

The Marsh Wren

SINCE 1976

THE FRIENDS OF DYKE MARSH

SPRING 2015



FODM Quarterly Meeting

Wednesday, May 13, at 7:30 p.m., Huntley Meadows Park, Norma Hoffman Visitor Center, 3701 Lockheed Blvd., Alexandria, VA 22306. Phone 703-768-2525. Free to all.

Calendar of Events

FODM 2015 Meetings
September 16 - 7:30 p.m., Joe Marx lecture on eastern forest ecosystems and challenges.

November 18 - 7:30 p.m., LoriAnne Burnette on nature's exquisite timing, phenology. See p. 7 for program details.

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Fascinating Birds

Learn How Birds Have Influenced Our Lives

Join the Friends at our quarterly meeting Wednesday, May 13, at 7:30 p.m. at the Norma Hoffman Visitor Center, Huntley Meadows Park, when FODM member William Young will give a presentation entitled "99 Reasons to be Fascinated by Birds," based on his book, *The Fascination of Birds: from the Albatross to the Yellowthroat*, released by Dover Publications in May 2014. Birds have been part of literature, music, arts, religion, linguistics, sports and more through the ages. Remember "Quoth the raven?" And the St. Louis baseball team?

Among the many things you will learn from this multi-media presentation are the origin of the term "fink" and how cranes are related to ancestry charts. Another fascinating fact: our coccyx, or tailbone, is so named because an anatomist thought it resembles the cuckoo's bill.

"The fascination for me comes from all the different ways that birds have influenced people's lives," Bill said recently. "They have inspired many words to enter many different languages. They have been powerful religious symbols for



FODM member Bill Young will talk about "Fascinating Birds" and his recent book.

FODM Business Meeting at 7 p.m. May 13 immediately before the Speaker, for members of the Friends of Dyke Marsh—see p. 2 for details.

many faiths and have been used as political symbols and sports team mascots. And of course, birds play an important role in the balance of nature."

BIRDS (Continued on page 2)

Restoration Update

In our last newsletter, we reported that Dyke Marsh restoration is "moving along." National Park Service (NPS) officials reported in early April, "The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) will finish the draft interagency agreement and get approval from their general counsel and hopefully have a signed agreement between both the Department of Interior and USACE by summer." NPS will also be working with USACE to identify engineering firms to prepare the restoration plans. George Washington Memorial Parkway Supt. Alex Romero said, "We are working hard and aggressively with



Dyke Marsh erosion continues as restoration plans drag. Photo by Ned Stone.

the USACE to enter into an interagency agreement to begin the planning and de-

RESTORATION (Continued on page 2)

FODM Business Meeting at 7 p.m.

FODM will hold a business meeting on May 13 at 7 p.m., before the speaker, to consider several updating and “housekeeping” changes to our bylaws and articles of incorporation. We must make these documents consistent and make a few other changes to help us manage the organization more efficiently and effectively. The Board of Directors has sent every member whose dues are current a copy of the proposed changes and a proxy form. If we have your email address, we sent them by email; otherwise, we sent them via the U.S. Postal Service. Please provide your proxy before the meeting to help us establish a quorum and expedite the meeting. If you have questions, contact Glenda Booth, President, at gbooth123@aol.com or 703-765-5233.



At the February 22 FODM quarterly meeting, FODMers elected the individuals listed below for a one-year term.

BIRDS (Continued from page 1)

Cosponsors of the talk are the Virginia Society of Ornithology, the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia and the Northern Virginia Bird Club. The talk is free to all. Copies of the book will be on sale for \$20 (cash or check only), with 20% of the proceeds going to Huntley Meadows Park.

Website, Membership and Email Updates

FODM is in the process of streamlining our membership processing and email systems and adding features to and upgrading our website. These changes will take place over the next two or three months. Our web address will continue to be www.fodm.org. After the change to our membership and email systems, emails that currently come from friends-of-dyke-marsh@cox.net will come instead from an address that ends with “@fodm.org.”

RESTORATION (Continued from page 1)

sign of Dyke Marsh restoration. This has been a daunting task, but I believe we have come to some resolution.”

In a Congressional hearing on March 17, Congressman Don Beyer (D-8th) posed several questions to NPS Director Jon Jarvis about the restoration’s status, but Director Jarvis’s answers were somewhat unclear. Mr. Jarvis promised to get back to the Congressman on why the \$2.5 million from National Airport mitigation funds have not been transferred as agreed in March 2013. Congressman Beyer has followed up with Director Jarvis. We look forward to the answers.

