



The Sycamore Islander

MARCH 2010 | VOLUME 89 NUMBER 3

President's Letter

Stormy Weather

Our unusual snow conditions have made it difficult to impossible at times to access the Island this winter. Most of us tend to dwell on our own difficulties caused by downed trees, shoveling truly deep snow, and the like, but think what our caretaker has had to cope with on an island out in the Potomac. If you haven't read Joe's log for Thursday, February 11, 2010 on the club's website, you should. Joe's travails in managing his life and caretaking job make fascinating reading on self-reliance and sense of duty.

The huge recent accumulation of snow in the watershed posed an ominous threat for a serious flood. In January 1996 we had similar conditions followed by a warm rain that rapidly melted the snow into a flood that destroyed our canoe shed. But in 2010 there has been a gradual melt and no rain, so the Potomac maintained a level below five feet at the Little Falls gauge for the weeks following the storms. Surprisingly, the water did not even become cloudy from runoff. Keep your fingers crossed for slow melting of the remaining snow in the highlands.

March Meeting

We are fortunate this year to have our March off-Island meeting at The Irish Channel Pub in downtown Washington. Nell Hennessy and Frank Daspit have once again generously offered to host the club at their delightful restaurant. Nell and Frank are long-time members of Sycamore Island. They welcome us with delicious samples from the pub's menu in a room set aside for our meeting. We will gather March 10 at 7:00 P.M. for a

social time before getting down to business. The pub is at the corner of 5th and H Streets NW. Parking spaces on streets in the area can be found as soon as District no-parking ends at 6:30 P.M. Be aware of competition for street parking due to an event the same night at the nearby Verizon Center. "Gallery Place" parking garage is close on 6th between G and H Streets but is expensive. Getting there by Metro subway is easy—it's two blocks from the 7th and H Street "Chinatown Exit" at the Red Line's Gallery Place—Chinatown station.

I don't expect complicated motions (and lengthy debates) this time, but it will be an occasion for members to discuss ideas concerning proposed new membership rules. These discussions will be helpful to the Membership Committee as they draw up plans for subsequent voting.

Winter Birding

Snow was still deep on the ground for Paul Hagen's bird walk on February 10. The expedition proceeded as scheduled, but kept to the Island itself—slogging through crust over heavy snow was too difficult for hiking along the canal. But everyone had a great time! Paul includes an account of the walk in this issue. Bald Eagles were among the flying birds spotted. We speculated that they had abandoned the nest across from the Island. However, many days later, member Jack Colwell, who can see the nest from his house, reports they are still visible in the nest. "Our" eagles seem remarkably successful so far in protecting their eggs from this year's blizzard conditions.

DAVID WINER
President



ALL PHOTOS BY DAVID WINER

Winter Bird Walk

Several club members and invited guests participated in the first annual Sycamore Island Winter Bird Walk on January 20. About a dozen participants walked the Island despite the heavy snow cover and were rewarded with good looks at several resident and migratory birds, including: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Mallard, Ring-neck Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Bald Eagle, Turkey Vulture, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red Shouldered Hawk, Ring-billed Gull, Belted Kingfisher, Downey Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, American Crow, Fish Crow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, American Robin, European Starling, and Common Grackle (24 species). The Bald Eagles are nesting now down river from the Island in a large nest that is easily seen from the Island or the Maryland side of the river. Conditions were blustery which may account for the absence of several common visitors to the area that are typically found this time of year. Traversing the Island was challenging due to the recent heavy snow but the club house proved to be a welcome staging point with fresh coffee, the warmth of the wood stove, and the camaraderie that comes from some time in the field. Please watch for future bird walks and paddles that will be scheduled later in the year.

