@aol.com

Project WET Workshop Facilitator Training March 13 - 14

Thursday, March 13, 10:00 a.m. through Fri. March 14, 4:00 p.m. at the Virginia Dept. of Forestry's New Kent Conference Center. \$25 Registration Fee toward meals, lodging and materials. Previous participation at a regular WET K-12 workshop is a requirement. For an application and more information, contact Kris Jarvis, Project WET Trainer, VA Office of Environmental Education at DEQ at kdjarvis@deq.virginia.gov.

Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) and local John Clayton Chapter.

All programs and activities sponsored by the state and local chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society are approved for Advanced Training for HRC members. For more information about activities at the State level, check the VNPS web site: <http://www.vnps.org/index.htm> For information about local Chapter events, visit their web site: <http://www.claytonvnps.org/>

Mountaintop Removal: Effects on Plants, Animals, and Humans. March 20

Location: York County Public Library, Route 17 and Battle Road. 7:00 p.m.

Learn about the destruction and damage to plants, animals and humans caused by mountaintop removal right here in Virginia! Yes, mountaintop removal is occurring in our mountains in Southwestern Virginia in order to get fuel for coal-fired power plants. Representatives from the Chesapeake and Williamsburg Climate Action Networks will show a film about the habitat destruction and will discuss the environmental hazards of coal mining and coal-fired power plants, as well as strategies for reducing global warming.

"Walk and Talk," New Quarter Park. April 5, 2008

10:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon

Topic is "Woody and Herbaceous Plants" with Dr. Stewart Ware and Dr. Donna Ware.

"Water Quality Issues: A Look at Populations" April 9 - 10, 2008

Location: Andy Guest (Shenandoah River) State Park and Smithsonian Conservation and Research Center, Front Royal.

This continuing education session is designed for Project WET facilitators and other experienced trainers seeking updated information on selected water quality issues. The group will experience lessons from Project WET's "Healthy Water Healthy People" curriculum and associated field activities including a canoe trip provided by the state park. Topics will include studies related to recent fish kills, amphibian population monitoring, and human health concerns. Participants will receive the "Healthy Water Healthy People" Educator's Guide and a variety of supplemental teaching materials related to the featured topics. Those interested in becoming HWHP workshop facilitators can elect to attend a meeting held in conjunction with the 2 day program. Program starts at 10:00 a.m. April 9 and ends at 4:00 p.m. April 10. Registration Fee is \$25.00 toward meals and lodging. Space is limited. For registration information, email kdjarvis@deq.virginia.gov

Landscaping and Nature April 12, 2008

9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m Williamsburg Unitarian Universalist Church. \$50

Mail registration to WALT, 3051 Ironbound Road, Williamsburg, VA 23185. Web site: <http://www.wuu.org/walt/courseIndex.html>

What is your biggest landscaping challenge? Led by Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists, learn about using native plants in landscaping, how to deal with non-native invasive plants and other elements of creating a low maintenance native habitat. This full day workshop focuses on the ways to approach landscaping in order to incorporate native plants, eradicate non-native invasives, and create/enhance/preserve habitat. Instructors are Susan Powell and Kathi Mestayer, Master Naturalists; Helen Hamilton, Master Gardener and President of John Clayton Chapter of VA Native Plant Society, and Philip Merritt, landscape architect and membership chair of John Clayton Chapter of VA Native Plant Society. A box lunch is included.

Armed and Dangerous: Destroying Virginia's Invasive Species with Volunteers. April 19, 2008

Location: New Kent Forestry Center. Time: 9:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Want to make a difference in Virginia's on-going fight against invasive species? This workshop will give you the background and resources you need to engage your community in this effort. It includes an overview of invasive species issues in Virginia, hands-on sessions on identifying and controlling invasive plants, and tips for leading educational programs and work days. Upon completion of the workshop, you are asked to do at least one program in your community, such as an education event for the public or a stewardship event, such as an invasive plant removal day.

