



# The Sycamore Islander

APRIL 2011 | VOLUME 90 NUMBER 4

## President's Letter

The next Sycamore Island Club meeting is April 13 on the Island. The meeting begins early at 7:30 P.M. with a special "State of the Nation's River" presentation by Hedrick Belin, the President of the Potomac Conservancy. Paul Hagen is the event coordinator. I hope you can attend. This is the first of what will be an annual program and discussion on the health of the river we treasure and enjoy.

Then on Sunday, April 17, we have the Spring Work Session. There is always much to do to prepare the Island for a summer of activity. Floats go back in the river. Flood debris needs clearing. The clubhouse could use a spring cleaning. Trails need reopening. And much, much more. Lots of tasks for all ages. Come and enjoy the bluebells. Joe Hage will have a long to-do list.

Sycamore Island work sessions are our version of an old-fashioned barn raising. We all come together and work cooperatively, accomplish a lot, and then relax and have a really fine meal. Some members think the best thing about a work session is the food. George Malusky has coffee, doughnuts, and turkey bacon on the table from early in the morning. Then later a wonderful potluck afternoon meal. George grills hamburgers, hot dogs, and chicken—and club members bring their specialty side dishes, salads, breads, desserts, more desserts, and other delicious contributions.

Speaking of cooperative volunteer work—thank you to our captain Tryon Wells and the group of dedicated club members who spent several weekends on the Island last month building a brand new captain's float. The float is now completed and in the water. It looks great!!

JIM DREW  
President



JOE HAGE

Dutchman's Breeches

## Minutes for the March 9 Meeting

The meeting was called to order by President Jim Drew after a fascinating slide show of the wildlife of the Galapagos Islands, presented by our host, Larry Heilman.

**Attendees:** Larry Heilman, Jim Drew, Joe Hage, David Winer, Bill and Lucky Marmon, Gerry Barton, John Noble, Tryon Wells, Drew Walsh, Peter Winkler, Marc Bergeron, Alison and Richard Burns, Alan Gelb, Charlotte Brewer, Jeff Komarow, Sherry Fitzdale, Ann Marie Cunningham

The minutes, as printed in *The Islander*, were approved.

**Communications:** Chuck Pill wrote from Rwanda that he will be unable to perform the duties of the supervisor of Carpentry/Painting. He insists that the demands of the supervisor job was not the reason he left for Kigali, as there has been little demand for his services since the completion of the club house renovation planning, and because of Joe's supreme skills in painting and caretaking. A volunteer is needed to step into this role.

**Captain/Caretaker Report:** Tryon Wells reports that construction of the new captain's float will be postponed until next weekend due to the prediction of high water and the subsequent closure of the ferry. The materials have been purchased and are on the Island. The new float will be like a floating veranda, approximately 12' x 20' in size. It will be built in sections, like the canoe float, but there will be a more robust method of connecting the sections for increased stability. The cost will be between \$2,000 and \$2,500.

The preparations for a 12' flood have been completed, with the floats and canoes from the lower level of the shed tied up. Joe Hage, Tryon Wells, and Drew Walsh welcome others to their work crew.

Joe Hage had not heard from the Park Service volunteer coordinator about adopting a mile along the towpath. The coordinator will write a contract that will specify tasks such as picking up trash, reporting incidents, shoveling the bridge, and will cover liability issues. Joe will present details at a future meeting after he receives the contract and has an opportunity to discuss it with the coordinator.

Joe has completed Weed Warrior training and gotten his license to kill invasives such as English ivy with little disturbance to native plants.

**Winter bathroom:** Gerry Barton will investigate alternatives to construction of a warm bathroom by next winter. Possibilities include a new bathroom that would be next to the caretaker's, a heated stall in one of the existing bathrooms, a bucket. Gerry was presented with a sign from the old bathroom and encouraged to use it to maintain the atmosphere of the former facility.

**Membership:** Peter Winkler conducted a meeting earlier this week to discuss a method of admitting new members as the waiting list diminishes. There are passionate, strong-willed folks on the committee, which will result in two or three options being presented to the members for discussion. There will be a report published in *The Islander* in a month or two describing the options, with debate to follow. The options may be revised according to input during the debate.

New members will be nominated for admission to the club after the deadline passes for paying dues.

The question was raised as to what the optimum number of members would be for the club. It was noted that when waiting list members became active, the Island seemed busier, but the activity level has since dropped.

**Large Parties:** John Noble introduced Marc Bergeron and his request for a large party to celebrate a big birthday. The party will be held on May 21. The request was approved.

