



Cattails

7130 Marshy Point Road, Middle River, MD 21220
www.marshypoint.org
410-887-2817



The Marshy Point Nature Center Council Newsletter March - April - May 2019

Spring Festival

April 20
10 am ~ 4 pm



Speaker Series



"Safe Skies Maryland" by Beth Decker March 19, 7:00 p.m.

Birds, like humans, cannot see glass. Collisions with glass on buildings and on homes is a leading cause of bird mortality, second only to habitat loss. Beth will discuss some of the human caused hazards to birds and how we can help.

"Surviving the Tropical Rainforest" by Bob Stanhope April 16, 7:00 p.m.

The Amazon is the world's largest rainforest. Retired Baltimore County Naturalist, Bob Stanhope will share the adventure and excitement of his trip down the Amazon by riverboat and canoe.



Amazon tributaries near Manaus



"The Thin Green Line" The Joys and Sorrows of a Conservation Officer by Loren Lustig May 21, 7:00 p.m.

What happens to Game Wardens when they are out and on patrol? Loren will share highlights, surprises and true tales from working on the front lines of conservation.

Spring Is Time for Asparagus!

Gerry Oshman



Asparagus is one of the first plants that greets us in spring. Asparagus have male and female plants, with the female plants producing berries. Since asparagus is a cool-season crop, Maryland has the right climate. While it usually takes a couple of years to get your first asparagus crop, they are relatively easy to grow and can be productive for up to 25 years.

How to plant asparagus

As soon as the soil can be worked in early spring, asparagus should be planted from one-year-old plants, called crowns. Asparagus likes dry feet, so make sure your garden bed has good drainage. Another option is planting asparagus crowns in a raised bed. Make sure your soil is free from weeds and turned over at least three to four inches

down. Mix in a good compost with your about a few days before planting to avoid burning the delicate crowns.

Dig shallow trenches about 6 inches deep by 12 inches wide. Space the crowns 12 to 18 inches apart in rows that are 4 to 5 feet apart. Be sure to spread the roots out with the buds pointing upward. Cover the trench completely with soil. Add 4 to 8 inches of mulch and water regularly.

In order for the asparagus to grow out its root systems, don't harvest any spears the first year, but cut down dead foliage in late fall and add some compost to the soil. In the second year, add compost in spring and cut down foliage again in fall, keeping the bed thickly mulched. If all goes well, by the third year, you'll have your very own irresistible tender, young asparagus spears!

Backyard Bird Feeding

Ben Porter

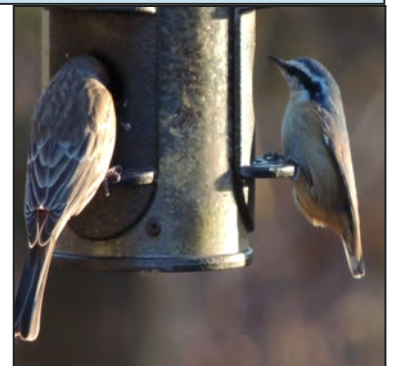
Backyard bird feeding is one of the most popular hobbies in the United States. Indeed, the National Audubon Society suggests that as many as 40% of Americans feed birds. This hobby can be rewarding and relaxing, provides an opportunity to observe wildlife up close and presents unexpected opportunities such as participating in a citizen science program like the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project Feeder Watch: <http://feederwatch.org/>. Clearly feeding our backyard birds provides plenty of benefits to people but does it actually help the birds?

With 30 years of data, Project Feeder Watch researchers recently took on the question (<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/analysis-do-bird-feeders-help-or-hurt-birds/>). Most of the species that frequent backyard feeders appear to have stable or increasing populations. On the other hand many of the bird species that are most in need of conservation are those that do not visit feeders, such as shore birds, forest birds, seabirds, and tropical species. All this means that feeding birds has little direct benefit for the species that need the most help. Hopefully the interest and enjoyment of feeding birds in the back yard will encourage and motivate people to take an interest in the species that really are in trouble.

To be sure that your backyard bird feeding efforts are indeed helping our feathered friends there are a few best practices to keep in mind. The birds your feeder attracts will depend what kinds of food you're offering. Your feeder should keep the food dry and will be designed for specific types of food. Although general purpose seed mixes might be the cheapest bird food, they're not the best. These kinds of mixes contain large amounts of seeds that most birds won't eat. These filler seeds end up on the ground, start to rot, and can attract rodents and harbor disease. Providing a few different seed options can be less messy and keeps different bird species at different feeders thus reducing the risk of your feeders spreading pathogens such as house finch eye disease or parasites.

