



The Sycamore Islander

SEPTEMBER 2012 | VOLUME 91 NUMBER 9

President's Letter

The monthly meeting of the Montgomery Sycamore Island Club will be held at 8:00 p.m. at the home of Tryon Wells at 6216 Winston Drive in Bethesda. All members and club applicants are invited to attend.

At the picnic and meeting we will have a chance to talk with Joe Hage, our intrepid caretaker, about his 150-mile kayak trip from Sycamore Island to the Bay. During Joe's trip, Mary Kearney did a great job as substitute caretaker. Mary dealt with things on the Island and also made daily postings on the club's website about life on the Island and updating us on Joe's trip.

The Sycamore Island Fishing Derby is Saturday, September 15. Members and waitlisters, young and old, beginners and serious fisherpersons, all will enjoy a morning of fishing and lunch from the grill. George Malusky, a long time Islander and master fisherman, will again coordinate the Derby. Bait and a number of club rods and reels will be available. Prizes and bragging rights are at stake. See the notice in this issue.

At our August meeting Islanders celebrated and gave Joe Hage a heartfelt tribute on his ten-year anniversary as Caretaker. Many Islanders helped make it a great night. You

can read all about it in the extended minutes in this issue.

Thank you to Cindy Bertaut and everyone involved in the annual Sycamore Island Regatta on Labor Day. And, to RG Steinman and John Parrish, and Jane Winer, for the Flower Walk held the end of August on the Island. Looking ahead, not only is the Fishing Derby in September, but, the environment committee is planning a volunteer tree planting later in the month—and a beaver day in October.

New club officers and supervisors will be elected at the December meeting. Bill Marmon has done really important and excellent work as vice-president during the past two years and is in line to be nominated as President for next year. Many current officers and supervisors will volunteer to continue. There is a real need, however, for newer club members to step forward. There will be positions that need to be filled. If you would like to serve as an officer or supervisor or suggest someone, or if you would like to assist in the nominating process, please contact me at jdrewesq@aol.com.

JIM DREW
President

Minutes for the August 8 Meeting

The meeting was called to order by President Jim Drew after a number of members enjoyed dining *al fresco*.

Attendees: Caroline Gelb, Louise Meyer, Geoff Holdridge, Ned Goddard, Steve Newman, Stan Wiggins, Karen Possner, Tryon Wells, Holly Syrrakos, Rich Lodish, Abigail Wiebenson, Peter Jones, Marianne Ross, John Noble, Diane Noble, Jim Drew, Hester Ohbi, David Winer, Jeff Komarow, Jane Winer, Sandra Purohit, Ray Purohit, Mike Gelb, Drew Walsh, and Ann Marie Cunningham.

Minutes: Approval of the minutes was deferred until September.

Captain's Report: Drew Walsh reported that Trip Reid prepared a synopsis of a report from Scott Petrey, an environmentalist scientist, on ways to slow the erosion on the upriver end of the Island. The synopsis will be published in the *Islander*, including suggestions on planting trees and using the fallen trees as a buffer.

Drew and Joe met with an electrician to discuss the use of a generator to protect the water supply, refrigerator and other key items in case of a power failure. Cost probably be about \$800 for a generator and \$1,100 for labor. The electrician also suggested a separate electric line.

The stairs to the tool shed will be moved outside the shed in order to provide a larger, solid floor and to enable better organization of the tools.

Membership Report: John Noble reported that 37 of the 62 new wait list applicants purchased passes. The passes allow the wait listers to use the Island on Monday through Friday from May to October, and any time during the rest of the year. One member was in arrears, but has paid his dues and is now back into membership, making a temporary total of 161 members.

A notification was sent to applicants who did not win the lottery citing that they weren't selected because there were not enough slots in their age category.

New Business: It was suggested that a new membership roster be distributed as there have been a significant number of changes since January. A discussion of whether to include a roster of waiting list applicants

ensued, whether such personal information should be distributed. The Standing Rules state that a roster of all members and officers be distributed to each member in January. This issue was withdrawn, and may possibly be presented again later.