Thanks to the hard work of many Dyke Marsh supporters, NPS officials, Department of Interior officials, elected officials and others, NPS has had \$27.4 million for over 18 months and commendably, NPS has completed the final environmental impact statement/restoration plan. The FODM Board is very disappointed in the slow progress of restoration.

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www.fodm.org

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The Marsh Wren is a quarterly publication of the Friends of Dyke Marsh, Inc., a nonprofit 501(c) (3) organization. Letters and submissions to *The Marsh Wren* are welcome. Send them to the editorial address above. Board members too, can receive mail at this address. Special thanks to Duncan Hobart for managing our website (www.fodm.org), and to Paula Sullivan and Ed Eder for their photography contributions to *The Marsh Wren* and website.



President's Message

Glenda C. Booth, President, Friends of Dyke Marsh

Spring's awakening is always eventful in Dyke Marsh. Snakes and turtles stretch out to sun. Warblers return or migrate through. Fox kits leave their dens. Frogs start calling and insects start stirring.

This year, visitors delighted in an Eastern screech owl pair in a cavity quietly watching passersby on the Haul Road. We think they mated. We have confirmed one breeding pair of bald eagles and seven occupied osprey nests. And we have a new beaver lodge on the island near the bike path at Pipeline Bay.

As we approach next year's centennial of the National Park Service, President Barack Obama has announced plans to allow families of all fourth graders free admission to all national parks for one year. This could increase public support for our parks and encourage environmental stewardship in the next generation. However, given cuts to the NPS budget in recent years and the shortage of rangers already, visitor experiences could be less than ideal. NPS faces an \$11.5 billion deferred maintenance shortfall. The George Washington Memorial Parkway has a \$258 million backlog,

much of which involves parkway and building repairs. You might want to contact

"If people don't know, they don't care, and if they don't care, they don't act." – E. O. Wilson, biologist.

your U.S. senators and representatives and advocate for increased funding for our national parks.

NPS Partnership: We have prepared a work plan with the Park Service and are working on a new partnership agreement.

Pumpkin Ash Project: Pumpkin ash trees make up a significant portion of the tree canopy in Dyke Marsh. NPS officials tell us that an impending emerald ash borer infestation is likely to kill these trees over a 20-year period. With guidance from NPS (Brent Steury) and the services of Bartlett Tree Experts (Joshua Darkow), we are conducting a test project to protect two small sets of pumpkin ash trees of mixed sexes from this infestation. Bartlett will treat selected trees that hopefully will protect them for two years. If the trees withstand the infestation and continue to bloom this year and next, we and NPS will continue to treat them biannually so that a small native breeding stock can be maintained. We also hope to conduct a seed collection program.

Other Highlights

Joining forces with the Potomac Riverkeeper and the Friends of Accotink Creek, we are urging the city of Alexandria to upgrade the section of its sewer system called a combined sewer overflow, which dumps untreated sewage into the Potomac River during many rain events.

We are supporting Fairfax County's project to restore the "Quander Road outfall" and stream, a failing system in Mount Vernon Park that is sending unacceptable sediment loads into Dyke Marsh West.

In a joint project with the National Park Service, we have completed three of four seasonal brochures to help visitors identify what they might see in the preserve.

Our invasive plants team works regularly.

As we go to press, we will again welcome 30 students from the T.C. Williams High School's International Academy to Dyke Marsh. They will help us attack English ivy. And we will host a trash cleanup.

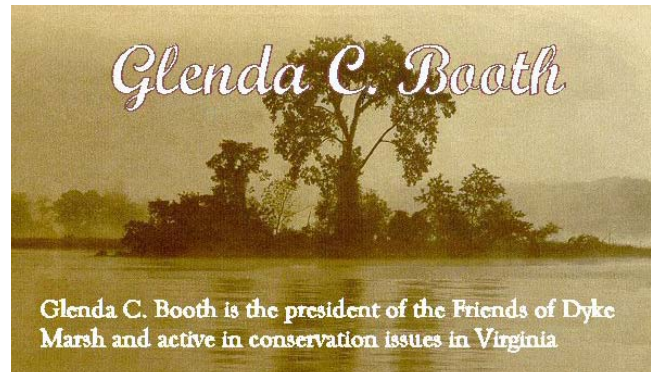
Some dedicated FODMers are surveying frogs in Dyke Marsh West. Laura Sebastianelli reports, "March 31 was the first night a frog was heard and documented in the area by a FODM FrogWatcher. A small but vocal group of spring peepers was recorded at the Belle View Elementary School in their restored wetland habitat! On April 6, a single spring peeper was heard and documented on the River Towers grounds near the community gardens. Both of these events are encouraging as previous anecdotal reports suggested that spring peepers have been absent from western Dyke Marsh for three years. FODM Frogwatchers will continue to monitor frogs through August."