The request sparked a discussion about whether the guidelines on large parties should be revised. Currently, the hosts are encouraged to provide ferry service for their guests. Large parties on weekends are only to be held on odd-numbered days. Current large party guidelines are on the web.

**Old Business:** Larry Heilman suggests that items that should be included in the archive should be emailed to him, if possible. If it isn't available in digital format, then mail it to him.

**New Business:** Alison Burns would like to brainstorm an efficient way to schedule relieve caretakers. It takes her five to ten hours per month to accomplish this.

Tryon sends an email to those who have not been relief caretaker in two years, reminding them that this club relies on active participation of members. Is it possible to create a webpage where individuals could sign themselves up for a slot? It was suggested that those who do not volunteer should be charged a fee, perhaps \$50, or that it be a requirement of membership and that those who do not volunteer would lose their membership. In the past, high school students were hired to work on weekends, but that raises issues of liability insurances and workman's compensation.

The meeting was adjourned with warm gratitude to Ann and Larry Heilman for hosting the meeting.

Respectfully submitted  
ANNE MARIE CUNNINGHAM  
Co-Recording Secretary

## State of the Nation's River Talk Planned for April Meeting

The Club will host its first annual "State of the Nation's River" talk on Wednesday April 13, 2011, beginning at 7:30 P.M. at the Clubhouse. The Potomac River is the source of much of the area's drinking water and provides outstanding recreational opportunities to club members. Despite improvements in recent decades, the Potomac River continues to face many challenges related to water quality and development in the region. Given the strong interest within the club in the overall health of the river, we will invite a recognized leader in the region to the club annually for a discussion of the river's condition, recent conservation achievements and related challenges.

For our inaugural event, we have invited Hedrick Belin, the President of the Potomac Conservancy, to speak to these issues ahead of the regularly scheduled meeting in April. Potomac Conservancy protects the health, beauty, and enjoyment of the Potomac River and its tributaries. The Conservancy's primary focus is protection of water quality through land protection and sound land use practices. A number of club members have assisted the Conservancy in recent years through volunteer events and board services. Hedrick has served as President since 2007 and has worked across the

watershed at all levels of government to improve the health of the river. The Conservancy's annual reports on the river provide the public with timely updates on both challenges and progress. Some members may recall that the Conservancy gave its Volunteer of the Year award to Joe Hage last year.



Hedrick Belin

## Canoeing Class

The Club will offer canoeing instruction again this spring for members and wait listers thanks to Frank Daspit, who once again has generously volunteered to lead the class. Mark your calendars now—the class will be held at the Island June 11 starting at 11:00 A.M. Paddlers with all levels of experience are welcome, and club canoes will be available. Frank will go over basic paddling techniques, how to enter a canoe properly, hazards of canoeing at the Island and, time permitting, other topics such as rescue techniques and equipment. This is a great opportunity to learn how to make your river excursions safe and enjoyable. For more information, contact Canoe Supervisor John Membrino at 301.229.1154.

## New Captain's Float

Some years ago the club installed a float in the river's mainstream. In honor of John Matthews, we named it the Captain's Float. This was immediately a great success and became one of the most popular spots for visitors to hang out, gaze upon the river, and generally enjoy being at the club. Eventually time exacted its toll: the wooden parts degraded, and worse, the large chunks of Styrofoam flotation eroded away to the point where a crowd could sink the decking low enough to wet some feet. We authorized our current Captain, Tryon Wells, to produce another, leaving it up to him to design the float, acquire materials, and oversee construction. Our confidence rested in Tryon's previous ventures with the Club's canoe dock, swimming dock, and swimming



DAVID WINER

float. Without further guidelines or specifications, we said in effect, “Just do it.” This is the story of how the new Captain’s Float came into being.

Tryon’s first task was to determine the size needed. He arrived at the deck area after consulting members who had extensively used the old float. Then he thought of a way to build it in units that could be assembled and disassembled in the water, so that each unit could be manhandled easily for winter storage on shore. (The old float was truly burdensome and moving it became a notoriously tough chore at spring and fall workfests.) Tryon chose the same type of commercially available fiberglass flotation boxes as he had used on the Club’s other projects. He then scaled five separate wooden structures to be joined together as one assembly. The boxes as thus incorporated in the structure would host a large crowd well above water.

One sees the finished product in the river but hardly realizes the logistical problems of obtaining the materials and transporting them to the Island. Truckloads were delivered to Tryon’s home! After that there were still the problems of taking all the flotation boxes, lumber, fittings, and plywood sheets down to the building site. Caretaker Joe Hage and members participated in these trips.