The annual Island Regatta will be held on Labor Day, September 3.

Joe Hage and Whit Overstreet will embark on the Second Annual Island to Island Paddle on August 18. They will kayak 150 miles down the tidal Potomac from Sycamore Island to the Chesapeake Bay as they raise awareness of the Potomac's water quality. All proceeds from their adventure will go to the Potomac Riverkeeper organization to help preserve our river and improve water quality.

Joe Hage's 10 years: Joe's tenure as Island caretaker was celebrated with song (Happy Decade to You) and with home-made cakes and other tasty goodies. Several members shared memories. Jim Drew begin by saying what everyone felt—that in addition to doing a wonderful job, what Joe really does is make the Island a happier place. Jane Winer and Holly Syrrakos exchanged accounts of how Joe first learned of the caretaker position. Was it Brad Reardon of Springriver Outfitters or Joe's brother's girlfriend at the Bethesda Co-Op?

Ann Marie Cunningham spoke of hiring Joe during Carl Linden's tenure as president. Members of the personal committee loved Joe immediately, but were very concerned about safety issues related to having his young daughters, Kelsey and Kaylen, living on the Island. But Joe won the committee over during the second interview by demonstrating his careful consideration of the matter. It was a sad day for those on the hiring committee when the girls left the Island, and for many other members. She also remembers telling Joe that the clubhouse would be renovated, but that it might take a while. (It took nearly 7 years.)

Jeff Komarow remembered that Joe's normally amazing level of equanimity wore thin during the clubhouse renovation, as an unusually cold winter and building inspectors delayed construction. His "Notes from the Island" contained comments like:

- It's really getting primitive now.
- Temperatures climbed out of the 20s today,
- It's above freezing in the bathroom, but not by much. (Of course, that was before the pipes froze

and he had no running water.)

- If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

But finally, Joe's old self returned:

- When this is thing done, it's going to be awesome.
- I finally got to eat in the kitchen, and it's like being in a forest canopy.

Dave Winer was skeptical at first about this guy with a ponytail, but Joe's resourcefulness and energetic nature won Dave over. Joe's skills at ice climbing and whitewater canoeing impressed Dave. Dave said that having Joe as caretaker and Alan as treasurer made it possible for him to be president.

Caroline Gelb, channeling for husband Alan, remembered an interview with Joe's daughters that was conducted simultaneously with Joe's interview to become caretaker. Alan was impressed with their knowledge about nature and their technique of catching catfish with cheese. Alan also spoke of Joe's ingenuity in bridge construction, endurance during clubhouse renovation, creativity and talent demonstrated in his "Notes from the Island" and in his music.

Tryon Wells recognized that former caretakers had shorter tenures than Joe, and have left for a variety of reasons, including flooding, family issues, controversies with members. By contrast, Joe's time has been quite peaceful, much to Joe's credit, and Tryon urged us all not to take him for granted.

Drew Walsh first met Joe Hage, the summer of 2002, while filling in between regular caretakers. I was pleased to see some extra bucks he put in my hand after helping him move some of his belongings on the Island! Joe has done a lot for this club over his ten years, helping to improve the facilities we all share, but most of all being a great friend to us all.

Joe was presented with three gifts: a plaque, a check, and a special cherry wood paddle bearing an engraved Sycamore Island emblem.

Joe reminisced that at sunrise on his 40th birthday he was on the verge of quitting his job and moving west when he learned of the caretaker position. He was excited about the many benefits of working and living on the Island, being able to spend more time with his children, and for his nature studies. He thought that he would be very isolated but he is happy that the opposite is true. He has a whole new community that he loves. Joe is looking forward to many more years on the Island.