On March 28, we received a community service award from the Nelly Custis Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution for our support of Dyke Marsh restoration.

See you in Dyke Marsh soon!



The flowers of the pumpkin ash tree emerged in late April. Photo by Ed Eder.



The Results of the 2014 Dyke Marsh Breeding Bird Survey

BY LARRY CARTWRIGHT, BBS Survey Coordinator

The 2014 Dyke Marsh Breeding Bird Survey was conducted as part of a continuing biological inventory of the tidal wetlands. The breeding status of each species was determined by means of behavioral criteria. Species were placed into one of four categories: confirmed breeder, probable breeder, possible breeder, and present.

The 2014 survey was conducted between Saturday, May 24 and Sunday, July 6, but any data collected outside of this period that confirmed a breeding species was entered into the database. This permitted us to weed out most migrants that do not use the marsh to breed. I also included information provided from the Sunday morning walks and reliable individuals to supplement data reported by the survey teams. The survey tract encompassed the Belle Haven picnic area, the marina, the open marsh, the Potomac River from the shoreline to the channel, and the surrounding



A female American Goldfinch works at a half-finished nest. Photo by Ed Eder.

woodland from the mouth of Hunting Creek to Morningside Lane. Volunteers found 84 species at Dyke Marsh during the survey. By the completion of data collection, 44 species had been confirmed as breeders, six species were listed as probable breeders, and 17 species as possible breeders. An additional 17 species were identified in the survey tract during the reporting period, but were considered not to be in suitable breeding habitat.

The analyzed data indicates both good news and areas of continuing concern. Breeding woodpeckers seemed to do quite well in 2014 and volunteers observed Red-bellied,

Downy, and Hairy Woodpeckers, and Northern Flickers all with fledged young. As in previous years, we discovered breeding Eastern Kingbirds, and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles everywhere that there were trees to host a nest. Territorial Warbling Vireos were singing from



A female Yellow Warbler is gathering spider silk for nesting material. Photo by Ed Eder.

every possible location too, but it wasn't until July 6 that the survey documented its first, and only, evidence confirming breeding, a nest near the boardwalk entrance. Observers reported possibly two Great Crested Flycatcher family groups in the south picnic area.

Survey teams did quite well on confirming the warblers. Prothonotary Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Northern Parulas, and Yellow Warblers all were tallied as confirmed breeders. These warbler species are fairly common in the survey tract during the breeding season, but it can be exceedingly difficult to confirm all four of them. Brown Thrashers, not always easy to find or even present at Dyke Marsh during the survey, were reported from several locations in 2014. I was delighted to find a Brown Thrasher pair near the Haul Road wooden bridge on June 18 followed by a report on July 8 of a ground foraging Brown Thrasher fledgling in the company of an adult near the boardwalk entrance.

Several confirmation misses are worthy of note. A Willow Flycatcher reported by multiple observers near the boardwalk from mid-May to early June apparently departed without attempting to breed. The now famous Eastern

SURVEY (Continued on page 5)

The 2014 Breeding Bird Survey Results

Confirmed - 44 Species: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Mallard, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Mourning Dove, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Warbling Vireo, Blue Jay, Fish Crow, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Marsh Wren, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, American Robin, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, European Starling, Cedar Waxwing, Prothonotary Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula, Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Orchard Oriole, Baltimore Oriole, House Finch, American Goldfinch, House Sparrow.

Probable - 6 Species: Least Bittern, Red-tailed Hawk, Eastern Screech-Owl, Acadian Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Indigo Bunting.

Possible - 17 Species: Pied-billed Grebe, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Mississippi Kite, Cooper's Hawk, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chimney Swift, Belted Kingfisher, Pileated Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Willow Flycatcher, American Crow, House Wren, Northern Mockingbird, American Redstart, Chipping Sparrow.

Present - 17 Species: American Wigeon, Ruddy Duck, Common Loon, Horned Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Black Vulture, Turkey Vulture, Greater Yellowlegs, Ring-billed Gull, Caspian Tern, Rock Pigeon, Black-billed Cuckoo, Alder Flycatcher, Mourning Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler.

SURVEY (Continued from page 4)

Screech-Owl pair put on quite a show in early March, copulating and giving every indication of preparing to breed, but we could not quite positively identify the nest cavity or locate young. A June 1 report of a Red-tailed Hawk pair near an empty nest in the south marsh was exciting news, but subsequent survey teams could not locate the pair or determine that the nest actually belonged to the hawks. Too bad, because Red-tailed Hawk has not been confirmed as a breeder in the 22 years that I have been compiler.

