



Keeping Afloat

Photo by David Winer

The Sycamore Islander

June 2004

Volume 83 No. 6

President's Message

This last meeting was a very interesting, relaxing one. We sat on the deck of the clubhouse, on a lovely spring evening. Unfortunately, there weren't enough of you there to conduct any official business; but we did have interesting committee reports and a discussion about the building plans.

I did bring two sketches of plans for the caretaker's quarters. One was a second-level extension that would have attached to the existing building alongside the kitchen and would have extended out beyond the clubhouse toward the tool shed. The late John Wiebenson, an architect and club member, had drawn these plans. Unfortunately, it appears that we will not be able to build them, because we have learned much about the permitting process in Montgomery County and the regulations that have been enacted to protect the environment, particularly wetlands, floodplains, and water quality. I think there are members who believe it would have been a fitting tribute for a man who died in the service of the less privileged.

The County will allow us to build within the current structure. The committee, chaired by Jack Sanders, has developed several sketches that would move most of the caretaker's quarters upstairs in the clubhouse. This, of course, means the caretaker would be using space that had previously been used by the club members. The club kitchen and ladies locker room would probably become part of the quarters. In exchange, the committee would build a new club kitchen, probably where the ladies room is now. The biggest benefit to the club members is that there would be extensive renovations of the downstairs. The plan by Tryon Wells that was shown at the meeting has new restrooms located approximately where the caretaker's bedroom and bathroom are now. The locker rooms would be renovated. And, best of all, the men's room would be turned into a new screened porch which would get much more light than the current one.

This plan has many advantages. First, it raises the caretaker's quarters above the height of most floods. Second, it opens up the lower level so that water can flow through more easily during a flood, lessening the likelihood of structural damage. Third, we, the club members, get a much nicer lower level with a better layout, and a more functional kitchen upstairs. This also fits with the goals that the building committee set out for itself: Raising the quarters above the likely level of floods, preserving the character of the clubhouse, and providing more livable quarters. Please come to the next meeting on June 9 at 8:00 pm in the clubhouse. We'll be discussing the plans in more detail, and I will be happy to answer any questions about what we've learned on the permitting process.

— Ann Marie Cunningham

June Meeting

**Wednesday, June 9th, 8 pm
At the Island!**

The Sycamore Islander is a monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. Articles, photographic essays, drawings, announcements, letters to the editors—any materials of interest to the membership and waiting list—are welcome and should be sent to the Editor, Norman Metzger, 638 G Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003-2724 or by fax to 202/544-6027. Text and graphics may be sent as e-mail attachments to nm2@bellatlantic.net. Telephone: 202/544-6027 or 202/445-5436 (cell). **Note to submitters of announcements, articles, or letters: The deadline for inclusion in the July issue is receipt at the Editor's address by Monday, June 22nd. Earlier submissions receive priority.**

From Holly Syrrakos, Archivist: 75 Years Ago At Sycamore Island

Selections from the June 1929 *Sycamore Islander*

“Tom Edwards, batting for Betsy Ross, produced a sketch of a new flag for Sycamore at the May meeting and a great burst of patriotic fervor resulted in a demand for a slightly larger paddle on the design. Tom very neatly provided the larger paddle by a wipe of his eraser and a quick stroke of his pencil. A banner, guaranteed to wave, is being made in accordance with the design and it will be flown to the breeze in the near future.”

“Escalator to be Installed in Tenting Colony

Sycamore Island—It is officially announced that an escalator or moving stairway will be installed in one of the tents at this point. Mr. Carl Stodder, eminent tent platform authority, has raised his platform three more feet to prevent its being washed by flood waters, thus making it the highest tent platform ever seen in these parts.”

“Ancient Colony on Midway Island Revived

A bulletin issued by the National Geographic Club announces that the ancient colony on Midway Island, that fascinating bit of territory between Sycamore Island and Upper Sycamore Island, will be revived this summer by young Partridge. This intrepid pioneer has already strung electric lights to what has always been a headquarters for parties wishing to admire dark nights.

Students of history will recall that young Partridge first invaded this gem to the river and erected a dock there some years ago but was forced to give up the settlement to the Indians when he hit his foot with an axe while opening some beans. Harry Lowenstein next took up the great work of colonization and carried a lunch table over to the Island so that a minimum of discomfort would be involved. However, before Lowenstein could return with some lunch, another party or parties unknown brought the lunch table back to Sycamore, thus defeating the great work and forcing Harry to eat his lunch right out of the basket.”