The meeting and celebration were adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
ANN MARIE CUNNINGHAM
Co-Recording Secretary

A First for the Island: Late-summer/Early-fall Flower Walk

Sunday, August 26 was a splendid day for the Flower Walk, a good thing—Tryon Wells' email message sent out only 3 days ahead of time attracted more than two dozen members and guests! Our leaders, RG Steinman and John Parrish, gave us a splendid tour that went beyond simple identification, offering new perspectives regarding the beauty, value and variety of plant life on the Island. They pointed out many new plants and some old friends about which we learned new things: Yellow and Orange Jewelweed, False Nettle and Wood Nettle, Green-headed Cone flower, Dwarf St. Johnswort, Rustling Wild Petunia (a state endangered species), assorted aster-family plants such as Leafcup, all this with the promise of more blooms to come from more asters, goldenrods, and fall bloomers. Stunning purple New York Ironweed, and gorgeous Cardinal Flower (it's there, but tucked away) were among the most spectacular. Another "star," quite prolific, at the lower end of the Island, was a stand of tall plants, the Late-flowering Thoroughwort, so attractive to a variety of insects. Another outstanding species, the low-growing Water Willow, found alongside and in the water, was covered with purple-speckled white blooms, each exquisite as any orchid. This modest plant stabilizes the shoreline at both ends of the Island and provides a first-line defense against shoreline erosion.

In fact, although we were concentrating on flowering plants and attendant insects crawling and flying all about, it was clear that all the native plants benefited the Island. Some plants were pointed out for eradication, however, such as the invasive Japanese Hop vine, along with Asiatic Bittersweet, Winter Creeper and English Ivy. These, along with the Porcelainberry vine—despite its beautiful blue-green berries—choke out important natives. Pulling up the ivy without having something to put in its place might not seem to be a good idea, but we were assured that the soil contains seeds of native plants that will grow given the chance;

in fact, RG and John offered to help identify lesser known native trees, such as Box Elder and Hackberry—along with more familiar Sycamore, Black Walnut, silver Maple, and Paw Paw, so we can try to protect them from beaver and browsing deer. The Hackberry, a handsome tree with an unlovely name, has berries tasty even to humans. *Chacun a son gout*—a friend who tried them on my recommendation described them as “seeds with a skin”!

Many of the names of plants suggest stories: Smartweed, Bur [*sic*] Cucumber, Sweet Annie, White Snakeroot, Halberd-leaved rose Mallow, Mistflower, Spicebush, the list goes on. Through the winter we can track down those stories in field guides as we sit by the fire and look forward to next spring, summer, and fall . . . on Sycamore Island.

JANE WINER, with help from RG and John!

Tree Planting Day

On September 29th at 10 a.m. the Island will host a tree planting day if the bridge is accessible. The goal is to plant small saplings to help prevent soil erosion (mainly on the north end of the island). Island members and wait-list members who have small, native species trees growing in their yards can bring them for planting on the Island. If you have small trees you would like to donate but cannot come on the 29th or have too many to bring down to the Island, we can arrange advance storage and transportation. The best type of trees to donate are SMALL, ideally about knee high (not taller than about 4 and half feet), and NATIVE. Species we would particularly like include Sycamore, Red Maple, River Birch, Swamp White Oak, Silky Dogwood, Elderberry, and Black Willow. Contact Alice Bullard, alibullard@gmail.com, phone 202.841.7753.

Please note: All upcoming events on Sycamore Island are subject to change since the bridge is currently impassable.

Notes from the Island

Thursday, August 2, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.1 Water Temperature: 85

It was ten years ago today when I first drove my van down the tow path and unloaded my mattresses onto the bare floors on Sycamore Island. I'm not surprised that I'm still here but it is surprising that it's already been ten years.

There are three great egrets hanging around the Island. Usually one can be seen at the foot of Rupperts Island or high in a tree further upstream, but they always head to the same spot in Virginia once the sun goes behind the trees. It just so happens that that is the time when I take my swim and it is so cool to watch this elegant bird fly by at eye level while I'm in the water.

