



The Sycamore Islander

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President's Letter

The Island is beautiful in winter— quiet and serene. Caretaker Joe Hage reports only a handful of visitors. I was there recently on a cold but sunny day. There was a dusting of snow and the water seemed to be moving sluggishly because it was near freezing. The air seems clearer and crisper without foliage. Ice was melting on the trees, and Bobby Benjamin, who was there too, said he saw tiny rainbows on the river created by forming ice. Birds and water fowl were everywhere. Joe had a warm wood-stove fire going; the bathroom has been winterized, and the steps to the shed in back of the club house are magnificent. Check out Joe's blog on the club website, and excerpted in *The Islander*, for wonderful details of winter life on the Island. (Also check out the short video about the Potomac Riverkeeper featuring the riverkeeper and our Joe Hage. <http://vimeo.com/57551075>)

The Ad Hoc Safety Committee, formed at the last meeting, headed by Captain Drew Walsh and vice president Sherry Fizdale, is actively considering ways to insure safety on the Island, consistent with our traditions of *laissez faire*. It is important, particularly for new members and wait listers, and most particularly for children and teenagers, to understand and respect the river, which can be dangerous. We had a couple of close calls last year with swimmers. Everyone in the club must help create safety awareness. One tragedy

would be disastrous for the club. (See Swimming Supervisor Larry Heilman's report inside.)

Some dates to mark on calendars—

Spring Work Session April 7 with rain date April 14
Downriver Race—May 11

**The next Club meeting is Wednesday February 13,
at home of Star Mitchell—8705 Hemstead Avenue,
Bethesda.**

BILL MARMON
President



BACKYARD BIRDCAPES

Minutes for the January 9 Meeting

After thanking our gracious hosts Judy and John Lentz, the meeting was called to order by President Bill Marmon.

Attendees: Lawrence C. Heilman, John Noble, John Lentz, David Winer, Jim Drew, Tryon Wells, Jody Benjamin, Judy Lentz, Cindy Bertaut, Sherry Fizdale, Pat Roth, Alan Gelb, Louis Smith, Jonathan Zimmerman, Richard Lodish, William F. Marmon, Bill Eichbaum and Ann Marie Cunningham.

Minutes: The minutes of the December meeting as they appeared in the *Islander* were approved. An email had been received from Trip Reid, requesting an amendment to the November minutes, in the section on large parties. The section was amended to indicate that an appropriate penalty for violation of the large party rules such as done by Paul Stanton and Kathleen Hooke be community service for the benefit of the club.

Captain: Drew Walsh reported that he is eagerly awaiting (and very grateful for) the completion of the workbench that Dave Winer is building.

Treasurer's Report: Alan Gelb reported that the Club closed 2012 with expenditures that were 0.7% above budget, due to unexpected large expenditures, including fixing the roof and a new water pump, and insurance costs higher than expected. There were savings on the cost of the *Islander*, maintenance and supplies.

Income was higher than expected, so the club ended the year with a higher carryover than any year since the late 1990s, but it is still below the goal of one year's operational spending. The balance on the construction notes has dropped from an original balance of \$65,000 to \$49,875.

Membership Report: Dues notices have been mailed. Margaret and Pat Barry have indicated that they will not renew their membership. It is expected that others will not renew, or will accept senior status.

Louis Smith, Elizabeth Ewing, and their three sons were nominated and accepted for membership in the club, having completed an application and all requirements for membership. Two members have written letters of recommendation extolling his and his family's virtues.

Jack Bauer, an applicant on the waiting list, died of a heart attack at age 37 last month.

Relief Caretaking: Patricia Harge, Alison Levine, Jennifer Urguhart, and Star Mitchell served as relief caretakers in December, for which we are very grateful.

Large Parties: 13 large parties were held in 2012 on 5 weekends. There were as many denied as approved, due to the requests not being for parties on an odd-numbered date or because the hosts had not completed three volunteer activities for the club.

Old Business: Our captain, Drew Walsh, and vice president Sherry Fizdale, will co-chair a survey of water and canoeing safety precautions to determine whether our precautions are adequate considering the number of children on the Island and the risks inherent in the Potomac. Larry Heilman circulated a memo with recommendations that he feels should be considered. The committee will consider methods of communicating to the membership and methods to maintain what is done. They will act quickly in order to have improvements in place before this spring.

2013 Calendar: The spring workfest has been scheduled for April 7 (raindate April 14). Watch *The Islander* for the dates for these activities:

- New member orientation
- Canoe class
- Downriver race
- Solstice dance party
- Fishing derby
- Flower walk
- Regatta
- River cleanup
- Old-Timers luncheon

Bill Marmon, as he concluded his first meeting as president, encouraged us all to:

- Consider writing articles for publication in *The Islander*
- Suggest programs that will help us all to learn something, even if it is only what fun we can have on the Island.