There was a new wrinkle in this design. Tryon wanted to use a system for connecting the float units together as we had worked out when building the canoe dock. But he felt the need for a more robust mechanism—one that could be made from standard hardware parts for replacements during future maintenance. The parts he selected were positively large. Talk about robust, the fittings were actually iron plumbing pipes over two inches in diameter that served as bolts, with iron caps that served as nuts. Of course, cutting

such large holes for these “bolt-clamps” would require larger than hand-held tools. And, the holes would need to be pre-machined with care to make the parts fit together properly when assembled down at the Island. Similarly, it became necessary to devise special washer-like spacers so that the tapered plumbing threads would allow enough clamping pressure. (These workshop operations were carried out by one of our members whose name need not be mentioned, but his initials are David Winer.)

Finally, Tryon set up a special work party of members whose needed skills were well proven. That Sunday, a mass of raw materials became five structures capable of floating high out of the water. All who participated were rather amazed and delighted at the result. A few came down during the following week to screw on the decking, and on Saturday, March 26, a crew of six members put on some finishing touches and dragged the float units to the shore. It took only two workers to ride the floats and secure them together with the new-design plumbing fittings. Thank goodness, these untried mechanisms worked well. A last touch before declaring victory: cable the 12 by 20-foot structure, now a true floating vessel, to a couple of large sycamores.

I think that all those who participated in this project greatly enjoyed the experience. Now the workers look forward to using this floating patio with all other members and guests in the coming years. Captain Wells wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the following who responded to his requests to join in special work parties: Sherry and Ed Fizdale, Steve Newman, David Winer, Gordon Phillips, Gerry Barton, Garth Ross, Joe Hage, Geoff Holdridge, Drew Walsh, Joe Membrino.

DAVID WINER

DAVID WINER



## Notes from the Island

**Tuesday, March 1, 2011**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 5.0 Water Temperature: 42**

Well, it appears that we did not get near as much rain as expected. On Sunday, they predicted that the river would go up above 8 feet by Wednesday, but today they say that it will barely get above five feet. So the ferry is open today and will probably be running tomorrow too.

I have a funny story. It's a story that could only happen to an ancient club like Sycamore Island, where the Club stays the same and the world keeps changing around us. The other day I noticed that there was a large tree limb that had fallen and was leaning against my power line. I called Pepco and informed them of the problem, but when I gave my mailbox address of 7023 Macarthur Boulevard, the woman told me that I was not in her computer. I assured her that I was indeed a Pepco customer and that I did indeed have the correct address. She checked again and tried using my phone number, but still no recognition from the computer system. Well, since the computer never lies she suggested that maybe I was a customer of another power company, like Baltimore Electric or Allegheny Electric. This was baffling to me. How am I getting power if I'm not a customer? I wasn't getting anywhere with the Pepco lady so I called our treasurer, Alan Gelb, and he explained the problem. For some reason, the service address for the club is not 7023 Macarthur Boulevard, the service address is 100 Sycamore Island Drive. I thought that this was hilarious. It seems that back in the wild west days of yore, when Pepco was just getting started and before we had a mailbox on the Boulevard, back when the Boulevard was called Conduit Road, our forefathers simply fabricated an address so that Pepco could put it on the map. So, according to Pepco anyway, I live at 100 Sycamore Island Drive, but don't try to Mapquest me. I won't be there.

**Monday, March 7, 2011**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 6.5 Water Temperature: 42**

The rains that dominated yesterday have passed over and now the river is on it's way up. We are at 6.5 now and the river is rising. The ferry is closed.

We had the Army Corps of Engineers down here on Friday. They were working on ridding A. U. Park of its

unexploded ordinance when they heard that we had a cannon ball on the Island. I thought it was laughable but they came down anyway to check it out and they assured us that the cannon ball would not explode. Apparently some of the old cannon balls were infused with explosives, but not this one.

I haven't seen any cormorants yet, but we do have wood ducks now and the first of the Virginia Bluebells are poking through the ground!

**Tuesday, March 8, 2011**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 7.0 Water Temperature: 44**

I just learned that there is a potential for us to get over three inches of rain later this week. Considering that the river is already above 7 feet and that the ground is thoroughly saturated, this has the potential of being a major flood and it may be necessary to get people down here to help with flood preparations.

**Friday, March 11, 2011**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 8.4 Water Temperature: 44**

The rain was not as bad as predicted and even though the river will reach above flood stage, it will not be a major threat to the Island.

