



THE NATURALIST

The monthly newsletter of the Historic Rivers Chapter

Virginia Master Naturalist Program

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Chapter Board 2016-2017

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President's Message

Meet the Executive Board
by Judy Jones

Happy New Year, folks! We're beginning this year with a bang, getting to know board member Nancy Barnhart. A member of Cohort VI, she has been on the board for three years, first diligently taking notes as Co-recording Secretary with Ginny Carey, and now handling the huge job of Volunteer Project Coordinator with ease and panache (yes—I know that's an impressive word, but she is an impressive lady!!!). Now, most of you are saying, "I already know Nancy! She's the bird lady, the Jamestown lady, the one we turn to to ID unknown birds and calls..." But she is so much more than that. Read on and discover the hidden Nancy that we never realized was behind that camera lens, the National Parks t-shirt, and her VMN ball cap--

Notes from the Board

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

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HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

Fill in a little background info please....

My husband Ken and I moved to Williamsburg over 6 years ago after living on a farm in Western Loudoun County for 35 years where we owned a farm service business. Our 200 year old farm house was like another hungry mouth to feed but we loved



it. The farm was the perfect place to raise two young active boys and multiple animals. My last large animal, Critter, a retired rodeo horse, lived to be 35.

Fill in a little about yourself now....

We live along the York River overlooking the marsh with our now-15 year old grandson Chris and Maple, a former barn-cat. In addition to our two sons, we have four grandsons.

We have also lived in GA and VT where I was a bird-bander and environmental educator with the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. Starting the day at sunrise catching Blackburnian and Chestnut-sided Warblers was magical! Ken and I love the National Parks and will make any excuse to visit

them, including my quest to find 50 birds in 50 states in 50 months.

Why did you choose to become a Master Naturalist?

I was a Biology major undergrad, MBA grad school...the first is my passion, the second was for the paycheck. So finding the HRC tent at the Farmers Market in Merchants Square in 2010 was an exciting moment! Who knew there was an organization involved in so many fun, educational, and worthwhile nature-based activities and projects?! I was hooked and couldn't wait for training to begin.

I've enjoyed every activity I have tried as a VMN because I'm with such fun people when we do them. But I do have some favorites; wildlife mapping, any and all bird-related projects, butterfly counts and activities, and outreach events, particularly the JCC Expo.

Tell us one thing about yourself that is funny, quirky, unique, or really rather bizarre....

I had to work hard to come up with something funny, quirky, unique or bizarre about me. So I went with embarrassing. Driving out to Jamestown Island one day I was amazed to see an incredible collection of fifty ducks including a dozen less-than-common Redheads. So I grabbed my camera and took lots of pictures, knowing I could download them to my iPad to verify ID's. But in the meantime I was so excited I sent an email right then and there to Bill Williams, Williamsburg's own bird-whisperer, telling him about the amazing sight. When I had a free moment I downloaded the pictures to my tablet and to my horror realized they were all DECOYS! I had just told Bill Williams to come see all the amazing DECOYS! Guess I missed the hunter in the blind in my excitement. I'm still trying to explain my way out of it two years later!

HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

(Lucky for me Bill and my fellow MN's have a sense of humor and we've had a good laugh about it!)

Final Question....which activity or activities in VMN have brought you joy?

The very best part of being an HRC VMN is being surrounded by bright, curious, energetic, friendly, cooperative, and adventuresome fellow nature lovers! Its fun and rewarding to continue to learn every time we're out together and to contribute to efforts to understand and help protect our natural world.

Executive Board Brainstorming Success by Judy Jones

As you know, our VMN mission statement is to be a “volunteer organization providing education, outreach, and stewardship, dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within our community”. In November, Michelle Prysby and her team from the state VMN led a leadership session to address, among other topics, two issues – recruitment of new members and

retention of members, so that we have the energy and dedication of enough volunteers to continue our mission. With this in mind, HRC’s board decided to devote our January executive board meeting to the issue of membership recruitment, and will be spending the bulk of the February meeting to the second half of the question, retention of members.