In 1929, the Editor of the Islander obviously had a sense of humor as well as a talent for recounting modified versions of the truth. [The current Editor denies such talent.] I'll probably have to revisit our archives at the DC Historical Society to find out exactly who he (I'm assuming) was. If he hadn't described the location of "Midway Island," I wouldn't have a clue as to its whereabouts. Is there anyone out there who re-

Iris and Larry Miller recently had their first experience as relief caretakers.

Iris sent this note afterwards:

It was one of those special days on the island - the female geese were sitting on their eggs, hissing as we passed, when they weren't sparring with the males. They were so human in their relationships. The wildlife certainly let us know they were present...noisy or background music as we read our books. The sparkling sun cast a diamond necklace across the Potomac, especially toward sunset. The bluebells created a tapestry covering the earth, interspersed with the chartreuse green of new growth. The subtle colors of buds were forming on tall sycamores against the blue sky. Larry and I enjoyed the ambience mostly alone - Marika and her son (morning caretakers) watched the geese with us and then played pool for a while before departing; late afternoon Mr. Matthews rang the bell, crossed on the ferry, and then set out on a canoe. As evening was approaching, the chill in the air alerted us that our time on the Island was concluding - and we climbed the hill with a more peaceful spirit than when we had arrived.

Sycamore Island Club Demographics

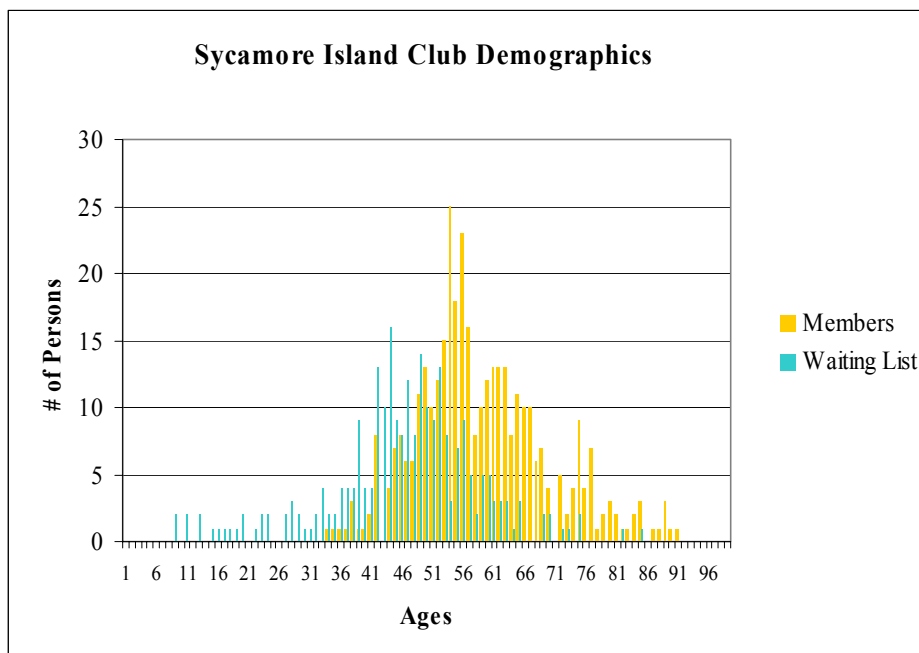
The Sycamore Island Club's waiting list has been closed now for a couple of years as a reaction to its unprecedented growth in the 1990s. When it was closed, the number of applicants on the waiting list was over 210. Today it hovers above 150. That is still a long list, and it is estimated that it will take most of a decade before everyone on that list is admitted.

The long waiting list has spotlighted membership issues and prompted recent debate about what to do when the waiting list is opened again. When that day arrives, and unless any procedures are changed, virtually everyone expects a new long waiting list within a couple of years that may be longer than the one that prompted the club to stop accepting applications two years ago.

As the club tries to figure out what the future membership of the club will be, its demographics show that the club has stopped being what it has been historically. Instead of a Club with members of all ages, the Club has become a Club of late middle-agers and the elderly.