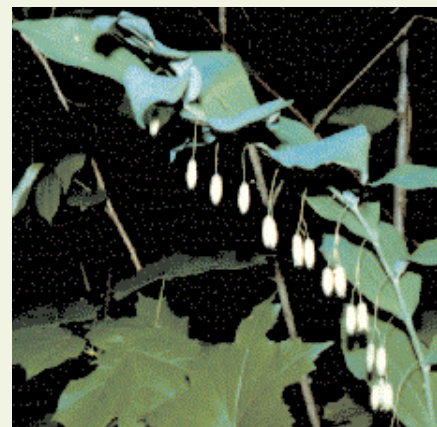
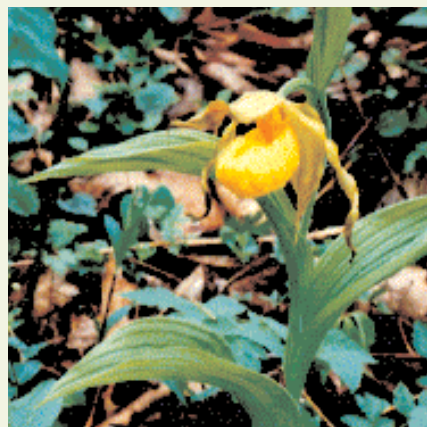
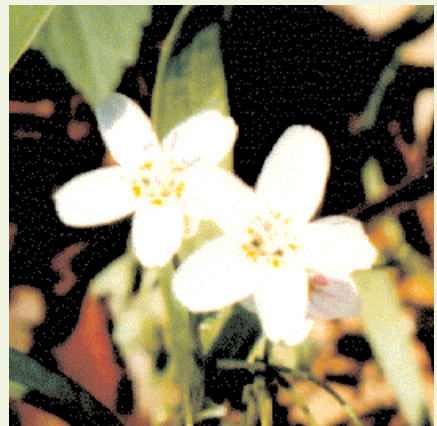
PAUL HAGEN



Wildflower Walk

The Sycamore Island wildflower walk will be on Sunday, April 11, from 10:00–2:00, RAIN OR SHINE! Bring a lunch or snack, water, and dress for the weather.

We will be exploring the area in the vicinity of Cabin John Island near Lock 7. We will be meet at Lock 7 at 9:50 and depart at 10:00. Parking is available along the southbound lane of Clara Barton Parkway. The access from the parking lot to the towpath is at Lock 7. The winter snows will finally have given way to the Spring Wildflowers, and we hope to encounter such delights as Spring Beauty, Toothworts, Dutchman's Breeches, Trout Lily, Early Saxifrage, Bloodroot, Golden Ragwort and maybe even Golden Alexanders and TwinLeaf.



Notes from the Island

Tuesday, February 2, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.8 Water Temperature: 36

It has just dawned on me and it is now abundantly clear why this club, over the last 125 years, has found it necessary and perhaps even vital to pay a caretaker a years' wages to live and work here. There is just no telling what kind of strange sequence of events will lead unusual circumstances in a place like this. I think the forefathers of this club figured out long ago that they needed someone here at all times. There is just no telling what kind of weird scenarios this river and this weather can create.

This recent weather is a good example. We had a flood and carnage on the Island. We had debris, trees, and mud, and the canoe shed was clogged with river trash and tree limbs. We had canoes in the trees, canoes off the racks, and canoes in the field filled with water.

Then it quickly got cold and the water-filled canoes



JOE HAGE

became ice-filled canoes. The mud that was everywhere turned into cement, impossible to clean from the landings and boardwalk. The ferry rope was down too, pulled to protect it from the flood. I now have to launch a canoe every time I want to leave, or worse, when I come home late at night. I can't have guests without telling them the risks of hypothermia if the canoe happens to capsize and they fall into the icy Potomac.

Snow followed, on top of the frozen mud, which added to the complications of getting onto the ferry that is still stranded at the towpath landing. From the ferry I climb into my canoe, but not before I load my bags of groceries or packs or luggage, or whatever else I need at home. If I don't go through the trouble of hoisting the boat onto the ferry and turning it upside down, I regret it sometimes. I have come home to a canoe with two inches of melting snow inside it.

Friday, February 5, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.8 Water Temperature: 36

I know that we're in the middle of the biggest storm to hit D.C. in our life time, but I wanted everyone to know that the rope is up and the ferry is operational. I became tired of messing with the snow-filled canoes and had to do something. The impending storm was going to bury my canoe and make matters even more difficult for me, so I put the rope up last night.

Thursday, February 11, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.4 Water Temperature: 36

I know that everyone is just dying to know how things are going down here. Considering everything, it hasn't been too bad. It could always be worse. Right?

I lost power for 70 hours. I heard that a huge tree had fallen on Macarthur Boulevard by the Inn at Glen Echo and cut the power line. Without power I don't have lights, heat, or water, since the well pump works on electricity. It was Friday night and I had all the trail lights on so I could watch the snow fall. It was very nice and cozy in my warm house, but around 5:30 all the lights went out and I went into emergency mode.