We piloted this workshop in Charlottesville last fall, and are now offering it in 3 additional locations around the state. Registration is limited, so sign up soon if you are interested! Based on feedback at our pilot workshop and our projected costs, we have raised the registration fee to \$20. Financial assistance may be available if the fee is preventing you from participating; please contact Michelle Prysby at 434-872-4580 to discuss it. Rest assured you get a lot for this fee: several excellent presenters, a binder chock full of resources, a CD with invasive species manuals and information, and two field guides, plus lunch! Parts of our costs are also covered by a grant from the Virginia Tech College of Natural Resources.

Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival. May 16 - 18, 2008

The field trips and walks during this weekend will enhance Master Naturalists' knowledge of the migratory birds of Virginia. In May, the neo-tropical migrants will be on site and more readily visible and identifiable. In addition, there is a "Beginning Birding" walk/workshop, a Wildflower Walk, a Butterfly/Dragonfly Walk, a Geology Walk, and a Hummingbird Banding Program. All trip leaders are knowledgeable and enthusiastic birders and/or naturalists. Most events are 2 - 4 hours in mornings and afternoons.

Location: Mountain Lake, Giles County, VA. Most events and walks are around the hotel or in Giles County within short driving distance from the hotel.

The attendance is first come, first serve for activities. Most walks/trips have a limit of 15 participants. Advance Registration is required. Fee for weekend birding festival is \$35 per person, not including hotel accommodations. Additional info and registration forms: <http://www.mountainlakebirding.com/>

Holiday Lake Forestry Camp, June 16 - 21

The VA Dept. of Forestry will again offer an opportunity for teachers and other educators (including Master Naturalist volunteers) to attend Holiday Lake Forestry Camp, receiving about 35 hours of field forestry instruction and Project Learning Tree training (all modules). There might also be volunteer opportunities at the event—helping to teach a class, for example. The dates are June 16-21; location is Holiday Lake 4-H Center near Appomattox; the cost is only \$60. If interested, please contact Lisa Deaton at 804-328-3031 or lisa.deaton@dof.virginia.gov no later than April 15. Space is limited, so early contact is recommended.

Virginia Environmental Conference September 17 - 18, 2008

Location: Natural History Museum, Martinsville, VA

This weekend of training on Environmental Education is sponsored by Virginia Naturally. Save the date and look for more details in future newsletters.

Virginia Master Naturalist Statewide Conference October 17 - 19, 2008

Location: Wytheville Meeting Center, Wytheville, VA.

A fun-filled autumn weekend in a very lovely part of the state. We will meet at the Wytheville Meeting Center, but we'll have forays to the many surrounding recreational and natural areas, such as Hungry Mother State Park, New River Trail, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, and the Big Survey Wildlife Management Area. The weekend will include time to exchange ideas with other chapters, plenty of advanced training sessions, and opportunities to get outside and enjoy fall in the mountains. This is the FIRST statewide Virginia Master Naturalist Conference. Consider if you would like to go so we can begin to make plans for our chapter to attend. Save the date and look for more details in future newsletters.

Volunteer Service Projects

The following projects have been approved. Feel free to contact the "go to" person listed for each event and find out how you can join in and earn those hours. Meanwhile, if you have a service project that you think will fit with HRC VMN talents, contact Cherie Aukland, Chair of the Volunteer Service Committee: aukland.c@cox.net

School Tree Counting Project

Counting the number of trees that are within 100 feet of the school for all of the James City County Schools for Dr. Jeff Kirwin at VA Tech. Volunteers will:

1. Go to the school site and count, measure, and record the types of trees and saplings within 100 feet of the school building.
2. Report data back to Dr. Kirwin for loading into the school site web page.

Contact: Kari Abbott, bearsbaskets@cox.net

Location: James City County Schools

Time Frame: One time project. The project will take about 1/2 day for each school and there are 8.

New Quarter Park Native Plant Teaching Trail -- Update from Laurie Houghland

Spring is coming! It is time to start working on the trail at New Quarter Park. I have met with the plant rescue team of Carolyn and Ralph Will of the Native Plant Society and they will be a wonderful resource for plants to enhance the trail. April is the projected time that planting will need to start. As plants become available I will need help to plant and transplant. I also have a list of needed plants if you are willing to divide and share from your individual yards. The area is a woodland setting with several areas where the water runs through. A rain garden area (or two) is in the works too.