It's no wonder that it's increasingly difficult to find members for weekend ferry duty or maintenance tasks that require moderate physical labor -- more than 80% of the membership is over 50, and about half of that group is over 60. Though many may still feel that they are in the game, there is no denying that a Club that has historically counted on its youthful members to tackle physical tasks and thus keep the dues low, will have a hard time maintaining that model in the future.

The waiting list provides little relief from this demographic reality as the current waiting list is on average about 10 years younger than the current membership, almost exactly the number of years it will take them all to become admitted. That means that around 2014, the age of the membership will look remarkably like it does today (though it is likely to have even more elderly members than it does today).



The 2004 statistics (by age decades):

| | Individual's Ages | |
|----------|-------------------|--------------|
| | Membership | Waiting List |
| under 30 | 0 | 25 |
| 30 - 39 | 8 | 33 |
| 40 - 49 | 53 | 98 |
| 50 - 59 | 150 | 71 |
| 60 - 69 | 103 | 20 |
| over 69 | 57 | 8 |

(Missing Info: 11 regular, 3 inactive and 3 senior members declined to provide their birth years, as did 9 applicants on the waiting list.)

What, if anything, these figures mean for the future of the Club's membership makeup is for the Club to decide in future meetings. But the question may go to the heart of the future nature of the Club.

-- Tryon Wells

What Is A “Flood Plain”?

The recent issue of the *Sycamore Islander* (Vol. 83, No. 5), suggests there is some misunderstanding of the term “flood plain”. As typically used by various national, state, regional, local flood management agencies, a flood plain is defined as all of the area at and below the water level of the estimated 100-year flood at the given location. (In some cases a flood of greater frequency than the 100-year flood may be used.) Thus, all land under this water level and any facility no matter how high, 1 story or 10 stories, with its foundation on the land, is, by definition, in the flood plain.

Of course, the flood plain is likely to change over time, usually expanding, as a result of subsequent floods. The longer the record of hydrologic events, ignoring the complications of global warming, the larger the 100-year flood is likely to be. For example, I was working in northern California in 1953-55, on the Klamath Basin. In 1953 only a 30-year period of flood events on the Klamath River at its mouth existed, as the basis for estimating the 100-year flood. In 1954 the flood at Klamath was several times larger than the estimated 100-year flood based on the 30-year record.

One job I had after the 1954 flood was to check the various community water plants along the lower Klamath River. When I arrived at the town of Klamath at the mouth, I found a gentleman rebuilding where the water had been 18 feet deep. When I asked him about this he replied, “I read in the paper that this was a 100-year flood. I won’t be around when the next one happens.” What happened?? An even larger flood occurred in 1955 than the flood in 1954.

The logical and operational objective for the Club is to modify the structure and the caretaker’s quarters, to minimize flood damage over time. The club house is in the flood plain, period. We are fortunate that the club member (an engineer) who designed and supervised construction of the clubhouse after the 1936 flood, allowed water to flow through the clubhouse, thereby reducing pressure on the building. There are various publications suggesting specific measures for reducing flood damages.

-- Blair T. Bower

Sycamore Island on a New Map

As an artist, hiker and student of American history, I recently completed my dream commission: a map of the Potomac River Gorge for The Nature Conservancy. Sycamore Island is one of more than 160 features on the map, which shows 15 miles of river running from north of Great Falls to Theodore Roosevelt Island.

Stephanie Flack, director of the Conservancy's Potomac Gorge project, hired me to paint the map after seeing one I had done of Rock Creek Park. The new map shows the Gorge as a single identifiable place, defined by its special hydrology, biology and geology. It's intended to give people a sense of the whole, instead of a disconnected series of spots where we picnic or boat, or that we simply view from the Beltway.



I used watercolors to create the map, with hand lettering in ink. My style is very detailed and I use strong colors -- qualities not typically associated with watercolors. But the artists who accompanied the early Western expeditions used watercolors, a highly portable medium, producing bold, detailed, lasting records of their journeys.



The Nature Conservancy plans to use the Potomac River Gorge map to raise public awareness of this irreplaceable resource; it will publish the map in various formats. I have published the map personally as a signed, limited-edition art print, available, framed or unframed, in two sizes: 20"x24" and 24"x28". These archival prints are produced by Old Town Editions of Alexandria on an Iris-brand printer, making the colors highly accurate and long-lasting.