The house was warm, so that first night I slept in my own bed, hoping that the power and heat would be restored soon. I kept listening for the sound of the heat pump blowing but all I heard all night were the sounds of breaking trees and limbs crashing to the ground.

I got out of bed Saturday morning ready to embrace my new situation, a forced winter camping trip, no



JOE HAGE

telling when the power would be restored. I also didn't want to abandon the Island just in case there was an emergency. I dug out my propane camping stove and had my coffee. The club room had some firewood by the wood stove but I spent the morning stocking firewood from the wood pile out back.

Next, I checked the club phone—dead. I wasn't surprised, considering all the trees and giant limbs that were littered everywhere on the Island and the canal. I don't think we lost any whole trees on the Island but some of the silver maple limbs that fell were huge. Just outside my front door, I had two eight-inch-diameter limbs resting on my power line. One limb fell with such force that it pulled the siding and trim from the house where the line was connected. Incredibly the cable itself did not break.

I started to feel very isolated and vulnerable so I decided to dig out my escape/rescue route. I wanted to break a trail up the hill but I also had to free the ferry. The weather wasn't too cold so the river wasn't entirely frozen but an accumulation of a thick layer of frozen

slush formed around the ferry and all along the shore. I decided to chop the ferry free, especially since all the canoes were buried anyway.

I was on high alert as I approached the mainland on the ferry. I'm sorry I didn't get any pictures but I was too nervous about all the falling trees and limbs. The stairs at the landing were completely obstructed by snow-laden branches and other branches were hanging low onto the ferry cable preventing me from reaching the shore. It took a few minutes of dumping snow on my head but I was able to shake all the snow off the trees and free the ferry.

I ascended the stairs up to the tow path and I was hit with a scene of destruction. Looking down river, just below the bridge, the path was completely blocked by freshly fallen trees. Another tree fell up river and had taken out the cable for the trail lights, leaving it dangling in the river. The phone line was also deep in the river and looking up the hill I realized why. One of the biggest oak trees on that slope had come down, taking out the phone line and a couple of other trees before its



JOE HAGE

upper branches crashed onto the top of the metal bridge. The bridge now had a thatched roof with piles of branches and twigs on top. Somehow this tree missed my power cable but another large tree was now resting against my precious electric line. I cleared my way up the stairs, across the bridge, and up the hill but had to squeeze past many more fallen limbs, large and small. Not a soul in sight.

Back at the house, I thought it wise to get up on the flat roof above my kitchen and remove some of the snow. I was especially worried since the roof was already supporting the weight of a two-ton heat pump. I also wanted to try to safely remove the branches from my power line leading to the house. I was glad to do the work; it kept me from getting bored and it made me so exhausted that I had no trouble crawling into my sleeping bag soon after dark. I slept pretty well on the floor by the wood stove but by morning the fire had long been out and the room was freezing.

I learned from the phone company that the wires would not be fixed until they were freed from the fallen tree. I guess this is another lesson in self sufficiency.

I located the problem and I was able to cut the

phone line and fish it through the tree. I was about to tie it off on the bridge and be done with it but then I had a second thought. There was another storm on the way and I didn't think it likely that the phone company contractors would be out any time soon. I decided that if I wanted my phone and, more importantly, my internet and email, I should try to fix it myself. I have to admit that I was rather pleased with myself that I was able to restore my internet connection. Unfortunately I did not get a dial tone on the phone but we'll let the phone company figure that out.

I rather enjoyed the challenges that I had to overcome. It was kind of fun to have this whole man vs. nature adventure. I was also glad that there was no one else here for me to worry about and be responsible for.

Sunday, February 14, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.0 Water Temperature: 34
We were supposed to have the Canoe Cruisers Association's annual Valentine's Day party here today but considering the snow pack, we postponed it. I hope you all make plans to be here for the party on the new date, Sunday, March 14, at 3:00.



JOE HAGE



JOE HAGE

It is a little scary with all this snow in the water shed. It's like a flood waiting to happen. This weather is ideal though, sunny and slightly above freezing. Perfect weather for gradual melting. The last thing we want is a warm rain like in January 1996.

We just heard that long-time member Brad Coolidge has recently died. Brad was an active member and helped to make the club what it is today. I also have another sad announcement—back in November we lost Phil Thorson, another great man and lover of Sycamore Island.