Black oil sunflower is a good general purpose food. Although the seeds themselves will not end up as waste on the ground it is still important to clean up the sunflower hulls under your feeder every couple of months. Black oil sunflower can also be purchased already hulled but represents a more expensive option. Suet is a cake made out of animal fat that will attract a number of insect eating birds such as woodpeckers, nuthatches, and is also eaten by tufted titmice and chickadees. Thistle seed can be offered in tube feeders with very narrow feeding ports and appeals to finches, especially American Goldfinches. Some backyard bird enthusiasts also offer pieces of fruit and live mealworms to attract species such as orioles, tanagers, and bluebirds that won't eat seeds or suet. In the warmer months a nectar feeder will bring you the amazing aerial displays of hummingbirds.

Although there aren't health inspections at a backyard bird cafe, a feeding station does need to be kept clean. This means raking up the hulls of seeds from the ground periodically and also disinfecting the feeders every few months. Scrubbing feeders out with a bottle brush and then soaking them in a 10% bleach solution every few months will keep a backyard bird eatery up to health standards. Stop by Marshy Point to check out the visitors to our feeders or come along on one of our monthly Sunday Birdwalks to learn more about the birds that you can encounter.



Spring Has Sprung at Marshy Point

Michele Oshman



"If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" asked poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. During long winters, it certainly seems far behind indeed. The good news is that as long as the earth revolves around the sun, and the earth is still tilted on its axis, spring will come to Marshy Point. And when it does, the plants and animals stir with revived energy. This article touches on some of what takes place when warmer weather returns.

We humans have many indicators that spring has arrived. We have calendars that mark off the passing of time. Stores put their spring finery on display and nurseries stock up on ceramic gnomes and other garden necessities. The sports announcer on the evening news ticks off the score from that day's baseball spring training games. However, the surest sign that spring is here is that the days get longer and the weather gets warmer, and this is how plants and animals know that it's time to get started on springtime activities.

Animals that have been hibernating in the winter come out of their sleep-like state. Black bears are probably the first hibernating mammal that comes to mind, but in Maryland, bears tend to live in the western part of the state and are unlikely to look for spring berries at Marshy Point. Bats hibernate during the winter. These include big brown bats, little brown bats, and tri-colored bats. Groundhogs also hibernate in burrows dug below the frost line, stirring when the ground warms in March or April.

Other animals, such as skunks, raccoons, and chipmunks, spend the winter in a semi-hibernation state called torpor. This is a short-term state of low physical activity that helps the animal survive the cold weather. White-tailed deer remain active during the winter. They mate in late fall so the fawns are born in the spring. They join skunks, raccoons, and chipmunks in resuming higher-energy activities when the weather warms in springtime.

Reptiles and amphibians, as a rule, live all their lives in the same area and use various methods to stay warm in the winter. Turtles and toads, for example, burrow in the dirt, often in ponds. Garter snakes clump in a group in tight rock crevices. When the sun warms the earth in spring, these animals emerge to begin sunning themselves.

Some animals stay active during the winter. In Maryland, northern cardinals, tundra swans, bald eagles, canvasback ducks, and bobcats remain active all winter long.

Plants go into high gear when the ground warms and the days get longer. Flowering plants grow their reproductive systems, creating spring flowers. Their pollen creates food for insects, which then spread the pollen to create seeds, which are spread into the environment. Some plants create berries and other fruits, which invigorated animals rely on to support their reproductive efforts.

With winter over and food more abundant, animals turn their attention to reproduction. Birds sing to attract mates. Amphibians such as salamanders, toads, and frogs head to the water to lay eggs. As noted, deer time their mating in order to give birth in the spring and other species also use this strategy.

Spring brings a host of activities for Marshy Point plants and animals. Visitors to Marshy Point Nature Center can learn more about what goes on along the Chesapeake Bay when the weather warms.

Skunk Cabbage

Anna Stoll

Skunk cabbage—what an odd name for a plant. Is it really a cabbage and does it smell like a skunk? No, it's not a cabbage, but it does smell like a skunk when the leaves are damaged. The scientific name for skunk cabbage is *Symplocarpus foetidus*, and the plants are found in moist woodlands and along streams throughout much of the eastern part of the country.