-- Mary Belcher

Mary Belcher is a long-time Washingtonian who paints streetscapes and maps. Her clients have included the City Museum, U.S. Forest Service, the new Convention Center, Smithsonian Institution and the National Building Museum. If you have questions about the Potomac River Gorge map and its availability, contact Mary at 202-462-9069 or by an e-mail to maryibelcher@earthlink.net.

May Orientation a Success!



Wait-listers receiving the message from Tryon Wells.

Some twenty-five members and wait-listers gathered on May 2 for the annual Sycamore orientation for waiting list families. Rain was threatening as we gathered that morning! However, the sun kept coming out, the weather was reasonably cool, and we had a wonderful orientation.

It was a pleasure to watch old-timers mingling with those who have more recently discovered Sycamore and sharing their knowledge of its history and ways. Not only did it give us an opportunity to acquaint the recent additions with many of the responsibilities and obligations that come with Club membership, but it was also a chance to meet many of them for the first time and get to know them. The weather cooperated and lunch (cooked by George Malusky with donations

from many) was delicious. Afterward many of us helped to retrieve the raft—messy, but fun. This is an annual event which is required for membership or to purchase a guest pass. Those of you on the waiting list who have not yet attended an orientation should make sure that you attend one of these prior to your name coming up for membership. It is actually a lot of fun.

— Tammy and Joe Belden



George Malusky doing his usual magic with 'dogs and burgers.

Retrieving the prodigal dock.



Some hard at work and some.....

Photos by David Winer

The Eagles Have Landed

By David Winer



The Captain's float was the best location for setting up scopes and cameras.



Nest location from the Captain's Float.
Photos by David Winer

In the Spring of '03 our view across the river on the Virginia side included a nest made by an unusual pair of visitors--Bald Eagles. This was an exciting prospect, but they produced no offspring and soon abandoned the site. Early this year Joe Hage spotted the pair hanging around the vicinity of Sycamore Island and before long they began refurbishing the old nest. Later, Joe reported they were doing what everyone hoped: sitting on the nest, as in brooding eggs. Now, in May '04, we can see not just one, but two youngsters occasionally standing up on the nest so they are visible from the Island.

This is indeed good news. Think of it... a nesting pair of Bald Eagles, a species once headed for extinction, now breeding three miles inside the Beltway! For some fifteen years there has been a breeding pair on Conn Island above Great Falls. Those eagles have always had a large following of birders who, year after year, trek up the path along the river from the Great Falls Tavern Museum to observe them throughout the cycle of courtship, mating, nest repair, brooding, and raising their nestlings to fledge. Some years the pair would raise two eaglets, but normally one; and all too often none would make it through the brutal March freezes. This Great Falls adult pair became a spectacle for nature buffs and others who continue to enjoy watching these big raptors hunt, practice aerobatics, and guard their domain.

Now we Islanders have a pair of eagles and offspring that can be viewed easily from our own Captain's Float. In mid-April, on what turned out to be the first really good day of the season—river finally down to ferry-level, warm air, and fair skies—a group of us took our scopes down to watch for signs of brooding behavior across the river. Before long, our excited activity on the downstream mud beach brought lots of visitors to take turns at the scopes and binoculars. This evolved into an impromptu party as the two eagles guarded the nest and took occasional flights. Even with good optics, the nest tree is so far away that we couldn't see what was happening down inside, but sometimes we could make out a nestling's head poking up. [Some of the ensuing excitement was reported in the *May Islander*]

One vigilant adult bird would remain close by the nest always. Once, an eagle dropped from its snag-perch near the nest and began a very long, uninterrupted glide upstream. Almost rigid, this huge bird bored on, lower and lower, until it neared the river's surface. It gracefully dropped its talons, and snatched up a fish. Wow. What eyesight to have spotted its prey a quarter of a mile off under the wind-shimmered surface! We all pointed and exclaimed as we watched the eagle return to a snag in the Virginia woods to chow down.