Wednesday night, January 4th, the board—joined by interested folks from the general membership--brainstormed ways to recruit new members to our chapter. The discussion was varied, exciting, and very motivating. It is remarkable to see how many excellent ideas can be produced when we put our heads, brains, and hearts together. Below is a summary of the meeting, compiled by Adrienne Frank. She did a remarkable job of fusing into an easily understandable format 2 hours of discussion, and I am very, very grateful for her help.

HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

Goal Area: Recruitment

Goal Statement: Recruit members who have diverse race/ethnicity, age, and interest.

Objective/Measurable statement: 20-30% of the new cohort will demonstrate diversity

Examples of strategies:

- Advertise basic training in location that target diverse audiences (e.g., colleges, WATA buses, apartments in various neighborhoods)
- Advertise using technology (e.g., Facebook, QR code on Rack Cards)
- Develop a basic training plan that provides online classes for part but not all of coursework.
- Consider location of basic training and other activities, related to transportation
- Involve already established organizations ie Master Gardeners; Farmers' Markets in Williamsburg and Yorktown; W&M Sustainability Office; etc)
- Establish a speaker's bureau to present at a variety of targeted venues.

It is interesting to note that 75% of the folks at the meeting learned about HRC VMN from a face-to-face contact with one of our members who very enthusiastically described our chapter and our goals. So, the board wanted it noted that each of us is a walking advertisement for our chapter — don't stop being the voice of our organization.

As a sidebar, the concern arose that we are not promoting our stewardship projects well. Adrienne also summarized this for us and noted a variety of strategies to implement. They are:

Goal Area: Stewardship

Goal Statement: Promote and improve documentation of stewardship volunteer projects

Objective/Measurable statement: Increase stewardship project hours to more than 1000 hours each year.

Examples of strategies:

- Realign projects to improve the count of stewardship hours
- Promote more leadership and champions for projects
- Offer more stewardship-oriented projects
- Offer more projects on weekends
- Entice members by presenting/demonstrating projects (e.g., project fairs)
- Generate ideas and offer incentives for participating

Our next executive board meeting is on Wednesday, February 1st, at 6:00 pm at Williamsburg Landing. We'd love to have you join us as we tackle the question of how we can retain members. Please come ... It's a fun discussion and we'd love to hear your ideas!!

Trivia Challenge

What is a baby Puffin called?
(Answer on page 15)

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Tulip-tree *Liriodendron tulipifera*

This is a beautiful tree for all seasons – in the spring tulip-shaped whitish flowers stand on short stalks near the leaves. Often the flowers are first recognized on the pathway below the tree, each pale petal with an orange spot at the base. Numerous straight stamens are inside the petals,



surrounding a cone-shaped pistil that looks much like the seed cones of magnolia, a close relative. In the fall fruits are formed around the upright cone, as dry, tan samaras with one seed inside, covering the ground nearby as they fall.

The leaves look like no other, with an unusual square shape and four shallow lobes. Bright green in the spring, the leaves are a rich gold in autumn. When they drop from the branches late in the growing season, a distinctive scar remains, round and somewhat elevated with several dots in the center arranged in a circle -- these remain from the tubes carrying water and food to and from the leaf. The branches

are stout and lustrous and end with buds shaped like a duck's bill with a line (stipule) underneath running all the way around.

Tulip-tree is easy to recognize since no other broad-leaved tree in our area has a gray, grooved trunk without lower branches. It is one of the largest hardwoods in the east, commonly reaching 80-100 feet with a 2-5 foot trunk diameter. While preferring moist, well-drained soils and rich woods, it makes a very desirable street, shade, or ornamental tree. Tulip tree ranges throughout eastern U.S. to the Mississippi River, and in every county in Virginia.

In the 1600's few plants were available in London nurseries and gardeners were sent abroad on plant-buying trips. In 1637 John Tradescant The Younger voyaged to Virginia and returned with 200 specimens, including Tulip-tree and Bald-cypress. As early American botanists John Bartram, Mark Catesby and John Clayton collected and identified the flora of eastern North America, a vigorous business developed, supplying nurseries in London with American species.