I also am putting a call out for all word smiths. I can dig a hole with the best of them, but feel less than confident to write the paragraphs to fill the signs. The trail will be marked to educate the public with signs that need to impart wisdom about the importance of native plants and their use in home landscape plans. The signs will be like the existing signs already found in the park that impart great information and have wonderful photos and illustrations. I have several topics that need to be covered, but there is room for more ideas. If you are creative verbally and want to help, let me know.

Contact me at woowee@cox.net or call me at 259-2169. See you on the trail. (As an aside, I found a micro Geocache on the trail. Perhaps we could add another!?)

After School Bird Club at Coventry Elementary School in York County

Volunteers will be educational resources to help support an after school education program [bird club for 4th and 5th graders] between October 2007 and May 2008. This after school bird club meets every other Tuesday, but HRC members are not needed for all dates. Contact the "go to" person to see where you can help.

Contact: Sheila Kerr-Jones, skj1s@cox.net

Trail & Garden Maintenance, York River State Park

This is an ongoing service project you can do anytime. Organized days are Tuesday mornings and Friday afternoons, but you can go out any time. Contact Mary Apperson at the Park, phone 566-3036 or email:

Mary.Apperson@dcr.virginia.gov

Project Toolbox [Master Naturalist in a Box!]

A collection of field guides, books, and other local information to assist any Master Naturalist who is out in the field in an interpretive capacity. Contact Larry Riddick to help complete this important cog in our contact with the public, larryriddick@cox.net

Wildlife Mapping

York River State Park, Greensprings Trail or your own backyard. If you've completed the Wildlife Mapping Training program, visit already "mapped" areas regularly to record your wildlife observations.

Contact Susan Powell, smapowell@cox.net, 757-564-4542

Hampton Roads Spring Bird Count -- April 26, 2008

The Hampton Roads Bird Club (HRBC) will conduct the Spring Bird Count for its respective 13 sectors (areas of Hampton, Newport News, Poquoson and York County) on Saturday, April 26, 2008.

Tim Christensen will lead the Tabb Sector again so everyone who is interested is welcome to participate. As before, no experience necessary...all eyes and ears will contribute greatly. Tim won't need an RSVP until April 14th so he can confirm and provide directions, etc). The count will be an all day event. The group will probably meet at the Washington Square Shopping Center parking lot (between Roses and Firestone) at 7:30 and go until about 4:00 p.m. Tim will send a reminder as date draws closer. There's no fee for the spring count.

Additionally, there are 12 other sectors that can also use your help. If you would like to help with other sectors, please contact Mr. Hayes Williams (he oversees coordinating and data collection for HRBC counts). His email is joycewms@inna.net

For those who have not participated before but wish to, please bring binoculars, spotting scopes and favorite field guides if you have them...and remember that by this time birds will be more difficult to see in the foliage so be sure to practice learning bird calls and songs. Contact Tim at: mtnc066@msn.com

Williamsburg Spring Bird Count -- May 4, 2008

Sponsored by Williamsburg Bird Club. Join experienced birders to survey a sector in the Williamsburg area. There are eight sectors in the Williamsburg Count and all need additional eyes and ears. Contact Shirley Devan, sedevan52@cox.net, 757-813-1322 or Bill Williams, the Count Coordinator, jwwil2@wm.edu

Children's Day at the Williamsburg Farmer's Market June 7, 2008 8 a.m. to 12 noon; set up by 7:45 am, break down by 12:30 pm.

Historic Rivers Chapter will set up a presentation booth to provide information to adult market-goers about the VMN program with posters, handouts and friendly conversation; enchant the children with interactive teaching exhibits, such as wildlife mapping, insects, fossils, etc.

Jordan Westenhaver is chairing the project and needs volunteers who enjoy interacting with the public and with children and have some ideas for children's exhibits and/or activities. Please contact Jordan at jordancw@tni.net, or by phone at 253 0174 if you would like to participate. You will receive hour-for-hour service credit for participating in this fun project!

Virginia Frog and Toad Calling Survey

Trained observers sample a route assigned by VA DGIF a minimum of 3 times per year. Contact Felice Bond for training and information: fbond203@cox.net

Craney Island Bird Monitoring, Conservation, & Management

Monitor of beach and marsh nesting birds; carry out approved management and conservation action plans. First trip was Feb. 20. Next trip is TBD.