The jewel weed is close to six feet high now and has created a kind of lower canopy on the Island. The chickadees seem to enjoy the shade of these seasonal "trees" and will jump from one to the other picking off small insects.

Wednesday, August 8, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 2.94 Water Temperature: 87

The hickory nuts are ripe and falling from the trees. You might want to wear a hardhat if you're sitting on the deck. Those nuts fall pretty hard but it's cool to be in the clubhouse and hear them hit the roof and roll into the gutter or bounce off of the deck.

I've been finding a lot of hawk feathers out on the field lately and for two mornings now I've seen a red shouldered hawk on the Island. It is really breath-taking to see these large, wild birds in action, those squirrels better watch out.

Don't forget, I'm leaving next week for my second annual kayak down the Potomac. Check out the following links and follow me on the interweb.

<http://www.potomacriverkeeper.org/island>

And the Donation Page at <https://potomacriverkeeper.ejoinme.org/?tabid=391961>

Thursday, August 16, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.00 Water Temperature: 83

Hi, Mary Kearney here, substitute caretaker, at your service for the next eight days as Joe Hage and Whit Overstreet undertake their second annual Potomac Riverkeeper Island-to-Island kayak trek in support of a clean and accessible river for all. Their real-time Twitter

updates have been really exciting! It's fun to watch their progress hour-by-hour down the Potomac. You can also see their daily photo albums on Facebook, and follow the detailed itinerary on their blog.

The adventure began Wednesday morning, August 15, as Joe and Whit set out on the first leg of their journey from Sycamore Island to Fletchers Cove. This is a short but dramatic passage down Little Falls, a challenging Class III/IV rapid. It marks the river's steep drop down the fall line from the non-tidal Piedmont into the tidal coastal plain. I watched from Chain Bridge as the guys totally aced Little Falls in open canoes, escorted by Olympic paddler Davey Hearn. Joe went left, Whit went right, and both emerged shiny side up, with big smiles all around.

Then at 8 a.m., Joe and Whit swapped their white-water canoes for sea kayaks to shove off from Fletchers on the falling tide. The tide, plus a tailwind, plus a lot of hard work, carried them eighteen-plus miles to their first overnight stop at Hard Bargain Farm in Accokeek MD, with many cool sights along the way. Tomorrow's itinerary: 16.5 miles to General Smallwood State Park in Marbury, MD, near the town of Indian Head.

Friday, August 17, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 2.95 Water Temperature: 84

Joe and Whit arrived safely at General Smallwood State Park near Indian Head MD this afternoon. They were able to set up camp before the rainstorm. Their daily schedule is the opposite of last year, when they made camp after dark most nights. This year they're getting up very early to travel with the tides, reaching their daily destination by mid-afternoon. The guys are in good spirits and looking forward to tomorrow's adventure.

The late summer wildflowers are blooming in profusion here. So far I've noticed mistflower (wild ageratum) near the captain's float, some wild phlox near the swim dock, and goldenrod up the path toward Ruppert's. There are lots of sunflowers, throughworts, and jumpseed (Virginia knotweed) all around the Island. The elephants-ear and beefsteak-mint are just starting to bloom. Along the shore there are halberd-leaved rose mallows, New York ironweed, and the beautiful but poisonous jimsonweed. There's a kind of natural lawn area, manicured-looking and springy underfoot, all around the downstream edge of the Island. I asked Joe if he mowed down there, and he said no, it just happens naturally.



Saturday, August 18, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 2.95 Water Temperature: 83

Joe and Whit paddled over 18 miles down the Maryland shore today, from Mattawoman Creek to Clifton Beach near Nanjemoy. This is a remote and beautiful part of Maryland. Along the way they passed the Ghost Fleet of Mallows Bay, a World War I ship graveyard that's evolved into a lovely manmade reef. At Clifton Beach, the guys made their first crossing of the day to Aquia Landing Park in Stafford VA, where they set up camp. Aquia Landing, known locally as Aqua-Po, was a notorious Virginia slave trade portal that later became a stop on the Underground Railroad. The guys made friends with a park ranger and some local fishermen before turning in for the night.