With its long, straight trunk, Tulip-tree was a favorite of the Native Americans for their dugout canoes. Bees make quantities of honey from the flowers, and the seeds are eaten by squirrels and songbirds.

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

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

Winter Plant Walks

January-March 2017

Sponsored by the John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society.
All walks are free and open to the public

Skunk Cabbage Walk. **Saturday, January 28, 10 am.** Come look for skunk cabbage in Longhill Swamp with Helen Hamilton, and Gus Hall will lead a walk through nearby upland woods. Meet at the Christian Life Center on Longhill Road across from Lafayette High School and wear waterproof footwear. To register, call Helen at 757/564-4494 or email at helen48@cox.net. Snow, ice and bad weather will cancel this walk.

Nude Tree Walk. **Saturday, February 18, 10:00 am.** Walk with Charlie Dubay to learn about identification of trees in winter condition. At the top of the hill is a nice comparison of 3 Virginia pines — loblolly, Virginia, and shortleaf. Participants may park in the William and Mary Hall parking lot, which is open to the public on weekends. Meet Charlie at the Sports Center, 400 Brooks Street to walk to the College Woods. And although most trees will be nude at this time of year, it is usually cold in February, so wear enough clothes! Contact Charlie Dubay at 757/870-0284 to register, and in case of bad weather.

What Is That Weed? **Saturday, March 18 at 10:00 am.** A walk in the Freedom Park area to identify emerging spring weeds and wildflowers. Learn which weeds are welcome and why others should be eliminated, and expect to see the first flowers of spring! Meet at the Freedom Park Interpretive Center parking lot. Contact Helen 564-4494 or helen48@cox.net for more information.

Symbolism of the Bald Eagle by Cheryl J. Jacobson

Many of you were present for the release of a rehabilitated Bald Eagle at York River State Park on December 22, 2016. He was the victim of poisoning when he and another eagle fed on a decomposing deer carcass. The deer had been hit along a road, was suffering, and was euthanized. The deer's body was not destroyed properly and the eagles were dying from the poison when discovered and rushed to the Virginia Wildlife Center.



The second eagle is still recovering and will be released in the near future so watch for information about that release and you can still enjoy this wonderful opportunity.

There is no anti-poison available for this situation so the eagles were cared for until they could "heal themselves". The Native Indians saw the Eagle as a

symbol for great strength, leadership and vision. As if to seemingly mirror this, the eagle has been used as a 'banner' by many of the great empires throughout history, from Babylon to Egypt, through to Rome and even the United States. In early Christianity the eagle was seen as a symbol of hope and strength, representing salvation.