After thanking our hosts Judy and John for their hospitality and refreshments, the meeting was adjourned. The next meeting will be at the home of Star Mitchell.

Respectfully submitted,
ANN MARIE CUNNINGHAM
Co-Recording Secretary

We are all lifeguards

Swimming in the Potomac River is one of the marvelous features of being a member of the Sycamore Island Club. However, with the privileges associated with enjoying the river comes the responsibility on the part of every club member to approach the river with an awareness of the dangers involved in swimming in the river.

We have no professional lifeguards on the Island to insure swim safety. Consequently, each of us may be pressed into the role of a virtual lifeguard who must respond to an emergency situation. What follows are specifications for the Swim Safety Infrastructure that will be in place by June 1. Knowledge of the equipment and how to use it is central to club members being able to effectively respond to a call for help.

Swim Safety Infrastructure

- Five Swim Safety Stations will be created and placed at the Swim Float, Swim Dock, Captain's Dock, Ferry Landing, and Canoe Dock. Each station will be equipped with a whistle, throw ring, pole, and rescue float.
- A canoe with safety equipment will be placed at the Swim Dock.
- A rowboat with safety equipment will be placed at the Captain's Dock.
- A depth meter, which will be colored coded, will be placed in the vicinity of the Swim Dock.
- The Ferry will be equipped with swim safety equipment.

We will schedule a day in June to provide instruction on how to use the equipment on the Swim Safety Stations.

Comments from club members are welcomed.

LARRY HEILMAN
Swim Committee Chair, lcheilman@verizon.net

Dues Reminder!

Thanks to the many of you who have paid your 2013 dues or waiting list fees.

If you haven't yet sent in your check, please do so as soon as you can.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact
Lisa Kliefoth, at LCKliefoth@gmail.com.

From the By-Laws:

A member whose dues have not been received by the Financial Secretary by April 1, or in the case of quarterly payers, by February 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1, shall be dropped from membership, without advance notice to the member required.

Any applicant whose fee is not received by the Financial Secretary by April 1 shall be withdrawn from the waiting list without advance notice to the applicant required.

Members or applicants who seek reinstatement shall be obliged to reapply as new applicants, unless there are extenuating circumstances as determined by the Membership Secretary.



JOE HAGE

Notes from the Island

Friday, January 4, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.9 Water Temperature: 37

I bought the songbirds a Christmas present—I finally went out and got them some birdseed. I was resisting, partly because of the expense but also because last year I think the easy access to food attracted a rat. The feeder has been full for the past week and so far no rats but it has been great watching the woodpeckers and tit-mice coming and going at the feeder. One downy woodpecker was under my living room pecking away, and it sounded so much like someone knocking that I had to go see if someone was at the door.

It's truly winter now and there are some new birds in town. Lately, I've seen a common merganser, a bufflehead and pied-billed grebes, all from the Island. Last Sunday, as the sun was beginning to set, Mary and I took a walk along the tow path toward the dam and we saw four tundra swans flying in tight formation. First, they flew up river, then we saw them fly back downstream again, very cool.

I finished up the carpentry work that had to be done around the new windows on the tool shed and last night I made a fire to burn all of the wood scraps. While I was out there, our twenty some resident Canada geese came swimming by. I'm not sure how I know that these were the same geese I see all of the time, but they just seemed to act like they lived here. I think they wanted to hang out on the Island but once they saw me and my fire they continued up towards Rupperts. I watched as they silently went by, their dark shapes silhouetted against the reflection of the sky on the water. Then, KA-SPLASH, a fat beaver broke the silence with a big tail-slap and made my heart jump. Damn beaver.

Tuesday, January 8, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.7 Water Temperature: 37

So I never turned off the water to the clubhouse and now that we're headed for a long stretch of warmer weather, I'm glad I didn't. It's just easier, if we have a lot of visitors over the weekend, to have all the toilets and faucets working.

The expected warm weather may slow down the arrival of the winter waterfowl but yesterday I had an excellent look at a small group of lesser scaups. The



Ann Boneau standing next to her old canoe

males are very striking with black head and tail and a solid white center, it's easy to tell that they are not the ducks that we usually see down here. The females are cool too, dark brown with a clear-cut white patch at the base of the bill. They were so close that I could even see their orangeish eyes, contrasting nicely against their black feathers.

