



# The Sycamore Islander

FEBRUARY 2012 | VOLUME 91 NUMBER 2

## President's Letter

Our next club meeting is Wednesday, February 8, 8:00 p.m., at the home of Alan and Caroline Gelb, 6824 Millwood Road, Bethesda, Maryland (301.229.5969). Directions: go out Massachusetts Avenue to its end at Goldsboro Road, turn right and proceed on Goldsboro Road, after crossing River Road take the first left onto Millwood. It's on the left at the fourth speed bump.

The Winter Bird Walk is Saturday, February 25, led by Islander Paul Hagen. This is an excellent event for both experienced and beginning birders. Bagels and coffee will be provided in the clubhouse at 8:00 a.m. and the walk begins at 8:30. See the article in this issue for more information.

The Island's new Environmental Committee is beginning to get off the ground. Drew Walsh and Ann Lucy have organized an Island walk-around and initial gathering of club members interested in the committee. This will occur at 11:00 a.m. on Saturday, February 25 (right after the bird walk). Meet in the clubhouse. Please see the article in this issue.

The January club meeting scheduled most of this year's annual Sycamore Island events. The calendar for 2012 should appear in the next *Islander*.

I think we can see the end of winter now. A mild February may give us the first spring flowers. The Potomac bird population is going through its annual

transition. Sycamore Island is beginning to stir. More members are coming down for a walk or a cup of hot chocolate by the fire. Thoughts of spring are everywhere. Pitchers and catchers report in a week. It's a great time of year !

JIM DREW  
President



BACKYARD BIRDCAPES

## Minutes for the January 11 Meeting

In attendance: Drew Walsh, Trip Reid, John Noble, Star Mitchell, David Winer, Alan Gelb, Jim Drew, Jane Winer

The meeting was shy of a quorum but we heard the following:

Financial Secretary Alan Gelb reported that we have come in under-budget for the year 2011 in spite of incurring capital expenses greater than expected.

Captain Drew Walsh reported that Tryon Wells' design for the winter bathroom is complete. Please note, the bathroom functions in winter for both men and women. Joe replaced the faucet in the sink with a "gooseneck" type that makes it easier to fill a teakettle, and, yes, the water via the new faucet is potable.

Drew and Joe conferred with a roofer who reported that the flat roof located near the air conditioning unit is in particularly bad shape, as is the roof over kitchen; the flashing needs to be addressed.

Drew spoke warmly and at length about time spent with our longtime devoted Captain of the Island, the late John Matthews. John served as boss and mentor to Drew the summer Drew took on the job as substitute caretaker.

Caretaker Joe Hage is on vacation for a week, beginning January 1. He will return to the Island briefly before going skiing. The ferry is locked up on the canal side.

Membership Chair John Noble reported in detail on the state of the membership, total figures, etc. John announced that at the April meeting there would be a supervised drawing from the applicants to the membership pool for 2013. For the numbers and details about the April meeting please contact John.

President Jim Drew devoted the rest of the meeting to discussion of the Calendar of Events for the year. Most dates are not yet fixed:

- Saturday, February 25: Birdwalk with Paul Hagen
- Saturday, April 14: Island Clean-Up (Workfest?)
- Sometime in April: Spring Flower Walk
- Saturday, May 6 or 13: Spring Workfest
- Saturday, June 16 or 23: Solstice Dance and Party
- Sometime in September, Fishing Derby Regatta, to be determined
- Monday, September 3: New Member Event
- September or October: Bird-Paddle with Paul Hagen

There was discussion as well about when to reschedule the Old-Timers' Picnic for the spring or fall;

when to hold the Fall Workfest (Sunday, November 11, Veterans' Day? Or November 18, raindate the 25th); when to schedule a Fall Bird-Paddle with Paul Hagen.

Jim Drew brought up two more projects of great interest. A proposed *Island Book of Workfest Recipes* to include our favorites for big crowds, the idea put forward by our late and devoted member, Nell Hennessey. Jim noted that the book could include illustrations from "The Best of Ruppert," Johnna Robinson's snarky cartoon character that entertained us for years in the newsletter.