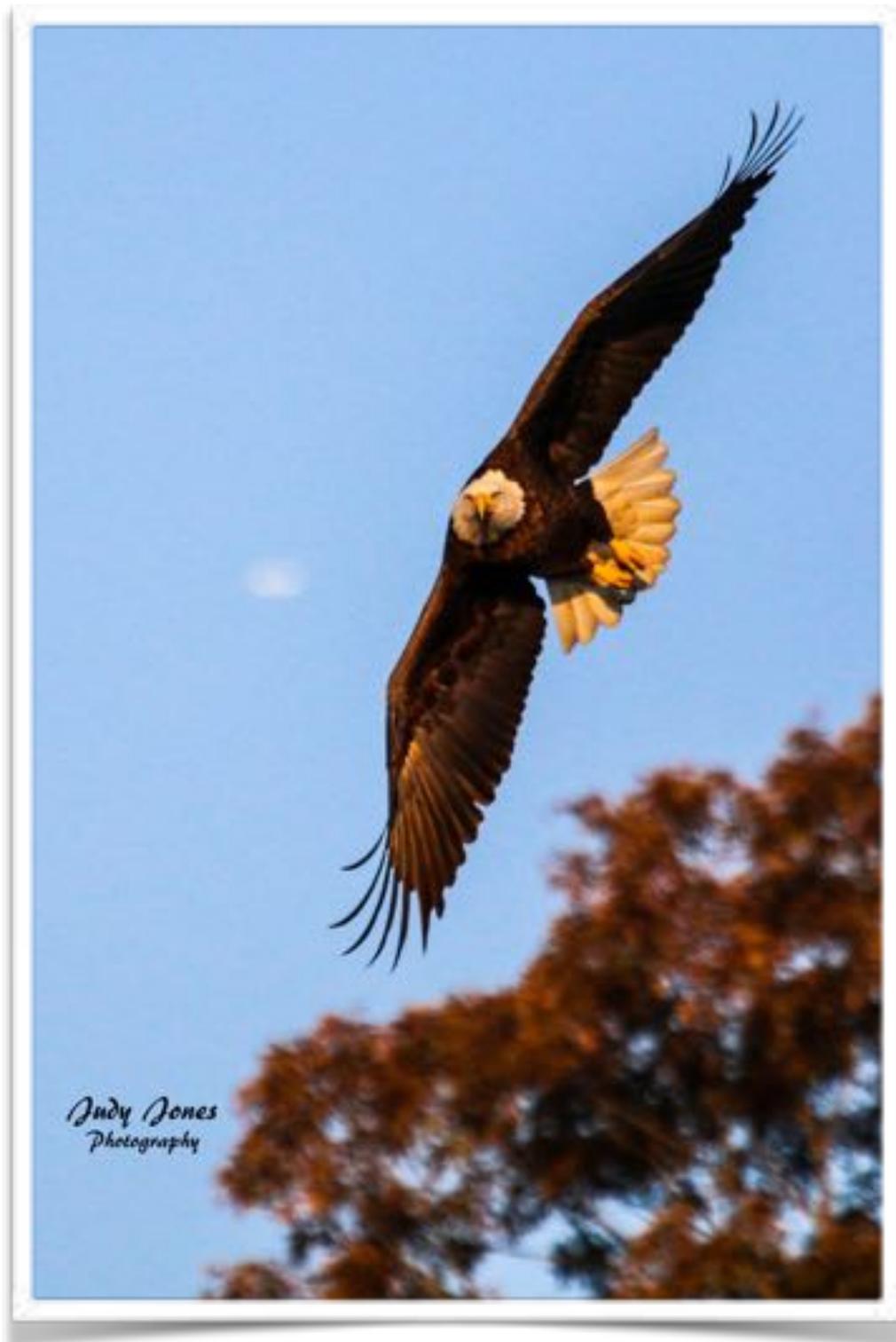
Eagles have a beauty and grace fitting their status as our national emblem. As with most birds of prey, the female eagle is larger and heavier than the male. They weigh an average of 12 pounds with a wingspan up to seven feet and a body length of nearly three feet. Eagles are lighter than they appear. The bulk of an eagle is its feathers; its bones are hollow and much lighter than the bones of mammals.

An eagle's eyes are up to eight times sharper than that of humans and contain many more color-sensitive cones. Located on the side of the head, their eyes provide a wide field of view. Bald eagles have a large wingspan compared to other birds, allowing them to soar and hunt vast areas with a minimum of effort. During migration they can travel 400 to 500 miles a day. Bald eagles have large, sharp talons and strong feet which they use to catch their prey.

HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

So for 2017... Fly Like The Eagle and remember; if you have been going through a hard time, reflect on the eagle as he not only signals a new

beginning, but provides a person with the stamina and resilience to endure the difficulties, and also, the strength to heal oneself.



Merlin Bird Photo ID Launched

If you're a beginning birder or even a 'pro' with a tricky ID, here's a great new tool for identifying 650 birds species in North America. It's the free Merlin Bird ID app from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The app now includes a Photo ID feature that can name the bird in a photo right on your smartphone or other mobile device. The automated photo identification is powered by computer vision using

machine-learning techniques. The bird lists you've submitted to eBird directly and through participation in the Great Backyard Bird Count help make Photo ID possible. The app is available for both iOS and Android. The Photo ID feature was developed by the Cornell Lab, Cornell Tech, and Caltech. In 2017, give Merlin Photo ID a try!

