



THE NATURALIST

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Virginia Master Naturalist Program

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President's Message

By Shirley Devan

The middle of October we visited Hilton Head Island for the first time and stayed at a Marriott resort property on the north side of the island. The resort offered a "beach workshop" for visitors and we showed up at the appointed time in the picnic area to find Joanne, a docent from the Coastal Discovery Museum who also happened to be a Master Naturalist from the Low Country Master Naturalist Chapter. I felt like I had found a kindred spirit! Unfortunately I had not worn my Historic Rivers Chapter VMN cap that morning so I had to introduce myself as a fellow Master Naturalist from Virginia. Smiles all around!

She had brought her "toolbox" from the Coastal Discovery Museum and shared with us information about the ocean habitat less than 100 yards from where we sat.

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Notes from the Board

All meetings of the Board of Directors are open to members.

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HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

She talked a lot about the 2015 sea turtle nesting season on Hilton Head – over 35 nests with a few still expected to hatch before the end of October. That's a BIG project for their Master Naturalist Chapter – volunteers out every morning before sunrise (on Gators!) to look for sea turtle tracks from nests back to the ocean. Then they marked the nests for protection from beachcombers, dogs, and other predators.

The docent was also able to identify the beach critter that produced so many tiny holes on the beach with “cupcake sprinkles” around it. Ghost shrimp! Who knew! I picked up some “sprinkles” and crushed them between my fingers, thinking they were made of sand. When the “sand” did not wash off easily in the surf I thought they might be feces and the docent confirmed it.



Ghost-shrimp fecal pellets, each about 5 mm long, and recently ejected by a ghost shrimp through the top of the burrow, which is the little hole just to the right. If you use them with any cupcake recipes, let me know how that worked for you. (Text and Photo by Anthony Martin on St. Catherines Island, Georgia.) Source: <http://www.georgialifetraces.com/tag/ghost-shrimp/>

Then we ventured to the beach to look for ghost crab holes (we found several) and she explained “wrack” to us and how important it was for the dune habitat and shoreline protection. Beach “re-nourishment” was last done on our beach about 5 years ago, in an effort to try to maintain for visitors a beach that naturally wants to migrate south.

Finally, as a local, she was more than willing to share her favorite restaurant and also recommended we visit the Coastal Discovery Museum only a few miles away. We followed both of her suggestions and enjoyed a better-than-great dinner at Trattoria Divina. The next day we visited the museum and joined in the Marsh Discovery Walk led by a museum volunteer. The museum is free but the Marsh Discovery Walk was \$10 per person and well worth the time and money. The museum featured a butterfly garden and a butterfly house with chrysalises of several butterfly species on display. The butterflies were still flying outside – mainly Cloudless Sulphurs, Long-tailed Skippers, and a few Ocolas. The museum had a great gift shop!

Bottom line – Hilton Head, SC has more than golf courses! You'll find lots for naturalists to explore and learn. I heartily recommend it!

PS: Don't get me started on the Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge! Wow!

Here are links to places mentioned in this note:

<http://coastalmasternaturalists.org/#sthash.uZpQ1fbr.dpbs>

<http://www.coastaldiscovery.org>

<http://www.trattoriadivina.com>

http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Pinckney_Island/



Hibernating chrysalises in the Karen Wertheimer Butterfly Habitat at the Coastal Discovery Museum, Hilton Head, SC

HRC-VMN BLUEBIRD TRAILS NESTING RESULTS 2015

James City and York Counties, VA

By Jan Lockwood & Lois Ullman

BLUEBIRD ACTIVITY WAS DRASTICALLY REDUCED in 2015

- EABL fledged 350 - approximately 44% of 802 fledged in 2014
- Only 95 bluebird nest attempts - BIG DROP compared with 220 in 2014, 190 in 2013, 210 in 2012. Only two 3rd nestings and seventeen 2nd nestings occurred in 2015
- 81% eggs hatched - comparable with 85% in 2014, 83% in 2013, 79% in 2012
- 77.5% eggs fledged - comparable with 82% in 2014, 78% in 2013, and 74% in 2012

Many fewer bluebirds nested in 2015, but their productivity was similar to previous years'.

WHAT HAPPENED to reduce Bluebird Numbers?

- Absent other evidence, mostly due to bluebird deaths last winter. Lack of food and brutal icy weather caused them to starve and freeze. Neighborhood bluebirds may have fared better because they had access to feeders.
We are awaiting Virginia Bluebird Society report on statewide losses.
- Notable that lowest activity most pronounced on trails in the western areas of our counties
- Interesting that two-thirds of dead birds were male. Have critical role in initiating nesting.