Jim also put forward the idea of creating an Environmental Committee devoted to studying and anticipating problems the Island faces constantly from the elements and beavers like Ruppert, and other creatures. Drew Walsh, Alan Gelb, and Trip Reid raised their hands to help form the committee. Ann Lucy's name was also put forward.

Jim commended the good work that Joe and club members have done on behalf of keeping the canal picked up. Joe's efforts have been supported by Trip Reid and Gerry Barton, in particular. We need to encourage more participation.

With this, the informal Sycamore Island Meeting for January 2012 was declared over, so we turned to the lively fire and excellent table that Star Mitchell had provided for us.

Respectfully submitted,  
JANE D. WINER  
Acting Secretary

Saturday Relief Caretakers <b>February 2012</b>	
	11 A.M.–DUSK
FEBRUARY 4	Joe Cecil 202.494.1481
FEBRUARY 11	Wayne Limburg 703.533.8639
FEBRUARY 18	Stephen and Sally Kern 301.270.5376
FEBRUARY 25	Please volunteer!

## Membership Information

Following is a monthly report regarding applications under the new system: Twenty-one applications for membership under the new rules were received by January 29, 2012. Applications can be accepted through March 31, 2012. Five of the applications have at least one of the applicants age 39 or under. The other 16 applications fall in the age 40 or older group. Please advise persons interested in membership to get the application and information about the membership process from [www.sycamoreisland.org](http://www.sycamoreisland.org) <<http://www.sycamoreisland.org/>> “Membership Info.” Applicants on the current waiting list will precede the new applicants in selection for full membership. New applicants can expect to be notified about their waiting list status about 10 days after the Monthly Meeting in April. Please correspond with me if you have questions.

JOHN NOBLE  
Membership Secretary  
[johnnoble@mac.com](mailto:johnnoble@mac.com)

## Initial Erosion Control Meeting

President Jim Drew has asked that an environmental committee be formed to initiate a discussion on how to deal with the problem of erosion on the upriver side of Sycamore Island. The Island has lost a significant amount of ground in this area over the past several years and the club needs to address the issue.

Grounds supervisor Anne Lucy suggested the committee meet Saturday, February 25, at 11 a.m. after Paul Hagan’s informative Bird Walk, which starts at 8:30 a.m. that morning.

If you wish to share your ideas, expertise, or just help out with the organization and formulation of our ideas, please come to the Island for this brainstorming discussion.

If you can not attend but wish to be notified of future meetings, or if you would prefer to email your ideas, please contact me at [andrew.h.walsh@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.h.walsh@gmail.com).

DREW WALSH  
Captain

## Annual Winter Bird Outing

Please join us for the Third Annual Sycamore Island Winter Bird Outing scheduled for Saturday, February 25, 2012. This year’s outing will begin at 8:00 a.m. with bagels and coffee at the clubhouse. Our plan is to walk the Island and the tow-path in the vicinity of the Island from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. looking for visiting winter waterfowl and other winter resident and migratory birds. Following the walk, we will compare notes on the day’s sightings over coffee around the wood stove at the clubhouse. Both beginners and experienced birders are encouraged to join us.

Last year a dozen participants walked the Island and were rewarded with good looks at numerous resident and migratory birds, including: Wood Duck, Ring-neck Duck, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red Shouldered Hawk, Belted Kingfisher, and Downy, Hairy and Pileated woodpeckers. Our resident Bald Eagles usually start to nest this time of year just down river from the Island in a Sycamore tree that is easily seen from the Island. If you would like to attend this year’s event, please contact our trip leader Paul Hagen at [phagen@bdlaw.com](mailto:phagen@bdlaw.com) mail to: [phagen@bdlaw.com](mailto:phagen@bdlaw.com) or 202.789.6022 by February 24. Bring binoculars and dress for the weather.

## Winter Bathroom

Thanks to the persistence of Gerry Barton and for Tryon Well’s simple engineering design, Islanders now have a winterized toilet and sink.