Contact Shirley Devan, sedevan52@cox.net, 757-813-1322

Grandview Beach Preserve Research Project

Monitor avian use of Grandview Beach Preserve and beach nesting birds; carry out approved management and conservation action plans; educate visitors to Grandview of human impacts on nesting birds. This project will start later in the spring. Contact Shirley Devan, sedevan52@cox.net, 757-813-1322

Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel South Island Research Project

Monitor avian use of HRBT South Island and island's nesting birds; carry out approved management and conservation action plans. This project will start later in the spring. Contact Shirley Devan, sedevan52@cox.net, 757-813-1322

Bobwhite Quail Habitat Restoration Project

Enhance and restore habitat for Bobwhite Quail at New Quarter Park. This is a cooperative project with the John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society and the Williamsburg Bird Club. Project has been approved by York County Department of Parks and Recreation. Currently, we are monitoring the area for evidence of Bobwhite Quail. Later in the summer we'll be removing invasive species.

Contact Shirley Devan, sedevan52@cox.net, 757-813-1322

A Steward's Guide to the Universe – Fertilizing

By Scott Deane, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

Spring is right around the corner. This is the time of year many people love to get outside to enjoy nature and work on their gardens and lawn. While proper fertilizing can help the plants in your yard, improper fertilizing can cause harm to the environment.

This becomes important as we live in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. Excess fertilizer can find its way into the rivers and bay contributing to the growth of algae blooms. This can lead to oxygen depletion and loss of underwater grasses, an important nursery for small fish and crabs.

As you prepare to fertilize, consider these tips from the Virginia Cooperative Extension:

1. Before You Fertilize, Get a Soil Test. Knowing what kind of soil you have and what your plants need is the first step. You can pick up a soil sample test kit from the Cooperative Extension office in Toano. Follow the directions, take a few samples from around your yard, and mail it to Virginia Tech. You will receive the results of the soil test in the mail. For a small fee, a Cooperative Extension Agent can come out to your house and sample for you.

2. Pick the Right Fertilizer. When your soil test comes back, you now know what your plants need. Pick a slow release fertilizer. This will feed your plants over a longer period of time.

3. Apply the Right Amount of Fertilizer: Read those directions! More is not better. By not over fertilizing you'll save money too.

4. Keep it on Target. Make sure you keep fertilizer in the area it is intended to go. Avoid getting it on the driveway, road, or sidewalks where it can be washed down the sewer and can find its way into the bay.

Recently I attended a talk by the Virginia Cooperative Extension called Lawn Care and Maintenance. Master Gardeners and Turf Rangers, Tom Rogers and Don Parker, gave us additional tips:

- If you accidentally get fertilizer on the sidewalk or driveway, sweep or blow it back into the yard with a leaf blower.
- If you're starting a new lawn, consider grass that is more drought tolerant and needs less fertilizer.
- Instead of bagging your grass clippings, use a mulching mower. Clippings will help fertilize your lawn.
- To help conserve water, water your lawn only when you have to. You should water deep and infrequently, soaking the root zone to a 4-6 inch depth.

A wealth of additional information on fertilizing can be found at:

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Docs.woa/wa/getcat?cat=ir-ln-f-r>

<http://www.ext.vt.edu/pubs/envirohort/426-715/426-715.html>

Toano Extension Office Information:

<http://offices.ext.vt.edu/view.cfm?webname=james.city>

Here Are the Next Ten Tips for Conserving Water.

31. Direct downspouts and other runoff towards shrubs and trees, or collect and use for your garden. Consider a rain barrel.
32. Designate one glass for your drinking water each day. This will cut down on the number of times you run your dishwasher.
33. Water your summer lawns once every three days and your winter lawn once every five days.
34. Install a rain shut-off device on your automatic sprinklers to eliminate unnecessary watering.
35. Don't use running water to thaw food.
36. Choose a water-efficient drip irrigation system for trees, shrubs and flowers. Watering at the roots is very effective; be careful not to over water.
37. Grab a wrench and fix that leaky faucet. It's simple, inexpensive, and can save 140 gallons a week.
38. Reduce the amount of grass in your yard by planting shrubs, and ground cover with rock and granite mulching.
39. When doing laundry, match the water level to the size of the load.
40. Teach your children to turn the faucets off tightly after each use.