Skunk cabbage is a thermogenic plant, which means it has the ability to warm the ground around it, allowing the plant to emerge in late winter or very early spring when snow or ice might still be on the ground. The first to emerge is a mottled purple leaf called a spathe, which surrounds the spadix, a stem with many tiny petalless flowers. The spadix resembles the peace lily flower, to which skunk cabbage is distantly related. The spadix gives off a foul odor which attracts flies and other insects that pollinate the plant. After blooming, the leaves emerge, which resemble cabbage leaves. The entire plant will grow to be 1–3 inches tall. The plants spread over time and can cover a large area.

In the past, Native Americans used dried skunk cabbage as a medicine for a variety of ailments, and some modern herbalists continue to use it. Skunk cabbage leaves contain oxalic acid, which will cause a burning sensation in the mouth of humans and many mammals, but the leaves are eaten by deer and bears. The skunk cabbage roots are toxic.

If you're walking in the woods in late winter or early spring, be on the lookout for skunk cabbage. If the flowers are in bloom, you will probably smell the plants before you see them. The bright green leaves are a welcome sight early in the season when there isn't much color to be seen.



President's Thoughts

Dave Oshman

What strange weather we have had so far this winter! Unseasonably mild, and now, as I type this up in late January, we are sitting in the deep freeze of the polar vortex. I hope you've had a chance to enjoy all of Maryland's seasons. Winter is one of the best times to see migratory birds, but I really look forward to spring. And what better way to kick off spring than to visit our Annual Spring Festival on April 20th?

Will This Year Be As Wet As the Last?

As everyone that lives locally knows, 2018 was a wet year. The final numbers show that precipitation at BWI airport for the year totaled 71.82 inches. Record keeping in Baltimore goes back to 1871. There were 145 days where it either rained or snowed a measurable amount. That's 35 days more than the average year. Multiple records were set for single-day rainfall amounts. The current rainfall total for January 2019 is about 0.3 inches more than average, so we are already starting out with a wet year.

What does all this mean, and what should we expect this year? For years, climate scientists have been stating that these types of scenarios are bound to happen due to the warming of the atmosphere. Does this mean that this wet weather is going to be the "new normal" for this area? At Marshy Point, one of our most iconic natural features and most important is the vernal ponds. In the spring, as the snow melts and the world starts to warm, these "temporary" ponds fill up with water. Amphibians lay their eggs in the ponds and the frogs, toads, and salamanders hatch and begin transforming. As the ponds begin to dry, they begin growing legs and preparing to be able to survive out of water. What will happen if these ponds don't begin to dry, like they have in most previous years?

I certainly don't have the answers, but it makes me think about what is happening with our environment. We all know that there are things we can be doing to help out. Reduce, reuse, recycle. Drive less, walk or bike more. Eat less meat or become vegetarian (perhaps just a few days per week). Buy local. Let's redouble our efforts with what we do to help heal our environment and hope that this year isn't as wet as last.



Native Plant Sale to Benefit Programs and Animal Care

Order your plants by April 26

Pick-up on May 18 & 19, 10am to 3pm

***Order form available for complete list of flowers and trees.**

*** Marshy Point Scholarships ***

The Marshy Point Nature Center awards scholarships are presented yearly to college-bound seniors and undergraduate college students who have shown a high level of commitment to the health of the environment and who plan to continue their studies in environmental sciences or nature education, and who have shown a strong affiliation with Marshy Point Nature Center. Qualified applicants are college-bound seniors from Baltimore County or undergraduate college students who wish to pursue a career in nature education or environmental sciences. Applications will be available online (www.marshypoint.org) or by calling the Center.

Marshy Point Newsletter Staff

Editor: Gerry Oshman, Layout and Design: Ginny Elliott

Director's Report

Ben Porter



Spring is an exciting time in the natural world and an exciting time at Marshy Point. The relative quiet of winter time afforded opportunities to work on a number of projects around the park and nature center. In the nature center, a new exhibit is well underway in the area of the osprey cam monitor. Building off the nest theme already there, the new exhibit reveals how different birds nest and depend on specific features of their habitats that we might not otherwise think much about: dead trees, eroded banks, and even marshy shorelines. Outside, along the blue trail expanded and improved housing for our birds of prey aims to give our raptor residents safe and comfortable homes.