Ann Boneau was down here on Sunday. She and her husband, Alan, have decide to end their membership at Sycamore Island. She came down here with some friends to pick up the canoe that they had stored here since 1979! I did not know Ann and Alan very well, they haven't been regular visitors during my tenure but I'm sure it was different 33 years ago when their kids were teenagers and their old Lincoln Canoe was new. Its sad, in a way, to see old members leave the club. I know that it means more room for newer families but every time a member leaves, a little part of the history of the club is lost. Gone now is the old canoe from rack F5, it will probably be replaced by one of those new-fangled stand-up paddle boards, how sad is that? All the best to Ann and Alan, we'll miss you on the Island.

I'm still puttzing around with the new windows in the tool shed. I replaced one of the broken panes and today I will trim out the inside of the windows with the 1" x 2" pieces of wood. Next, we have to decide on the



JOE HAGE

Shrouded in fog

best way to latch the windows shut.

Last Saturday Mary and I hiked the Potomac Heritage Trail. Its a trail that runs along the Virginia shore from Roosevelt Island all the way up to the American Legion Bridge,(formerly known as the Cabin John Bridge, or beltway bridge). We jumped on the trail right here across from Sycamore Island. After paddling across the river, we had the most enjoyable four hours of hiking. The scenery is awesome, especially in winter, and once you get to Georgetown, it's easy to find a cold beer and a sandwich as a reward. Lucky for us, we got a ride back up river, but there is a bus that will take you from Georgetown back up to Brookmont.

Wednesday, January 9, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.5 Water Temperature: 39

This past Sunday, one of the new wait-list members came down to the Island. It was good to see a new face, but what was cool was that he didn't come down to use the club, he came down exclusively to have a one on one orientation with the caretaker. I thought that this was a great idea for all members, new and old alike. I

think that it was very helpful for Fred to walk around the island with me and have me talk about where everything is and how everything works.

Monday, January 14, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.3 Water Temperature: 41

I was a little surprised to see that the river is on the rise. I didn't think we had enough rain to make it shoot up like it did yesterday. Plus, they are predicting the river to get over five feet by Wednesday. I thought that maybe there had been a large dam release upstream, but then I realized what was going on. My first clue came was when I went to look at the conditions at White Grass, the X-country ski resort. That's right, we didn't have much rain but the warm weather has melted all of the snow in the mountains and all of that snow is now river water.

The other weather story is the fog. I can't remember a time when the Island has been so socked in for so long. The fog descended upon us on Saturday night and stayed all the way until Sunday night. The fog was so thick that I couldn't see the Virginia at all, and

Ruppert's island was just a hint of trees in the distance. The fog was so bad at one point that even the landing on the Maryland shore was obscured. Mary and I decided that we didn't want to miss the chance at being on the river in such a thick fog. I thought it would be cool to be on the river in a cloud and not be able to see land at all. We paddled out to the middle of the river and when the Virginia shore came into view, Sycamore Island was so shrouded in mist that we couldn't even see the clubhouse.

I did some more cleaning and organizing in the tool shed and I have enough junk now, old cables, curtain rods, and the metal from the ping-pong table, to warrant a trip to the scrap yard. I repaired two broken thwarts on the club canoes and had to scrub the mud from the inside of another. I think I need to put my foot down in regards to how the members and their guests leave the canoes they borrow. Listen people, if you don't want to be responsible for cleaning the mud from the canoe you use, don't use a canoe. Simple as that.

Wednesday, January 16, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.2 Water Temperature: 41
THE FERRY IS CLOSED!

It's too bad that all of this rain isn't snow. If it was snowing I could go skiing and the river wouldn't be flooding. Oh well, that's how life is. The river is expected to get up to seven feet by Friday so I think the ferry will be closed until Monday at the earliest, but you never know. I do wish the sun would come out. I haven't seen the sun since it was out very briefly on Saturday.

Monday, January 21, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.2 Water Temperature: 41
Happy Martin Luther King Day! Happy Inauguration Day! How fitting to have the second swearing-in of the first black President to be on MLK's birthday. When I was four-years-old my parents took the family to a Martin Luther King Rally in Nashville, Tennessee. Two years later, after moving to D.C., I can remember the tragic day that he was killed.

The ferry will be closed all day today, but first thing tomorrow, we'll be back in business.

I will be winterizing the bathrooms and Club kitchen today, so the only running water will be in the men's bathroom.