Tryon’s design for the wall consists of styrofoam held together with metal studs and duct tape. Yes duct tape! The partitions are in two sections on alternating hinges allowing them to fold together for easy storage.

Tryon and I put together the sections in his garage and club members installed the hinges at the Fall work fest.

A plumber was hired to install shut-off valves to the existing water pipes leading to the bathrooms and club kitchen and to build a new water line that goes directly to the bathroom sink and toilet.

Joe Hage and I added special heating cords to keep the pipe from freezing and installed insulation around the pipes. Joe completed the project on his own, securing the temporary wall and adding some finishing touches.

Over the next several weeks head to the Island and enjoy our new luxury! I know Joe could use the company!

DREW WALSH  
Captain



## Notes from the Island

I can't believe this weather! No snow, no ice on the river, nothing. This has been my tenth January as caretaker and this has been the mildest year ever, by far. Someone called it January

I must admit that it makes my life easier if the river doesn't freeze and the towpath doesn't get buried in snow but I still miss the colder weather. It has been two years since we've been able to ice skate on the canal and it looks like I won't be X-county skiing on the towpath this year either.

It also seems like there has been fewer wintering birds here because of the mild weather. Of course there are exceptions and I've seen some really cool birds lately. An American wigeon has been feeding in the canal for the last two weeks and there has been an American coot hanging around. But there have been no huge flocks of tundra swans or scaups or buffleheads.

I've seen many common mergansers, but in past years we've also had other mergansers as well, like the hooded and the red-breasted.

Another disconcerting thing that I've noticed is that there is very little activity at the eagles nest. Paddling past the nest the other evening I didn't see any sign of a pair of mating birds. I only heard the sad, high-pitched sound of a single eagle calling out. I'm beginning to worry that this might be the first year since I moved here that the eagles fail to nest and breed at that nest.

Of course we can count on the Canada geese to be here in force. February is the time that they return to the Island and noisily stake out their favorite nesting spots.

Hopefully the birding will be good for the annual Sycamore Island winter bird walk on February 25.

The lack of ice on the river has made it possible to do some winter canoeing around the Island. Last Thursday I decided to visit High Island again. High



Paddling to High Island

JOE HAGE

Island is the big island that is just downstream from the dam. I took my kids there a few years ago and I thought it would be fun to go back and see if anything has changed. The last time I went there the girls and I used the canal to get downstream and around the dam but this time there was no water in the canal so we had to paddle down to the dam in the river and then carry around it.

The most exciting part of the trip was lowering the canoe back into the river and then heading straight down to the kayaker's slalom gates. The rubble dam is on the right but it's easy to hug the left bank and slip into the feeder canal. The last thing I wanted to do was to go for a swim in that frigid river, so I was very careful when we hit the big wave at the top. Then it was a matter of dodging the gates hanging over the river and it was smooth sailing all the way over to the banks of High Island.

We pulled the canoe onto shore and decided to cir-

cumnavigate the island before climbing to the top. Over the years there have been quarries and even a boat club on High Island. There is some evidence of old trails and ancient structures, but mostly the island overgrown with paw-paws and invasive vines, at least on the lower parts. Unlike Sycamore Island, it is possible to get to this island without swimming or using a boat. The downstream end of the island is only separated from the mainland by a small stream so it's an easy wade. Once you get onto the berm side of the canal and across the feeder canal that is.

It was so cool when we rounded the bottom of the island and got our first look at the main stem of the Potomac. Here, the character of the river was much different and the water turned white as it accelerated over the acres of rocks in its rush toward Little Falls. We were now on the flood plain side of the island and we were struck by the beach like savanna that we found ourselves in. There was driftwood and debris scattered



Near the dam

JOE HAGE





JOE HAGE

View of the Potomac from High Island

everywhere but there was also a nice layer of soft, white sand. There were many prints in the wet sand, deer, fox, raccoon, and heron. We continued upstream toward the head of the island, past huge piles of driftwood and fallen trees. As we began to climb the hill, there was a dramatic change. Gone were the sycamores and silver maples of the riparian forest and in their place were the hemlocks, pines and oaks that are more commonly found in the Appalachian Mountains. It was like going from Sycamore Island to Catoclin Mountain in five minutes!