I got the ferry rope up but right now the bell is not. It is buried under two feet of snow. As much as I'm enjoying not hearing it ring, I will dig it out today. I also have to go to the hardware and buy a new bell rope since the old one was lost in the flood.

Thursday, February 18, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.0 **Water Temperature: 34**
Come down for the excitement of winter bird watching! The Bird Walk starts at 9:30. The snow has melted enough for walking around and I will put wood ashes on the trail down the hill to make it less slippery.

I got the bell up and now the Island ferry is fully operational. The only problem is getting to the ferry. I have cleared away the fallen trees and branches blocking the trail but the packed and frozen snow make nav-

igating the trail a little risky. I usually use a ski pole to help me walk up; soon I may resort to crampons.

The towpath has been completely deserted lately. There was the occasional skier but even they have stopped using the trail. There are none of the usual joggers, young lovers, or dog walkers. It is a little strange to be living in the middle of a heavily populated metropolis and see only my own footprints in the snow for two days.

There have been some hardships caused by the recent storms but there are upsides to this kind of event as well. First of all, I get to have the novel experience of cross-county skiing on the towpath. If the airports are closed—guess what—no airplane noise. When the storm was really bad, even low-flying helicopters were grounded. And, like I said, I have the place to myself. No one on the towpath, no one on the trail, and no one ringing the bell.

Lots of birds! I walked down to the bottom of the Island at dusk and there were thirty common mergansers, two pairs of hooded mergansers, a couple of mallards, and twenty Canada geese. I heard that our eagles are sitting on eggs now. They were first spotted sitting two and a half weeks ago, at the end of January. They laid their eggs a week earlier than they did last year; I guess they weren't planning on all this snow. I hope they manage somehow.

Thursday, February 25, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.2 Water Temperature: 41

The river rose to above 5 feet today so the ferry is now closed. I might have had to close it anyway considering the strong winds today, 60 MPH! It looks like the river will peak at 5.5 feet sometime on Saturday but no prediction about when it will go back down below 5 feet. I'm still nervous about major flooding. There is a record amount of snow pack in the watershed. I'm making preparations but people with boats here may want to consider taking them up the hill just in case.

I've been doing a lot of tree work this week: moving the limbs from the trail and using the 14-foot pruning pole to cut the low hanging branches around the ferry landings. I discovered during the big flood last month that those branches were getting in my way when I tried to canoe across and they were also getting in the way of the flood-elevated ferry. I've been wrestling with the cables across the river as well. Some were caught up in fallen branches and others needed to be tightened up and raised higher above the river surface.

We were so smart to have that professional tree work done last fall. I think having those big trees trimmed away from the house probably saved our roof from being damaged. I learned a valuable lesson during the flood—of course I learned it the hard way. When I was asked what to do with all the fresh-cut branches, I simply told the workers to drag them into the woods. I've learned now that any debris should always be stacked

on the downstream side of the canoe shed and canoe dock. Now all those cut branches are piled up against the canoe shed and will have to be moved.

There has been a young doe on the Island this week. I've seen her from my kitchen window for the last three mornings and this morning she had two friends with her. I realized that this window would make the perfect deer stand. I'm not a hunter but I was thinking that I should take this opportunity to thin this herd of over-grazing pests. Apparently white-tailed deer are one of the biggest threats to our Potomac Gorge ecosystem.

Another creature that visited the Island was a coyote! I saw its tracks in the snow in early January when the river was frozen and crossable. The tracks were right outside my front door! And no, they were definitely not fox tracks.

Sunday, February 28, 2010

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.2 Water Temperature: 41

The river crested at 5.5 feet and isn't dropping. With the current warm temperatures in the area, I expect the river level to hover above five feet all week.

The trail down the hill is almost completely free of snow and ice which means I can no longer claim it for my own. I must now share the trail with the joggers, hikers, bikers, and dog walkers. It used to be so quiet.

Now that the snow is almost all gone, I've started to clear out some of the debris from the flood. Next we'll have to get out the chain saw and clear all these fallen branches. We were lucky that only one of the gutters was damaged by the ice, but that will have to be fixed. We also have to reattach the power line to the house.