We did do some precautionary flood prep on Wednesday though. Tryon and Drew Walsh were here for about three hours as we tied down the picnic tables, carried all the grills to high ground, and pulled all of the boats out of the bottom rack of the canoe shed. We also had to move all of the materials that we had just brought down for the dock-building project. It was a good workout.

**Monday, March 14, 2011**

**Water Level at Little Falls: 7.0 Water Temperature: 44**

Now that the waters are receding, it gives me an opportunity to talk about flooding on the Island. This is the first time since 2002 that we did not have at least a minor flood (above 8 feet) in January or February. This is also the first major flood (above 10 feet) that we have had since all of the snow melted last March.

Additionally, this recent flood was only the seventh time that the river has been above ten feet since I moved here. I was a little surprised to learn this since I have now become so accustomed to canoeing across the high water to the mainland.

The high water is a hassle. We had to do a lot of prep work before the flood and now that it is over, I have to

deal with a layer of mud that covers everything. I am also faced with the large job of getting all the canoes back into the bottom rack of the canoe shed before the next rainstorm. The high water is a hassle but I think it's good for me to have a flood every once in a while. It keeps my skills tuned and keeps me from getting too complacent about the seriousness of floods.

It's amazing to watch the river take over the Island and it's interesting to see how it travels through the Island. The river actually does a zig-zag pattern as it heads downstream. Instead of pointing the canoes upstream when we unloaded them we should have pointed them toward the Maryland shore, because, surprisingly, that was the direction that the river was coming from. Sycamore Island is protected from the current by Ruppert's Island above us, but as the river comes around Ruppert's, it heads towards the Maryland shore and slams into the head of the Island. Then, with a heading that is almost perpendicular to normal downstream flow, all of this water crosses the top of the Island and passes around the high ground where the clubhouse stands. The river gets slightly constricted beyond this point and the current takes a hard right. Strangely, the path of least resistance is straight through the trees, into our canoe shed, and across the lower half of the Island towards the Virginia shore.

The negative effect of this river action is that our canoe shed is slowly getting buried. The shed acts like a strainer and it catches all of the trees and debris that are floating through it. Then, the stockpiled trash creates an eddy where loads of sediment are deposited inside the canoe shed. It's funny how the river is eroding some areas of the Island while at the same time it is also building up other parts with layers of sediment.

### Wednesday, March 16, 2011

**Water Level at Little Falls: 6.0 Water Temperature: 44**

Big news, there is now a new view from the river. The old Beasley castle at the top of the hill was bought and, for the first time in over ten years, someone is taking care of it. The first thing that they have done is clear all the underbrush from the front yard so that now this majestic, stone structure is easily visible from the Boulevard and from the river.

### Thursday, March 17, 2011

**Water Level at Little Falls: 5.4 Water Temperature: 44**

I'm organizing a work party today at 5:00. We need to

JOE HAGE



do a little fixing-up after the last flood. Feel free to come down and join us.

I don't have an explanation, but there are over fifty fish crows on the island right now and they are making a lot of noise with their strange croaking sounds. I can also here the sound of a red-winged black bird, a cardinal, and a carolina wren.

I saw an owl last night, up close too. I was just arriving at the ferry landing around 10:00, and as I stood there on the steps, talking on the phone, a barred owl flew up silently and perched on the muscle wood tree, just 10 feet above me. The cool thing was that even though I continued to talk on the phone, it did not fly away for several minutes.

As promised, there are new little baby eaglets in the nest. There is more activity around the eagle nest now that the adults take turns hunting for their growing family.

### Thursday, March 31, 2011

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.2 Water Temperature: 44**

I haven't written for two weeks so there is a lot to catch up on. The word down here lately is Tryon Wells. Not only did Tryon design a new and improved captain's float, but he also ordered the floatation supplies and transported all the lumber. He then organized and supervised the construction of this awesome new dock. Tryon did have some help of course, and I think we should recognize Drew Walsh, John Membrino, Ed and Sherrie Fizdale, Gordon Phillips, Steve Newman, Garth

Ross, and David Winer for coming on more than one Saturday to help out. Good job everyone! The dock looks great!

We also had to replace our hot-water heater this month, which was no simple thing since it was on the Island, but we got it done and it works great.

Canal update: I heard that they may lay a pipe down where the canal berm is breached up at Anglers and that would allow water to pass downstream from Great Falls and re-water our section of the prism (“prism” is how the Park Service refers to the ditch, which is the canal). They have also opened the gate at the feeder canal by lock five and now the canal below lock five is re-watered all the way to Georgetown. Unfortunately, a leak was discovered in the berm wall during the last flood and there is no water in the canal between lock six and lock five.