I was away on Friday and Saturday and when I

returned yesterday the ferry was high and dry. It had become stuck on the dock after the river receded. Usually, if I put a long leash on the ferry it will drift away from the dock but this time there must have been a breeze that pushed it up on the Island. I wasn't too optimistic about my chances of getting the ferry free. The tip of one end of the ferry was slightly in the water but the other end was resting on top of one of the vertical posts of the dock so that the deck of the ferry was at waist height. I tried to use a long 2 x 6 to pry it free but the ferry was just too heavy. I had one more trick to try before I had to call in some help. I moved all of the roofing shingles, cinder blocks and other counter weights to the opposite end of the ferry. This was a little dicey as it made the ferry pitch dramatically toward the river. The ferry was at a very steep angle then, with the island-side sticking up in the air. I climbed back off of the ferry and to my surprise, I was able to lift the ferry free.

Tuesday, January 22, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.9 Water Temperature: 38
It looks like we may get some ice on the river this week.

The eagles have been spotted at the nest so it won't be long before they lay their eggs again.

Wednesday, January 23, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.5 Water Temperature: 35
I have the water running again. I had to open the modular walls in order to heat the entire men's bathroom, but the pipes are thawed and running again.

The pipes froze last night and there is no longer running water in the winter bathroom. It never got real cold for very long last winter, so this is the first chance we've had to test our new system of insulating and delivering water to the winter bath, it failed. I guess that the low voltage wire that we have snuggled up against the pipe just wasn't enough to keep the pipes from freezing while they cross the locker room.

Thursday, January 24, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 4.3 Water Temperature: 35
Stone Soup Films did a short documentary about Potomac Riverkeeper featuring Whit Overstreet and myself. Check it out at <http://vimeo.com/57551075>

It's kind of nice to have a little snow on the ground this morning. So far the river hasn't frozen. I'm afraid that once the wind stops blowing, the river is going to



Joe at the Blue Plains Treatment Plant

instantly freeze. I've got my fingers crossed that I won't have to face an icy crossing this week.

Saturday, January 26, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 3.9 Water Temperature: 33

The river hasn't frozen yet but it may freeze tonight. It's been quite wintry on the Island lately. I was crossing the river the other day with the snow blowing and the whitecaps crashing and it occurred to me that the Island looked like a remote fishing village in Alaska. The only thing that was missing were the sled dogs. Thankfully, it's supposed to get warmer on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Snow on the ground means animal tracks, and its fun to go out in the morning and play nature detective. I did find some tracks but they seem to have posed more questions than they answered. Like, I have squirrel tracks but I haven't seen a squirrel on the Island in months. Also, There were dog-like prints in the snow by the tree house. My first thought was that they were fox tracks but the fox usually don't swim over. Was it a coyote? Is it still on the Island? Very strange.

I saw a ruddy duck! Actually there were three of them, one male and two females, feeding near the ferry yesterday morning. I've never seen one in the wild, not that I recall. I do remember seeing a pair of stuffed

ruddy ducks hanging on the wall at the Jefferson Island Club but it was much better seeing them live with their pudgy bodies and over-sized bills. They were not in breeding plumage, of course, so the males lacked their bright-colored feathers and looked almost identical to the females.

I had to add a chain to the telephone pole on the mainland. I called it a telephone pole but it is actually the pole that holds the cable that holds the pulleys that are chained to the ferry. It's an important part of our ferry system and the other day I noticed that it was wobbling quite a bit. My solution may not work for the long term but I was able to stabilize the pole but using the come-along and chaining it to another tree upstream.

Thursday, January 31, 2013

Water Level at Little Falls: 8.1 Water Temperature: 33
THE FERRY IS CLOSED

I had a rude awakening this morning. I got out of bed and looked out the window to see that the river had flooded over night and that the dock was under water!

The river had gone up four feet while I was sleeping! I relized it was going to be another Sycamore Island, day of adventure. I rushed out to recue my canoe that was upside down and half submerged next to the board walk. I tried to raise the rope for the bell but I couldn't pull it from the tight jaws of the river, and I had to cut it. There was another canoe on the viginia-side shore but it was already floating upside down and out of reach. Luckily I had it tied off.

Unfortunately though, the ferry was on the mainland side of the river and was taking the brunt of the river's force. I paddled over and worked on getting all of the logs, branches and debri free from the ferry chains. I put both chains on the front of the ferry and tied it to the mainland with a long leash. It was still getting battered against the sycamore tree but there was nothing I could do about it. There was no way I was going to try to pull the ferry to the Island in 7.5 feet of rushing river.

I'm off to tour the Blue Plains sewage treatment plant this morning. Then, since the ferry is closed, I'm headed to White Grass Ski Touring Center for the weekend! See you next week!

JOE HAGE
Caretaker

The Sycamore Islander

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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:

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The deadline for inclusion in the March issue is March 1.