Williamsburg Bird Club welcomes HRC/VMN by Cheryl J. Jacobson, WBC Vice President/Programs

The Williamsburg Bird Club is pleased to again do a joint meeting with HRC on Feb 15, 2017. I have invited **Dr. Lesley Bulluck**, Virginia Commonwealth University professor, Department of Biology, to talk about **Prothonotary Warblers**, the bright little residents of forested wetlands and the only eastern warbler to nest in natural or artificial cavities. Aldo Leopold mentioned the bird in *A Sand County Almanac* as the "Jewel of my disease-ridden woodlot, proof that dead trees are transmuted into living animals, and vice versa. When you doubt the wisdom of this arrangement, take a look at the prothonotary." Dr. Bulluck will speak on her work with Prothonotary Warblers and will discuss the food web with an emphasis on the impact of toxic algae on the Prothonotary Warbler's diet. Many of you help monitor prothonotary warbler nests so this

topic is very relevant. The meeting will be held at William and Mary at 7 pm and I will send out an email when I know the room location. I hope to see you there.



Shirley Devan holding a Prothonotary
Photo by Cheryl Jacobson

Year Two of Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA) by Dave Youker, Region 11 Coordinator

HRC is located in Region 11 of the VABBA. A number of HRC members participated in year one of the program and I truly appreciate the time you dedicate to this important conservation effort. The time to start preparing for the 2017 breeding season is now. Certainly those early breeders like owls and eagles are already busy. But it's also the time to start planning which blocks you'd like to survey this year. Now that we're veterans of the process, consider branching out to new locations. Use the topographical maps on the VABBA2 website to evaluate which habitats are contained in your block, and sketch out the routes needed to cover these areas.

Priority Blocks will remain as during 2016. There are two reasons for this. First, many of the priority blocks were not surveyed, as many people wanted to survey their local areas in order to get comfortable with this Atlas process. Second, we need these blocks covered for purposes of baseline comparisons with the first Atlas. So I urge you to go to the VABBA website (<http://amjv.org/index.php/vabba2/about>) and sign-up for a block, you'll see the priority blocks outlined in purple again.

I hope you'll consider taking one or more of these priority blocks this year. Of course, any blocks you survey will be greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me at youkerd@aol.com.



American Robin on Nest. Photo by Shirley Devan

Look! A Snake!! Is it "Poisonous"?! by Tim Christensen

The sight of a snake inspires a variety of emotions on the part of the observers. Many emotions are positive, being generated by the awe of a legless vertebrate from our animal world. Unfortunately, not everyone shares this opinion. Frequently, people have the misconception that most snakes observed in the wild are likely to be venomous...and human fear overrides logic and the snake is killed.

Snakes are critical components to natural communities and most ecosystems. Consequently, conservation of this group is important. In Virginia, we have a relatively large number of snake species. Currently, there are 32 species of snakes in the Commonwealth. Of this number, only 3 species employ venom that is detrimental to humans. These snakes are the Timber Rattlesnake (sometimes referred to as the canebrake rattlesnake), Eastern Cottonmouth and Northern Copperhead.

Snake identification can be useful towards educating the public about snakes, and Master Naturalists can take a major role towards reducing the impacts of wanton destruction of a misunderstood creature.

Let's put this in the perspective of a recent local incident. On or about October 24th, Historic Rivers Chapter member, Renee Dallman, became involved when neighbors spotted a snake and were intent on its destruction, believing it to be venomous. The location was in James City County. Renee made efforts to obtain an accurate identification from which she was able to

convince neighbors that it posed no threat. Kudos to Renee! The snake in question was identified as a Northern Watersnake (*Nerodia sipedon sipedon*). This species is fairly common and is distributed across most of the Commonwealth. It is harmless and poses no real threat to humans. The snake is found in many aquatic habitats but can be found away from water. It is not uncommon to find them in suburbia if sufficient resources exist.