I could only find three active goose nests on the Island this year. When I first moved here there were closer to ten goose nests on the Island. I think I may have convinced most of them that nesting on Ruppert’s Island is better idea. In the past, protective geese were a nuisance and would attack anyone who came near their nests, which were often built right on the trail.

I think we have bluebirds nesting in Gerry’s bluebird house! We also have a phoebe nesting under the tool shed. The shad are running, the cormorants are roosting, and the wildflowers are blooming—it must be spring!!

Stay tuned for updates on my first annual Island to Island River Awareness Kayak Trip! I’ve teamed up with the Riverkeepers to do a ninety-mile kayak trip from here to St. Catherine’s Island in St Mary’s county. Get involved and help me raise money for this great organization!

JOE HAGE  
Caretaker

### Large Parties Scheduled



Sunday, April 10, R.G. Steinman, wildflower walk,  
10:00 a.m.–2 p.m.



Sycamore Island Club may be joining up with the National Park Service to help them in their Canal Steward Program. If all goes as planned, the Club will be adopting one mile of the towpath, from mile marker 6 to mile marker 7, and will agree to help in its maintenance. Contact Joe for more information.



Plans are in the making for the dance to be held in the clubhouse on Saturday, June 25, starting at 7 p.m. Come early and grill your dinner—if you’d like to bring an appetizer to share, that’s great! Bring your own soft drinks on ice and get ready to dance to DJ Rock ‘n Roll. “Joe and the Guys” will provide live music as well. And yes, you can spend the night so bring a tent if you plan to stay.

Kids are welcome too, of course, and ideas for games or entertainment. Anybody up to making French Toast for the gang the morning after???

#### Contacts

Jane Winer @ 301.229.8963 or [jdwiner@verizon.net](mailto:jdwiner@verizon.net)  
Caroline Gelb @ 301.229.5969 (home),  
301.529.2381 (cell) or [cgelb@worldbank.org](mailto:cgelb@worldbank.org)

# The Sycamore Islander

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ADDRESS SERVICES REQUESTED

## FIRST CLASS MAIL

Saturday Relief Caretakers <b>April 2011</b>		
	10 A.M.–3 P.M.	3 P.M.–DARK
APRIL 2	Gordon and Gregory Phillips 301.358.5137 gphillips@rhsmith.umd.edu	Tryon Wells 301.576.6339 tryonwells@verizon.net
APRIL 9	Elizabeth Taylor 240.997.6890 etaylor4312@gmail.com	Lauren Brandt 202.363.4289 lbjls@RCN.com
APRIL 16	Richard Edelson 301.951.0195 redelson@gmail.com	Mark Carlin and Meryl Silverman 301.263.9596 silver.car@verizon.net
APRIL 23	Gary Kasnett 301-654-7020 MRGKAZ@aol.com	Jennifer Urquhart 202.244.0446 jumewords@aol.com
APRIL 30	Fran & Steve Rothstein 301-588-5976 Fran.rothstein@verizon.net	Susan and Tove Elfstrom 703.533.5537 elfstrom2@verizon.net

*The Sycamore Islander* is the monthly newsletter of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club. Every attempt is made to publish *The Islander* before the second Wednesday of the month in advance of the monthly meeting. Text and graphics may be sent as email attachments to: Carol Beehler, cbeehler@comcast.net. The deadline for inclusion in the May issue is May 2.

### Wildflower Walk

The Annual Sycamore Island Spring Wildflower Walk will be on Sunday, April 10, from 10:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m. We will explore the botanical diversity in and around the third section, section C, of the Billy Goat Trail, adjacent to Carderrock. Carderrock is down river, about 2 miles, from Old Angler's Inn. From the Clara Barton Parkway, get off at the Carderrock exit, and enter the Park. Turn left at the stop sign, and park in the parking area at the end of the road. We will gather here for departure, shortly after 10:00 a.m. From our meeting place, we will head south along the towpath to access the Billy Goat Trail. Here's a sample of some of the wildflowers we can expect to see—Golden Ragwort, Bluebells, Wild Blue Phlox, Spring Beauty, Toothworts, Trillium, Violets, Dutchman's Breeches, and Early Saxifrage, to name a few. Bring water and lunch or a snack to enjoy in a scenic spot along the way.

For more information contact R.G. Steinman or John Parrish: 301.565.2025; email, lifeonurth@gmail.com