I took down the blue tarp that was hanging from the tool shed, finally. It did protect things stored under the shed and I was thinking that we should install a permanent wall around the lower part of the shed; we could really use the protected storage space.

The mergansers are still plentiful but soon our winter visitors will be gone to nest in the great white north. The Canada geese are here as well, of course, but they will be staying and doing their breeding right here on Sycamore Island. It won't be long before they start to stack claim to their favorite nesting sites. It will be interesting to see how many nest here this year. The number of nests have been declining over the years.

JOE HAGE



Coyote footprints

JOE HAGE



Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

ROBERT FROST

Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

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JOE HAGE

William Bradford “Brad” Coolidge,
1916–2010

We lost a gentleman of the “old school” when Brad Coolidge passed away at 94 on February 9 at his home in Mohican Hills. Brad’s longevity was partially related to his long-term interest in outdoor pursuits, from sailing to restoring and building small boats. He and his wife, Jean, joined Sycamore Island in the early 60’s. Brad served in several positions, one being Club President. Brad was a devoted member of the Island. He was always an enthusiastic participant in the work fests, bringing the whole family along to help the jobs get done. In 2002, Brad formally retired from Club membership, but was immediately voted in as an Honorary Member in recognition of his years of participation in Club activities.

Born in Medford, Massachusetts, Brad took degrees at Tufts and Harvard. In the late 1930s, he lived in Tokyo, working as a newspaper copy writer and developing a thorough knowledge of the Japanese language and customs. In 1939, he served as a ‘string’ correspondent for the United Press to Japanese occupied Northern China, Manchuria, and Canton before returning to the States. This led to postings with the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service during World War II. In 1946, he joined the State Department’s Office of Intelligence Research, but later became a Foreign Service Officer in Washington, D.C. His State Department career of 25 years also took Brad and his family to Thailand and Turkey before his retirement in 1972.

Brad had affiliations over many years with the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut and the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton, New York, where he donated historic

Active Islander Gerry Barton has lost his wife, his best friend of 49 years. She died in early January at their summer home in New York state. Gerry is now in New York with their daughter and grandchildren.



DAVID WINER

small craft to their collections. Brad had a lifelong fascination with boats, sailing, music, and photography. He grew up summering on Nantucket, Massachusetts, where these passions first developed. He was a talented photographer, enjoying both camera equipment and the many photos he took of family and places traveled.

Brad will be greatly missed. He is survived by his friend and companion of the last ten years, Helen Huling, his three children, and six grandchildren. A memorial service is planned for April at the River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation. (Website: rruuc.org)

Saturday Relief Caretakers **March 2010**

	10 A.M.–2 P.M.	2 P.M.–DARK
MARCH 6	Howard Shapiro & Shirley Brandman 301.320.6033 sdbhms@verizon.net	Wayne & Susan Limberg 703.533.8639 wplimberg@aol.com
MARCH 13	Andy Malmgrem 301.263.0146 malmgrem@verizon.net	James Hess & Betsy Cody 703.522.6788 codyhess1@verizon.net
MARCH 20	Steve Jones & Donna Messersmith 301.571.4878 steve@jones88.net; donna.messersmith@jones88.net	Carole Trippe 301.469.1515 ctrippe@mathematica-mpr.com
MARCH 27	Tamara & Joe Belden 202.882.2224 tamarabelden@gmail.com	Hester Ohbi & Bob Beauchamp 202.667.8529 hesterohbi@verizon.net; rbeauchamp@umuc.edu

The Sycamore Islander

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ADDRESS SERVICES REQUESTED

FIRST CLASS MAIL



Daytime view of the club's March 10 meeting location, The Irish Channel Pub, at the corner of 5th and H Streets, NW, Washington. The meeting will take place at 7 p.m. See you there!

Save the Date! May 29!

Plans for celebrating the 125th Anniversary of the Club continue to evolve. Dressing up in period costumes is encouraged, but not mandatory; the whole family is invited, and for non-dancers, musical interludes between Contra-dancing sets, and games—croquet and horse-shoes, are planned. We therefore call for games volunteers. We have not yet lined up a caller or musicians and continue to welcome ideas, suggestions, referrals (for a caller and fiddlers). Please call Jane Winer 301.229.8963 with your ideas and suggestions.

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. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to: Carol Beehler at cbeehler@comcast.net. The deadline for inclusion in the April issue is March 26.

Masthead photo by David Winer.