We can analyze the situation and the accompanying photograph to examine why it is not one of the venomous snakes.

1. Snake species and location. We are in Virginia so we know there are only 3 venomous snake species from a total of 32 species. In this general region of the Virginia Peninsula, there are approximately 25 snake species documented or likely to occur. This point suggests that encounters with venomous snakes are low. However, we can examine this further. Consider insight about the 3 venomous snakes.

The Timber Rattlesnake population occurring in southeast Virginia (which includes the Peninsula) is considered endangered, meaning it is protected because there are few remaining. A small population exists at Sandy Bottom Nature Center in Hampton. I am personally aware of two specimens documented from York County. Considerable herpetofauna surveys have been conducted at the Colonial Historic National Park which contains parcels in York and James City Counties but none have been documented in any of the parcels.

Eastern Cottonmouths also occur on the Peninsula in certain habitats. However, the general region of southeast Virginia constitutes the northern limit of their range. As a result, we would expect smaller numbers in the extremes of ranges. A small population exists where swamp habitats of Newport News Park and the Colonial National Historic Park connect (primarily York County). The herpetological surveys at the Colonial Historic National Park included other parcels such as Jamestown and Green Springs. Cottonmouths were only documented in the area of park interface in York County.

Indeed, we can consult Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries website for information specifically Virginia Fish and Wildlife Information Service (<http://vafwis.org/fwis/>) and the Virginia Herpetological Society website (http://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/reptiles/snakes/eastern-cottonmouth/eastern_cottonmouth.php and http://www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/reptiles/snakes/timber-rattlesnake/timber_rattlesnake1.php) to obtain county/independent city occurrences. Neither cottonmouths nor Timber Rattlesnakes are documented in James City County currently. These two species can then almost be ruled out, or we can at least conclude that the likelihood of the snake being either venomous species as low. The only remaining venomous snake is the Northern Copperhead and it has a greater distribution in the Commonwealth including James City County. Consequently, we have an even lower chance of this being a venomous snake.

2. Habitat. Little information was available about the habitat though apparently it was observed in a residential area. This factor can

also be useful towards making the determination of venomous vs. nonvenomous. Several snake species can be fairly common in residential areas. The Northern Watersnake is one of these. They can be found in residential drainage ditches at times if there is sufficient water to support their prey such as frogs and fish. It is not prudent to simply say cottonmouths would not occur in suburban habitats but the likelihood is low in contrast to Northern Watersnakes.

3. Head shape. Some discussion did mention the shape of the snake's head with some suggesting the shape being indicative of a venomous species. Many people automatically consider a snake to be venomous if the head is perceived to be triangular. Indeed, all three venomous snakes in Virginia have more or less, triangular heads with defined necks. However, this is a poor diagnostic feature by which to make the distinction. Several nonvenomous snakes have a somewhat triangular head to include this Northern Watersnake. Look at the photograph; the head shape gives the appearance of an isosceles triangle. This is the case with some other nonvenomous snakes as well such as Eastern Ratsnakes. In fact, Northern Watersnakes and Eastern Ratsnakes (amongst others) often flatten their heads into more profound triangular shapes when disturbed. I've witnessed this numerous times. These species can have defined necks.

4. Eye pupil. It's difficult to see the eyes of the snake in the photograph. However, this would be helpful in determining whether the snake is venomous. For snakes in Virginia, nonvenomous snakes have round pupils. The three venomous species have elliptical, narrow pupils.

5. Color and pattern. Northern Watersnakes and the 3 venomous species have patterns on their bodies. Patterns of Northern Watersnakes are different from cottonmouths and copperheads but such patterns may seem



similar to those unfamiliar with snakes. In fact, many people consider snakes with a pattern often to be a copperhead. Variations in color can also occur based on an individual

snake's genetic make-up, its age, or if it is about shed or has recently shed.