<http://www.wateruseitwisely.com/100ways/se.shtml>

Backyard Birdwatching

By Joanne Medina, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

February 20, just after lunch, I decided to stake out a seat by the window in my son's bedroom which has a good view of the back yard for some bird-watching. I have been tinkering with bird feeder placement in order to be able to view my visitors. The configuration of this house and my desire to not have the mess on my deck that I had at my last house from bird feeders located on or adjacent to the decks has resulted in the back yard location for the four feeders that are currently in use. I am morally and financially opposed to feeding the deer, raccoons and squirrels with the seed I buy, so I am very careful in placing the feeders to only allow feeding of said creatures from the seeds the birds toss out in their efforts to get to their favorite morsels.

I was richly rewarded for my efforts with sightings of: red-tailed hawk; mourning dove; downy, hairy & red-bellied woodpeckers; northern flicker; carolina chickadee; tufted titmouse; white-breasted nuthatch; carolina wren; dark-eyed junco; eastern bluebird; american robin; yellow-rumped warbler; northern cardinal; red-winged blackbird and american goldfinch.

I am looking forward to seeing who might move into the various birdhouses I moved up here from Georgia and recently installed. I have never had any takers on the two ceramic birdhouses I purchased for their beauty. I surmise that the ceramic houses have never been used due to their slippery surface and not due to any design flaw. Also I have hung a cement birdhouse with a coarse surface which vaguely resembles an owl and which was a huge hit with Georgia white-breasted nuthatches. One spring they hatched and fledged eight!!! The couple who bought our house in Atlanta gave us a bluebird house made from recycled plastic material and I am quite interested to see if there are any takers for it as the surface is somewhat slippery. I spotted what looks to be a newly excavated woodpecker hole in the top of an Isabel-damaged beech tree

and will be keeping a keen watch on that to see if it is a nesting site. I do enjoy playing a small part in the lives of wild creatures!

Update from late afternoon, February 29: I caught the Red-bellied Woodpecker at the aforementioned hole with wood shavings in its bill! While I was observing this, I was treated to 4 pair of house finches in the adjoining White Oak.

A Craney Island Adventure, continued from page 1

Being an ex-hunter I fleetingly think, "I wonder how they would taste stuffed and roasted or sautéed?" Guiltily I put the thought away until I remember the difference between Northern Birders and Southern Birders. Northern Birders exchange migratory information and Southern Birders (bless their hearts) exchange recipes.

Suddenly someone cries out, "What are those little birds hopping on the breakwater rocks?" There is a rush to focus on the plump little creatures scurrying from one rock to another. Suddenly they take off with an explosion of wings and in a perfect formation they wheel in synchronized flight by us back to their rocks. Ruth leads us through a visual checklist of field markings. Eureka! They are Sanderlings and so the day goes. Each site is faithfully documented by our resident GPS expert Seig and our expert recorder Felice. As we drive we constantly see new wonders. There is so much to see that we lose track of time until Ruth reminds it is lunch and potty break time. I agree and realize that for the last hour I have been crossing my legs.

The Craney Island staff welcomes us back to the Admin building and we have a lunch and fellowship time. Then it's out to the Island again.

We drive across one of the connecting roads, watching for soft shoulders and letting huge dump trucks that look like lumbering dinosaurs pass us. We come up on hundreds of gulls in one of the "Cells." They are Ring-billed, Herring and Black-backed Gulls. Ruth teaches us to count their numbers. She will not accept Seig's count of "gazillions." Off to one side we spot a row of about a dozen ducks sitting facing the wind and us. After much discussion Ruth again points out key field markings and tells us they are Northern Shoveler ducks.

As we come up to the side of the Island facing Norfolk Naval Base, we spot a Hooded Merganser and a raptor. Someone yells out, "Kestrel." Back to books and spotting scope. It is a Kestrel. Lucky guess. We watch it hover and suddenly dive to catch its meal.