There is a reason why they call it High Island and when we reached the top we were easily over a hundred feet above the river. We were actually at eye level with the second story of the houses in Brookmont. It was obvious that we weren't the only visitors to this island. There was a hammock, two chairs by a fire pit and a makeshift lean-to. There was also a can of unopened

Hormel Chili, probably edible. From our new vantage point we sat and enjoyed the view of the river and the setting sun. It did not take long before we spotted a fox along the riverbank and a group of deer off in the distance. Then, to our delight, we watched a bald eagle, fishing among the rocks in the river below us.

It was getting dark, and cold, so we descended the remnants of an old trail and made it back to the canoe. It was easy to cross the feeder canal in the canoe but, since there was no water in the main canal we had to portage the canoe for at least one quarter of a mile to get back above the dam. Luckily I had the foresight to bring along my portable canoe caddie. I rolled the canoe up the towpath and then dropped it back in the river just above the dam. Then, as darkness fell I paddled past the warning buoys and back to the Island, Sycamore Island that is.

Tuesday, January 24, 2012

**Water Level at Little Falls: 4.3 Water Temperature: 38**

I'm sorry about my lack of posting here, but I've been away. Last week I traveled to Tampa Bay, Florida to visit my girls, and over this past weekend I was up in the mountains of West Virginia.

It was really great to go to Florida to get caught up with my daughters, and they were very appreciative of the Christmas cards that they received from the Club.

My trip to Canaan Valley was not quite as great. Don't get me wrong, we had a blast traipsing around in the hills, but there was no snow at White Grass so the skiing was terrible. I did happen to see a couple of folks that I knew from right here in Cabin John. The good news about there being no snow however, is that without a huge snow pack building up in the mountains (like last year) there is much less of a chance of flooding in the Spring.

I've been keeping busy doing some painting side-work off of the Island and I've also been doing some

great local hikes. I hiked the Archibald-Glover trail, part of the Rock Creek network of trails. We started at Fletcher's Cove and did a four-hour loop that took us up to New Mexico Ave. and then into Georgetown and finally along the towpath back to Fletcher's. Another hike that I highly recommend is over at Turkey Run Park. I've hiked and jogged all over Turkey Run but I had never taken the time to follow Turkey Run to its source up in Langley. After crossing under the GW parkway we spent four hours hiking around in Langley Oaks Park. We ended up close to the Beltway and decided to follow Dead Run as it passed back under the parkway towards the river. I have to say that I was pleasantly shocked at just how beautiful Dead Run was, and to view its long series of cataracts and waterfalls was well worth the effort. Then we hiked the two miles back down river to the canoe.

JOE HAGE  
Caretaker

### Whit and Joe's 7-Day Trek



What happens when a carefully planned 85 mile paddle turns out to be 132 miles?

When campsites on maps don't really exist?

When you wake up and your once dry tent is floating on water?

When sudden storms, scorching heat and changing tides require the right gear, creative sources of drinking water, and often more than one "Plan B"?

Find out as Whit and Joe recount their 7-day trek to explore the lower Potomac and build support for our river watchdog, Potomac Riverkeeper.

This promises to be as entertaining as it is informative for anyone interested in paddling and understanding the river. See their route, watch some of their videos and read their blogs at [potomacriverkeeper.org](http://potomacriverkeeper.org)

Whit and Joe will be presenting at the monthly Canoe Cruisers meeting on February 27, 7:00 p.m.

The meeting will be held at the Clara Barton Community Center.

# The Sycamore Islander

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Cabin John, MD 20818

ADDRESS SERVICES REQUESTED

## FIRST CLASS MAIL



Above and masthead photos by Joe Hage

*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](mailto:cbeehler@comcast.net) The deadline for inclusion in the March issue is March 5.

**Large Parties Scheduled**



Saturday, February 25, Paul E. Hagen, winter bird walk, 8:30–11 a.m.