Other Species more successful in 2015 - Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, House Wren

- ALL fledges (Bluebirds plus Other Species) 566 - approximately 62% of 889 fledges in 2014
- Chickadee and Titmouse nested before majority of bluebirds in 2015 - 216 fledges compared with 83 in 2014, 116 in 2013, 105 in 2012
 - Chickadee fledges in 2015 were double those of 2014
 - Titmouse fledges in 2015 were almost triple those of 2014
 - 26 House Wren fledged in 2015, whereas none fledged in 2014

House Sparrows (HOSP) and 2-Hole Nestboxes

- House Sparrows predate Bluebird and other cavity nesters - present on five HRC trails
- Seven 2-Hole nestboxes designed to assist bluebirds escape attack and successfully nest were installed on four trails.
- Over 63 HOSP nest attempts and eggs destroyed by monitors. 26 HOSP fledged.
 - 8 bluebird eggs were destroyed by HOSP, but no bluebird chicks or adults were lost this season
 - Two 2-Hole boxes successfully fledged bluebirds (remarkable in first year)

While this was a discouraging season for our bluebirds, it is but one season. Hopefully, next winter will be milder and the following nesting season will be as productive as those in past years. In the meantime, we plan to winterize some of our nestboxes to further protect the winter roosting birds, although it must be remembered that many more birds perished than those which froze in nestboxes.

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Nor do these results tell the complete story of the 2015 HRC bluebird season. They do not celebrate the commitment of our monitors who regularly checked the nestboxes and reported their findings. While concerned about the unnaturally quiet trails and reduced activity in the boxes, they continued to delight in newly hatched chicks, rejoice when those chicks were grown and successfully fledged from the boxes, express frustration that wasps were once again in the boxes, and share photographs of nests, eggs, and chicks, and occasionally of a Tree frog and a Little Brown Bat in the boxes. Most of all it does not convey the camaraderie and enjoyment they experienced in supporting this project. Perhaps it was all the more heartfelt this year when the bluebirds were significantly stressed and in need of that support.

We couldn't be more proud to work with such a fine group of Master Naturalists and we thank them all.



Newport News Park Bluebird chicks and Carolina Chickadee eggs
Photos by John Adair



Bluebird Team at Eco Discovery Park



Little Brown Bat in Bluebird House
Photo by Deane Gordon

HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

October 19 Wildlife Mapping at York River State Park
Photos by Shirley Devan



Beavers in action near Beaver Pond



Common Buckeye butterfly



Two different Northern Watersnakes sunning themselves mid-morning — both near Beaver Pond

Trivia Challenge
(Answer on Page 8)

What is a group of goats called?

HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

Wildflower Spot– November 2015

John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society

Common Sneezeweed

Helenium autumnale

Golden, daisy-like petals surround the round, yellow centers of this late summer perennial. The common name is misleading—the plant isn't a weed, and it doesn't cause sneezing, since the pollen is too heavy to be carried by wind. Some Native American tribe members dried the leaves and used them as snuff to cause sneezing, which was supposed to rid the body of evil spirits.



Common Sneezeweed is highly desirable in the fall garden and stunning when paired with purple flowers such as asters and blazing star (*Liatris* spp.). This local native is easily grown in rich, moist soils in full sun. It grows 2–5 feet tall on erect stems, with lance-shaped leaves arranged alternately on the stem, each leaf base continuing down the stem as a wing. The plant can require staking, but can be cut back in early summer to force shorter and more-branched flower heads. Clumps can be divided every few years to maintain vigor and provide new plant starts, or seeds can be collected.

Like other members of the aster family, the showy ray flowers look like petals, with the disk flowers in the center containing nectar and pollen. The centers of Common Sneezeweed are ball-like and surrounded by fan-shaped, drooping “petals,” each ending in three teeth, which distinguishes this species. Flowers appear in September, and some isolated plants are still producing blooms in November. After the petals fall, the striking round centers which remain provide winter interest in the garden and can be collected as additions to flower arrangements.

Bitterweed (*H. amarum*) is a taprooted annual with similar flowers, but very narrow leaves. This species may be introduced from the west (botanists disagree about its nativity), but is a very long-bloomer, forming flowers from May through December.

Sneezeweed is attractive to many species of insects; most late butterflies and bees are seeking nectar, and some feed on its pollen. It is a highly desirable pollinator plant, providing food for honeybees, many native bees, wasps, and beetles—all late-season insects preparing for survival over the winter.