It is wise to avoid picking up a snake with hands. This is true of venomous and nonvenomous snakes. Some snakes bite and/or musk if handled as defenses. This is not aggression but merely the snake's attempt to stave off perceived predation. Additionally, many snakes will writhe and thrash about potentially injuring themselves. So, keep this in mind for your well-being and the that of the snake.

Always consider the information source that suggests a snake is venomous or that venomous snakes occur in certain areas. I cannot begin to tell you how often I've witnessed incorrect identification or heard misguided information about where they occur. Seek out insight from the experts and, as Master Naturalists, develop snake identification skills as this supports efforts in educating the public about the importance of snakes. Examining field guides, reviewing photographs and information on the two websites noted above or even visiting the Virginia Living Museum can be helpful. From there you can teach people to live with snakes versus implementing wanton



Northern Watersnake



Eastern Ratsnake

Continuing Education Opportunities

The Continuing Education calendar is now posted on the [VMN Volunteer System](#) website. When you log in to enter your hours you can find the link to the calendar in the left-hand column, under Calendars and Continuing Education. Press the activities on the calendar and open to find more detailed descriptions of each continuing education activity.

This list is generated by the system's website and you will need to open the website to find the calendar and detailed information. There is no direct link to individual activities on this page.

Sat, Jan 28, 2017	Williamsburg Bird Club Bird Walk 7am at New Quarter Park
Sat, Jan 28, 2017	York River SP - Stargazing 7:30-11:45 pm
Sat, Jan 28, 2017	NPS -Skunk Cabbage Walk- 10 am meet Helen Hamilton at the Christian Life Center on Longhill Road
Sat, Jan 28, 2017	WBC Field Trip to CBBT by Boat 8:30 am 3311 Shore Drive-Virginia Beach
Sat, Feb 04, 2017	York River SP - Taskinas Creek Hike 10-12
Sun, Feb 05, 2017	HRBC Sunday Bird Walk - Newport News Park 7 am
Tue, Feb 07, 2017	VIMS Plan & Facilitate Coll Meetings \$-Waterman's Hall McHugh Auditorium 1375 Greate Road Gloucester
Wed, Feb 08, 2017	HRC Monthly Meeting
Sat, Feb 11, 2017	Williamsburg Bird Club Bird Walk 8am at New Quarter Park
Sat, Feb 11, 2017	Walk&Talk- 10-12- Leafless Tree ID S. Ware at New Quarter Park
Sat, Feb 11, 2017	York River State Park - Fossil Frenzy 10-12
Wed, Feb 15, 2017	C. Wren Classes - A Changing Bay (\$100) Feb 15-Mar 1
Wed, Feb 15, 2017	Combined Meeting HRC & WBC at 7 pm at W&M Andrews Hall- Dr. Lesley Bulluck Prothonotary Warbler
Wed, Feb 15, 2017	Williamsburg Bird Club Monthly Meeting
Sat, Feb 18, 2017	James River Assoc RiverRat Training - Newport News 10-3pm
Sat, Feb 18, 2017	HRBC - Birding trip to the Islands of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel - 7:30 am
Sat, Feb 18, 2017	NPS - Nude Tree Walk- 10:00 am. Meet Charlie Dubay near W & M Hall/Sports Club
Sat, Feb 18, 2017	W Botanic Garden 10:00-11:30 am: BLUEBIRDS IN YOUR YARD- Freedom Park
Sun, Feb 19, 2017	HRBC Sunday Bird Walk - Newport News Park 7 am
Tue, Feb 21, 2017	VIMS Discovery Lab: Sea Turtles 6-8pm Catlett-Burruss Res & Ed Lab-7577 Spencer Road Gloucester Pt

HISTORIC RIVERS CHAPTER

Wed, Feb 22, 2017	Friends of Dragon Run Meeting - Presentation 7 pm Gloucester Library
Sat, Feb 25, 2017	Williamsburg Bird Club Bird Walk 7am at New Quarter Park
Sat, Feb 25, 2017	York River SP - Stargazing 7:30-11:45 pm