I turn over a piece of drift wood and uncover a microcosm of arthropods. The dominant predator is a Black Widow Spider. Other pieces of flotsam and jetsam show the area to be an arachnid heaven. Felice uncovers a huge male Earwig and it becomes part of the "Zoo" menagerie. Kari spots a gull skull that will go into our Chapter box. A little further on Patty in the second car spots a Common Loon and gains a nickname.

Coming back on another cross over, Alice spies some more waterfowl in a Cell. They are Hooded Mergansers, Black Ducks, Buffleheads and Mallards. I can't keep up with the IDs but we are getting better at it. The day ends too quickly and it's time to drive home and back into our lives.

A Song Just as Sweet

By Linda L. Cole, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member

The Republic of Ireland is magnificent any time of the year. February 2008 was no exception. Treading lightly in the footsteps of the ancients - Saint Kevin and the 6th century monastery he founded in Glendalough, Ireland – I searched for the blackbird or Lon Dubh in Irish and taxonomically *Turdus merula*. Legend has it that when Kevin was a boy of seven, while kneeling in prayer on Ash Wednesday, a blackbird alighted on his outstretched hand and began building a nest. The disciplined child moved not a muscle and the blackbird finished the nest. So grateful was the blackbird for Kevin's protection that it fed him berries and nuts throughout the Lenten season. By the end of Lent, the hatchlings had fledged and Kevin was able to join the Holy Week celebrations.

Ash Wednesday was only four days away so surely the blackbird was too. Much to my surprise not one of the estimated 2 million blackbirds of Ireland was flying at Glendalough that day. The skies were eerily silent. My encounter was not to be. Passing by St. Kevin's Cross, however, I was surprised by a robin announcing his territory. In Irish the robin is known as Spideog or taxonomically *Erithacus rubecula*.

The Eurasian robin is very different from the American robin (*Turdus migratorius*). *E. rubecula* is actually an Old World flycatcher not a thrush. When Dean Martin sang about when the red red robin comes bob bob bobbin' along, he was singing about our red-breasted thrush, which is what the European settlers found in the New World and called robin. The Eurasian robin is the robin of Christmas fame. In the 1840's postmen in Britain who wore red uniforms and delivered their posts even on Christmas Day began to be called Robin Redbreasts. The Victorian's, associating the robin with gifts and Christmas, exchanged cards and a tradition was born.

E. rubecula is found throughout Europe and breeds in February and March in the British Isles and Ireland. There are an estimated 4 million robins in Ireland alone. The robin has become habituated there and posed for a picture. More on colonies of black birds in Ireland next time.



Eurasian robin, *Erithacus rubecula*.

Great Blue Heron Chronicles

By Alice and Seig Kopinitz, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalists and Members

February 16, 2008: It began innocently enough. The Williamsburg Bird Club was having one of its regularly scheduled bird walks to York River State Park. We have been on several and always enjoyed and learned from our fellow birders. For the last part of the walk, our leader, Bill Williams, trekked us over to the pond. Across the pond on what appeared to be a large dead tree were great blue herons building a nest.

They were moving construction material into a "proper order." In a pine tree close by was a condominium consisting of three nests from the previous years. These nests were not being used as far as we could tell.

Last year, beginning in April, we had watched the three nest condominium as the great blues raised their young. Watching the nest was rather hit or miss – if we were at the park, we took a look. It was astounding to see how these baby birds that the nest. It made one wonder how the nest survived and how crowded it must have been. Then one day the nest was empty.



On the way home from the bird walk, we decided that it would be a challenging and fun activity to try to keep a record of the nesting activity as the year progresses. Seig is learning to photograph nature (requiring new equipment, of course). Alice is paying the bills for the new equipment, and so we are off on a new adventure.

We have scoped out locations for pictures, trying to figure out the best time for light and are going to try to continue the Blue Heron Chronicles in the newsletter over the coming months. We have visited the location several times and the herons either have not been home or left immediately upon our arrival!

February 29, 2008: Update: After completing our Friday Frolics, we decided to make a trip to the pond to check out the blue herons. Four VMN's gathered binoculars, cameras and scope and headed to one of the docks to look at the herons.