Although the straight native species will draw more native butterflies and other insects, many cultivars are available from garden centers and nurseries. Hybrids appear in autumn colors of golden yellow, flame red, orange, russet and their centers can vary from deep red to chartreuse.

For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

By Helen Hamilton, past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS

Photo: Common Sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*) taken by Helen Hamilton

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Notes From The Wild Side October 2015

Ramblin Clyde

Two weeks ago I captured two Wheel Bugs on our lawn glider that I was taking down in anticipation of the Nor'easter coming in. They were the first of their species I had seen in real life. The pair was mating as I grabbed them. I immediately felt like I had grabbed a red hot poker and I literally could not let go of them. I ran into my garage and shook them off into a plastic bowl on my work bench. I dumped them into a glass jar and put them into the freezer to keep in preparation of mounting them for exhibit. My hand was numb for the rest of the day. It was the nastiest bite I have ever experienced.

Over the years I have been bitten by venomous snakes nine times (two copperheads, one water moccasin and six rattlesnakes). I have been stung by a half dozen scorpions, several centipedes, a black widow and several other spiders, fire ants, harvester ants, velvet ants (wingless wasps), bats, rats and cats. Without a doubt the most painful bite I have sustained was from a wheel bug. Later as I visited Google sites I found this reference written by Richard Fagerlund along with the photo.

"The wheel bug has a characteristic dorsal crest, shaped like a wheel or cog. It moves and flies slowly, and in flight produces a noisy buzzing sound. As with other [assassin bugs](#), its proboscis arises from the anterior end of its long, tubular head and unfolds forward when feeding. The bug plunges its beak into its victim, pinning its prey with its front legs. It then injects enzymes into the victim, paralyzing it and dissolving its insides, and proceeds to drain the resulting fluids. The



bite of a wheel bug is very painful and may take months to heal (sometimes leaving a small scar), so caution is highly advised when handling them.

The wheel bug is also noted to be very vicious in the wild, and cannibalistic behaviors between them have been noted; for example, [nymphs](#) may prey on one another and the female may feed on the male after mating is concluded.

It possesses two scent glands (red-orange in color) that can be everted from its abdomen, usually in reaction to being disturbed. The scent produced by it is not as powerful as that produced by the [stink bug](#), but is still strong enough to be detected by humans.

Wheel bugs are highly regarded by organic gardeners because they consume a variety of insects and their presence indicates a healthy, pesticide-free ecosystem. "They're the lion or the eagle of your food web," Dr. Michael J. Raupp, an entomologist at the University of Maryland, notes. "They sit on top. When you have these big, ferocious predators in your landscape, that tells me that this is a very healthy landscape, because all these other levels in your food web are intact."

Continuing Education Opportunities

Please check the Chapter website for more information (<http://www.historicrivers.org>). Workshop registration may be required ahead of time.

[CE] WBC Bird Walk - October 24, 2015 from 7:00 am to 9:00 am at New Quarter Park, 1000 Lakeshead Dr., Williamsburg

[Class] Herpetology - October 27, 2015 from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm at JCC Human Services Building, 5249 Olde Towne Rd.

[CE] VIMS After Hours Lecture: Otherworldly Oceans - October 29, 2015 from 7:00 -9:00 pm at VIMS - Watermen's Hall, McHugh Auditorium 1375 Greate Road Gloucester Point

[CE] HRBC Bird Walk - November 1, 2015 from 7:00 am to 10:00 am at Newport News City Park

[Field Trip] Cultural Archeology (Cohort X only) - November 1, 2015 from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm at Powhatan's Complex, Gloucester

[Class] Habitats - November 10, 2015 from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm at JCC Human Services Building, 5249 Olde Towne Rd.

[CE] Monthly meeting - November 11, 2015 from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm at Kitzinger Meeting Room at James City County Library in Norge (7770 Croaker Rd).

[CE] WBC Bird Walk at New Quarter Park - November 14, 2015 from 8:00- 10:00 am at New Quarter Park, 1000 Lakeshead Dr., Williamsburg

[CE] HRBC Bird Walk - November 15, 2015 from 7:00 am to 10:00 am at Newport News City Park

[Class] Native Plants; Dendrology - November 17, 2015 from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm at JCC Human Services Building, 5249 Olde Towne Rd.

[CE] WBC Monthly Meeting - Kestrals - November 18, 2015 from 7:30 pm to 9:30 pm at College of William & Mary, Andrews Hall, Room 101

[CE] WBC Bird Walk - November 28, 2015 from 7:00 am to 9:00 am at New Quarter Park, 1000 Lakeshead Dr., Williamsburg

Trivia Challenge

What is a group of goats called?

A flock, herd, or trip