Later, a group of us brought our spotting scopes and digital cameras down early in the morning to take pictures of the nest in bright front-lit sunlight. This time we would occasionally get terrific views of the two downy gray eaglets. Shutters clicked away. With eagles, you never know when something especially interesting will happen. In mid-morning one of the adults spread its wings and simply soared off its perch, circling on invisible thermals of air rising from the river. The bird rose to an amazing height, stiff-winged and seemingly without effort, before becoming a target for a Red-shouldered Hawk that dived at it and then veered off (probably wisely).

Now, in late May, the two chicks have survived and prospered. They are still unable to leave the nest, but surely not for long. The nest tree is slightly inland, a few yards upstream from a dam-warning sign near the Virginia shore. Look for a tall, snaggy-bare tree that stands out from the shoreline foliage. Above the first crotch there is a second one to the right. The nest is in that crotch, barely discernable even with good eyesight. You will need binoculars to see much more than the adults' white heads, but a spotting scope will bring out lots of detail. In the coming weeks of June, watch the youngsters grow into large dark brown birds of prey. They should flap their wings and hop about the nest tree as they prepare for fledging. All this while, the parent birds will be active in the area, hunting to keep their offspring supplied with fish, and guarding against predators. After fledging, the family may not use the nest anymore, but they should stay in the area for a while so the adults can teach the youngsters how to hunt. We Islanders are in for quite a show.

Eagles will not continue to use a nest if they feel threatened by human proximity. Please keep this in mind when boating on the river across from the Island. When you are out there in mid-river, stay away from the Virginia shore, and watch to see if the birds take an interest in you. If so, paddle farther away. We want "our" visitors to return year after year.



Eagle chicks in April (left) and late May. Photos by Sarah Anderson (left) and David Winer

In Touch With Joe...

I'm beginning to feel like I'm reaching true River Rat status. Not only did I get invited to the annual fish fry at Fletcher's Boat House, but I was also interviewed by Angus Phillips of the *Washington Post* and got my picture in the paper, paddling a canoe with Star Mitchell!

It's been a fabulous month down here on the Island, a welcome change to the dreary May we had last year. The early warm weather has brought out the swimmers and most evenings there's some activity on the swim dock. We've been enjoying the swimming and grilling and the sunsets. The bugs haven't been too bad yet, and there are no cicadas down here. The fishing looks much more promising than it did last year as well. Large catfish are being caught regularly from the Captain's Float; and I heard a story about an eleven-inch bass.

I really had a blast at the annual Down River Race. Not only was it an exciting ride through the gorge on a perfect day but I also loved seeing the Island covered with kayaks, canoes, and paddlers. Everyone seemed to be having a good time, even those of us who didn't win a prize. Thanks to Star and George Malusky and John Stapko and everybody else that helped to make it a big success.

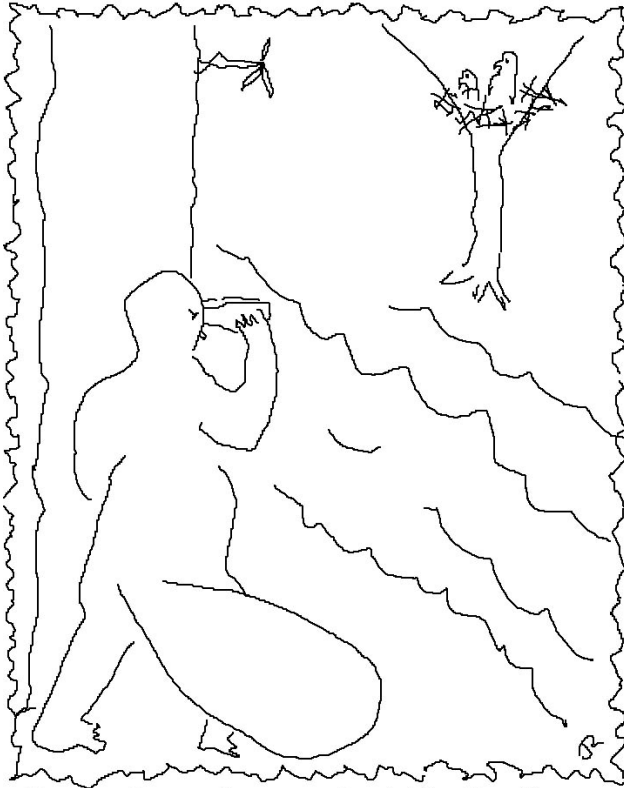
The bird activity on the Island is beginning to slow down a little. It looks like most of the nests are empty and the parents can now relax a little. Strangely, there aren't very many young geese around, not like last year at all, and I wonder if there wasn't a hungry fox or coyote here. I did see some tracks. The wrens seem to be having a good year. I saw seven of them together on one small branch. One brood of offspring I wasn't too thrilled to see, even though they are very cute, was the ground hogs. I thought I had just one fat ground hog living under my house but I guess I have a family of them now—could be trouble. The barred owls have been adding some enchantment to our evenings. Their low resonating voices can be heard calling to each other across the Island. One night there were at least three owls here, making quite a racket.