Like a lot of folks, I don't really "do" Twitter, but it's been fun to follow their updates in real time. Whit is posting photos so often that it's almost like being there! You can see their Twitter feed here without joining or signing up.

Sunday, August 19, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.10 Water Temperature: 80

The great Island-to-Island adventure got a little more adventurous today. Joe and Whit set off from Aqua-Po



STAN WIGGINS

in Stafford VA in a pink-orange dawn. They crossed to the Maryland side near Port Tobacco MD, then cruised down past Nanjemoy Creek. Coming up was their longest crossing yet, a straight line across to Mathias Point VA and back to MD, in order to cut the corner of a big bend in the river. As they set out to cross, a light drizzle turned into a full-blown squall, with heavy rain and big seas. The guys made it over safely—just as the rain stopped. Luckily they fetched up at Capt. Billy’s Crab House in Popes Creek MD for some well-earned refueling. A quick trip down to Aqualand Marina in Newburg MD, hard by the 301 bridge, and they were in for the night. It was their longest day so far at 24 miles. They were happy to see there was a clothes dryer at the campsite.

Quote of the day from Joe: “It’s reassuring to see the river grass pointing the same way you’re going.”

It was a rainy but busy day here at the Island. The light on the river is beautiful under a cloud cover and even in the rain. There’s no bad weather, just bad gear, right?

Monday, August 20, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.28 Water Temperature: 79

I made a custom Google map showing Joe and Whit’s progress down the river each day. I was having a hard time visualizing their journey until I actually mapped it. I can’t believe how much ground (or water) they can cover in such a short time!

The guys said farewell to Maryland for a few days as they headed across to Colonial Beach for a long paddle down the Northern Neck of Virginia. After passing

Wakefield State Park and the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, they wrapped up another rainy day at the spectacular cliffs of Westmoreland State Park in Montross, VA. The helpful park manager gave them special permission to camp on the beach. It saved them a long, long carry up the hundred-foot staircase over the cliffs.

On the boardwalk today was the biggest caterpillar I’ve ever seen. It was almost six inches long and as fat as a thumb. It was also bright green, with big black eyes and long bright orange horns. I did wonder whether isolation was starting to cause me hallucinations, but I finally identified the creature. It’s called a hickory horned devil, *Citheronia regalis*, and it turns into a moth called the royal walnut moth. The moth is a beautiful striped orange—not green—and very, very large. It feeds on hickory and walnut trees. Keep an eye out for the caterpillars. There are probably more than one, and they are an amazing sight to behold.

Tuesday, August 21, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.25 Water Temperature: 78

Today’s relatively short (!) paddle of 17 miles took Joe and Whit from Westmoreland State Park in Montross VA to Coles Point in Hague VA, past the stunning Horsehead, Stratford, and Nomini Cliffs that rim the Northern Neck. As Joe put it, this area is like the land before time, with the bluffs towering hundreds of feet over dawn-fogged marshes, and a dozen bald eagles circling overhead at first light. The Miocene-era cliffs are composed of layers of fossils that are between 10 and 50 million years old, before the Chesapeake Bay was even formed. Geologists call this area the “windshield wiper.” Erosion pushes away the bluff faces in huge crumbling sheets, exposing new layers of long-extinct marine creatures that have never been seen before.

Wednesday, August 22, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.18 Water Temperature: 79

Meanwhile, down on the Northern Neck, Joe and Whit have settled into slow, steady “waterman time” for the last stretch of their journey down the lower Potomac. Today’s paddle took them 16 miles from Coles Point in Hague VA to the Coan River Marina in Lottsburg, VA. As Whit says, the further they travel, the friendlier people get . . . and they’ve been friendly the whole way along. The Coan River Marina owner actually offered the guys the use of his car for reprovisioning. They’re

now happily ensconced in a campsite with fresh food and a grill, preparing to rise before dawn for the next-to-last leg of an amazing and educational trip.