On a hike further into the park, it is hard not to notice that the ponds and wetlands are not only full but overflowing. 2018 was the wettest year on record in our area with six feet of precipitation, a full two feet above normal. Ponds and wetlands that would normally have dried at the end of summer have remained filled and areas of the forest that are usually dry have become temporary wetlands. With Marshy Point really living up to its name these days, visitors to the park are likely to encounter muddy and sometimes even flooded trails. A hike at Marshy Point this time of years is best taken in waterproof boots. All of this water has consequences for plants and animals as well. Some large trees around the park have gone over as their roots were unable to hold them upright on saturated ground. Some of our young paw paw trees near the nature center have also not survived the saturation. Amphibians are breeding this time of year but with more flooded areas of forest, their activities are more widely dispersed than usual. Other animals depend on finding dry places to lay their eggs or make their dens. This year's breeding season might be a bit more difficult than usual for them. Excessive rainfall also impacts the health of the entire Chesapeake Bay. It can change the usual patterns of salinity, brings more sediment and pollution, and carries storm debris from far inland down the bay's river systems.

These and other implications of our extra rainy year raise questions about future patterns of weather and climate. Was our recent rainfall record an anomaly or something we might soon see more commonly? If so, other shifts in weather and climate will certainly continue to change local conditions over time.

Chesapeake Adventurers Pre-K

Bella Kline



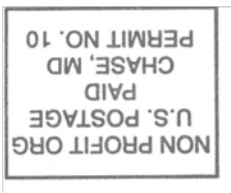
Last spring we launched the Chesapeake Adventurer's PreK Program here at Marshy Point. Our mission is to offer children ages 3 to 5 a primarily outdoor learning experience. Each week the Adventurers focus on a new nature based theme and set out on daily expeditions in the park to fortify that theme. Through inquisition and discovery we facilitate a curriculum based on teamwork, problem solving and consideration.

Alongside their two Adventure Guides, Ranger Bella Kline and Ranger Courtney Meadows, the Adventurers journey through the forests, wetlands, and tidal creeks that make up the coastal plains of Marshy Point. We explore vernal ponds, play in meadows and climb trees. Along the way, we discover the flora and fauna that surrounds us, allowing each child to make their own special connection with nature.

We hope that over time the children in our program will grow to trust themselves and each other, deepening their love and respect for the natural world.

This January marks our first ever Winter Session of the Chesapeake Adventurers Program. We believe in experiencing our environment through every kind of weather it offers and so the Adventurers have been suiting up each week and creating memorable experiences in Maryland's coastal plain during winter. Some of our favorite winter themes so far have been The Arctic & Antarctic and Animal Homes & Hibernation. On our hikes around the park the Adventurers were able to spot different animal homes like a squirrel's drey and a tree's cavity, perfect for a barred owl. The Adventurers have been making the most of our snow and ice by experimenting with melting point and learning how to follow blazed trees through the park when the trail is covered in snow. Needless to say, we have been having a blast this winter out in the park!





Wildlife Corner - For the Love of Snakes

Valerie Greenhalgh



Snake: a long limbless reptile covered with smooth, living scales, having no legs and no eyelids. For some, the mere mention of the word invokes fear. But snakes are very often misunderstood and underappreciated. If you are cringing right now, read on and maybe you will begin to feel different about snakes.

Snakes and other reptiles are important to the balance of our environment and act as bioindicators due to their choice of prey, method of movement, and reproductive needs. Carnivorous middle predators, snakes' prey includes lizards, eggs, fish, birds, insects, frogs, other snakes, and small mammals. If you decide to relocate a snake, keep in mind that they have a homing instinct that will draw them back to their home territory, likely because of familiarity and food supply.

Some fun and interesting facts: A snake's lower jaw is loosely attached to its skull, enabling it to open its mouth widely and consume food larger than its head. Snakes use their tongues for smell, have eyes that never close, and are masters of camouflage. They shed their skin several times a year to allow for growth and for other reasons, such as eliminating parasites.

In Maryland, there are 25 species of snakes and two subspecies. The most common are the black racer, the northern brown snake, the rat snake, the eastern garter, and the ring-necked snake. There are only two venomous snakes in Maryland, the northern copperhead and the timber rattlesnake, both of which are pit vipers. Some people believe that Maryland is home to the venomous water moccasin (a.k.a. the cottonmouth), but that snake is found further south, more common to Florida. (A quick piece of trivia—snakes are venomous because venom is injected while poison is consumed.)

If you haven't become a snake lover yet, don't take it from me. Take it from the late Steve Irwin. He greeted every snake he met with the same line: "Isn't she a beauty?!" Yes, she is, Steve.