Upon arrival at the dock area, Shirley Devan set up her scope and focused on the birds. She was panning around and discovered a great horned owl occupying the middle condominium from last year's blue heron rookery. What a find! This neighbor explains why there are not more blue heron nests close by (at least we have not been able to find others). Needless to say, after the owl was spotted, she became the focus for the rest of our time. Now our visits include checking out both nests which is difficult with just binoculars. I believe a digiscope is on the "new equipment list."

A Naturalist Went to School And Found a Zoo In His Luggage

By Clyde Marsteller, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member and Major, Medical Service Corps, US Army (retired)

Many years ago I came across a series of books written by a British Naturalist named Gerald Durrell. One of his most entertaining stories is titled "A Zoo In My Luggage" where he describes the trials and tribulations of catching, housing, feeding and transporting wild animals from the tropics to English zoos. Since then I have often envisioned having a small traveling Zoo that I could show to children and adults.

After graduating last year with Cohort I and attempting to tie together all the information from our classes, I took a page from Dr. Lou Verner's Ecology class and went searching for the Decomposers and Predators in the ecological system of an Isabel log.

The quantity and variety of life in my "small, small world" was astounding. Much to the dismay of my wife our den at home was quickly filled with slithering, hopping, crawling, flying, clicking, and hissing creatures. Ellie's prior exposure to "Creepy Crawlies" has been limited to butterflies, house flies and ants

I had to devise homes for animals ranging from small arthropods to herps with a couple of venomous, many legged critters thrown in for good measure. Plus I had to feed them all. I wrote an outline for a presentation aimed at third to fifth grades which I titled "A Naturalist Went to School and Found a Zoo in His Luggage".

To those who haven't had the pleasure of meeting the cast of "Zoo" I will tell you that they absolutely charm and fascinate children. To see the youngsters become involved and respond to the plants and animals that share their world and learn how we are all part of the Web of Life is exhilarating. Then to open their eyes and minds to the concept of Stewardship of the natural world is the most satisfying thing I have done. At the end of the class I tell them I have captured a huge unknown insect that I need help in identifying. I further explain I have kept it in this large paper sack to keep it quiet and inactive.

I have bought and assembled a battery operated robotic wasp and when I cautiously and slowly reach into the bag I turn on the robot. It buzzes loudly, its six legs claw at the bag and its wings vibrate. I let out a yell and quickly pull my hand out and put a finger in my mouth. Then I reach in and quickly pull out the robot and set it on a desk where it busily walks across the top.

The first time I did this I neglected to tell the teacher and the classroom aides what I was going to do. When I looked up I found 32 children and three adults plastered against the back wall with the dickens scared out of them. Fortunately it was readily evident that the wasp was a robot and it quickly became a teaching tool to revisit what defined an insect. Needless to say I am continually refining my presentations.



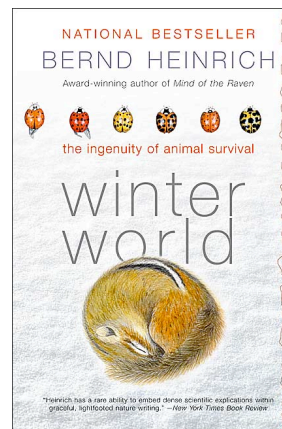
Clyde with Robo-wasp!

Lessons I've learned:

1. Small snakes are easier to handle than large ones.
2. Pass out the zoo crew in tightly sealed containers.
3. Don't pass out individual Patent Leather Beetles in Dixie cups to the class. Boys love to tease and frighten girls (I should have remembered that!).
4. Even though small snakes are easier to handle, their defense is to defecate on you. The poop is odiferous, long lasting and hard to get off.
5. Finally never, never go to bed without checking that all cages and containers are securely closed so that nothing is slithering down the hallway towards your bedroom when your wife decides to get up before you in the morning.

"Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival"

A book review by Alice Kopinitz, Historic Rivers Chapter, Virginia Master Naturalist Member



If you are curious about the winter survival of animals, then you would enjoy this book by Bernd Heinrich. The author has a cabin in the woods of Maine and is particularly interested in Golden-crowned kinglets that live nearby.

The book is certainly not limited to birds, but covers a range of animals from bees to bears and their survival techniques. His scientific writing is both readable and understandable.