Thursday, August 23, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.15 Water Temperature: 80

Joe and Whit made it all the way to Smith Point, VA today—the very southernmost tip of the Potomac, where the Nation’s River meets the Chesapeake Bay. It’s hard to believe they’ve been on the water for eight days straight, paddling seven hours a day or more. Today was especially challenging with a crosswind all the way down. They’ve now traversed the entire tidal Potomac. Wow. Congrats guys!

For those of you who’ve been missing the voice of Joe, there’s a terrific interview with the man himself on the Potomac Riverkeeper blog. Check it out, it’s pure Joe Hage.

Here on the Island today, there were two pileated woodpeckers play-fighting in the maple trees overhanging the deck. I also saw a beaver swimming in the channel at dusk, to and from the big hole on the bank near the ferry landing.

This week I’ve had the opportunity to observe the many varieties of nettle-like plants that are in full bloom on the Island right now. For better or worse, there’s a healthy biodiversity of nettles here! The true stinging varieties include the original stinging nettle, tall nettle, and alternate-leaved wood nettle. Their non-stinging relatives include clearweed, false nettle, and lots of three-seeded mercury. A shout-out here to my son Kevin, who fell hard into a patch of nettles on the towpath when he was a small child. He had his stings soothed with jewelweed, the nettle antidote, but it hurt quite a lot. I’m proud to say that despite this and other early traumas, he’s gone forth into adulthood to become a skilled outdoor educator and wilderness guide.

Friday, August 24, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.12 Water Temperature: 81

Island-to-Island has landed! Joe and Whit traversed the mouth of the Potomac today to land safely at Point Lookout MD. Congratulations guys!

I’d like to say a special thank-you to all the members who’ve made my time here as substitute caretaker a wonderful experience. Everyone’s been extra friendly and helpful. It’s truly been a pleasure to be of service to such a cool community of people.

Wednesday, August 29, 2012

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.12 Water Temperature: 81

Well, I’m back on the Island and it’s nice to be home. It’s great to be back at this relatively narrow part of the river and to be free of the tidal fluctuations of its lower reaches. Don’t get me wrong, I had a fabulous trip and it was amazing to be at Smith point, the Virginia side of the river mouth. But let me add that I don’t think I’ll be doing that 14 mile (4.5 hour) crossing from Smith point to Point Lookout every week.

It’s great to be back but the caretaker’s work is never done. It’s time to change the water filters, fix the pulley on the ferry, cut the grass, clear the trails, put up the new zip line, etc., etc.

I want to send a very special thank you to Mary Kearney for watching the Island while I was away! She had to have been the most conscientious substitute that I’ve ever had. Not only is the place clean and organized but she also spent many hours updating the log and keeping everyone tuned into my trip down the river. Thanks Mary!

JOE HAGE and MARY KEARNEY

The Fishing Derby scheduled for Saturday, September 15 may be cancelled due to the situation with the bridge. Please check the website for current information.

**Put it on your calendar:
October 9th, 11:00 a.m. on the Island
(if bridge is passable)**

**Old Timers, Goodtimers, Boldtimers.
We don’t know exactly what to call those of us seeking a mid-week get-together to talk about our summer adventures, travels, and hopes for the fall. Everyone is welcome. If the spirit moves you, bring a story, a joke, a poem, an observation to share. And, oh yes, food. . . a dish to share as well.**

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The Sycamore Islander

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Tree falls on steel bridge over canal at Sycamore Island

The storm that moved through the area on Saturday (September 8) pulled down a large oak tree that sheared off the top branches of a nearby oak and landed on the steel bridge over the canal that club members use to access Sycamore Island. The bridge is impassable until the large oak branches are cleared. There is certainly some damage to the bridge, though there is reason to believe it may still be structurally sound. The Fishing Derby next weekend may be called off.



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 and in advance of the monthly meeting. 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, cbeehler@comcast.net. The deadline for inclusion in the October issue is September 28.