I completed the Red Cross first aid and CPR classes, so now you can feel free to have an emergency on the Island. But please don't! I've got the recently rescued swim float ready to launch again. We'll need some volunteers to help get it out in the river. We're looking forward to an action-packed June. The kids get out of school on the fifteenth and then it's "Camp Sycamore" for two weeks; should be lots of fun. See you there!

Scenes from the 2004 Down River Race



Photos by David Winer and Joe Hage



Ruppert

*—Created by
Johnna Robinson*

*Ruppert sneaks a peek at the Eagles--
Islanders know who's who.*

The Next Generation

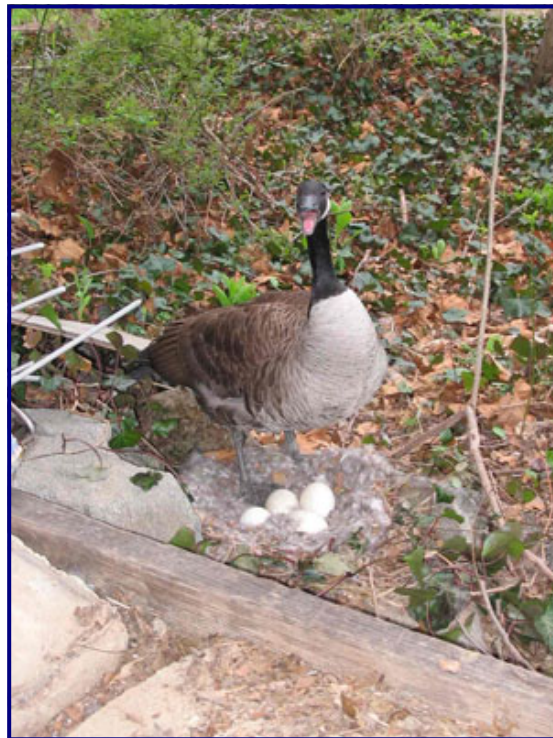


Photo by Joe Hage

Saturday Relief Caretakers June—July

| | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| June 5, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | Mid and Peggy Tilghman | 301-320-5846 |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | Steve Jones and Donna Messersmith | 301-571-4878 |
| June 12, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| June 19, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| June 26, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| July 3, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| July 10, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| July 17, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | Whitney Pinger | 202-686-5443 |
| July 24, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| July 31, 2004 | 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |
| | 3:00 p.m. - dark | <i>Call to volunteer!</i> | |

*** Caretaker Volunteers ***

To volunteer for Saturday relief caretaking, call Candy Means: 301-320-5270.
Volunteers from the waiting list are encouraged. It's a great way to spend time on the Island!

Large Parties

On Saturday, June 12th, from 10 to 4, Camp Fire girls and their families will be on the Island, About 25, hosted by Donna Messersmith Jones. And on Tuesday, June 15th from 3-7 pm a Girl Scout troupe will be on the Island to learn elementary canoeing and do some Island work tasks (!). About 30 people, hosted by Joe Hage.. Also, note that on Sunday, June 13th, Explorer Scouts will be working on the path to the Island from about 10:00 to 6:00. It might be a bit inconvenient getting to the Island that day.

A large party application form may be printed from the Club's web page at
<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/systems.htm>

— or —

To request a form through the mail, call the Supervisor of Parties, John Noble
e-mail: jnoble@shs.net, phone: 240- 747-4810, fax: 301-320-4216



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June 2004

- Eagle Parenting
- The Potomac Gorge
- The Club's Demographic Challenge
- A Tent Escalator
- Getting Oriented



The Big Muddy

Photo by David Winer