Ospreys had a highly successful breeding season in 2014. Survey teams discovered 10 Osprey nests and eight of these eventually contained nestlings. Of the successful endeavors, the platform nest near Porto Vecchio was the most productive, fledging four youngsters. That may be a new record for the Dyke Marsh breeding bird survey. Another observer reported a nest with four nestlings near the island in Pipeline Bay, but I'm not sure that all of them fledged.

The breeding Osprey pair at the marina nest perhaps had the most difficult time fledging their two youngsters. During the winter, pressure from moving ice pushed the pole supporting the nest platform to a precarious 45 degree angle. We were amazed as we watched the Ospreys build the nest, adding more sticks to one side of the platform than the other to compensate for the lean. We held our breath as the two nestlings grew, hoping that the pole would not collapse or the nestlings slide out of the nest into the water. But fledge they did, and kudos to the Osprey breeding pair that made it happen!

There is a corollary to the marina Osprey nest story. A group of Purple Martins nested at the base of the platform of the marina nest during the 2012 and 2013 breeding season. On April 6, 2014 observers during a Sunday morning walk saw four Purple Martins flying around inspecting the platform, but the birds apparently decided that the lean was too great to try to nest there for a third year. So several found an alternative according to one report. They apparently nested in the masts of some of the inactive sailboats in the marina, and with some success. An adult was found feeding a fledged youngster in mid-July at the boardwalk. More fledglings were sighting in the following weeks.

A new eagle nest along the tree line just west of the Little Gut was first reported under construction on December 21, 2013. Several observers noted some dark smudging in the tail of the smaller male eagle, indicating that he was probably only four or five years old, and likely a first time breeder. We watched the nest with much anticipation and everything seemed to be doing well until late March. On March 26 crows and Blue Jays were at the rim of the nest

with no adult eagles in sight, not a good sign. Several of us assessed that it was the excessive cold our area experienced in late March that likely killed young nestlings and caused nest abandonment, and not just the presumed inexperience of the Bald Eagle breeding pair. On a happier note, the Morningside Lane Bald Eagle nest once again was successful, with the breeding pair fledging its single nestling by mid-June.



A White-breasted Nuthatch female carrying nesting material. Photo by Ed Eder.

There remains much concern about the future of the Marsh Wren breeding population at Dyke Marsh. As in previous years, Marsh Wrens in the northern portion of Dyke Marsh were concentrated in the marsh vegetation on the north side of the Haul Road peninsula and the larger of the adjacent islands. By late June a canoe team could clearly see perhaps a half dozen nests in the Narrow-leaf Cattails as the surveyors transited the channel separating the peninsula from the island. By plotting locations of singing Marsh Wrens, I calculated that there was a minimum of 16 males on territory at this location.

Unfortunately, there were no Marsh Wrens in the portion of the southern marsh that we refer to as the Big Gut in 2014. Indeed, there has been no reliable presence of Marsh Wrens in the Big Gut since 2000 when the breeding population throughout Dyke Marsh gave initial indications of a decline. After an absence of several years, a few Marsh Wrens occupied a tributary of the Big Gut in 2011 followed by a few more in 2012. By 2013 one survey team reported the presence of approximately a half dozen singing males and a minimum of four nests. One observer even documented a nest containing youngsters. Hope stirred that the Big Gut would host an even larger Marsh Wren presence in 2014. It didn't. I'm confident Marsh Wrens will be at their usual location in the north marsh in 2015, but unwilling to make any prediction of what will happen in the Big Gut. The last decade and a half suggests it could go either way.



Marsh Wren breeding status is a concern. Photo by Ed Eder.

The pattern and concentration of the Least Bittern population at Dyke Marsh increasingly seems to parallel that of the Marsh Wren. I assess that Least Bitterns are starting to focus their breeding efforts on the marsh vegetation around the Haul Road peninsula, to include the Little Gut. A canoe team tallied five Least Bitterns within five minutes of enter-

SURVEY (Continued on page 6)

Meet the Plants of Dyke Marsh: Common or Swamp Dodder

BY PATRICIA P. SALAMONE

When summer visitors to Dyke Marsh first notice the dodder vine, they may not even realize that they're looking at a plant; its spaghetti-like orange stems look like string or netting draped over the marsh plants. But what they are seeing is a climbing native vine known as common or swamp dodder (*Cuscuta gronovii*). Common dodder is native to most of the continental US (except for California, Utah, Nevada, and Oregon), and is usually found in marshy or swampy ground.

Dodder is a parasitic plant; it has no chlorophyll and cannot survive without a host. Its tiny seeds sprout in the soil, but within a week or so the seedlings attach themselves to a host plant, twining around its stem and inserting small suckers (haustoria).



The spaghetti-like orange stems of the dodder vine look like string. Photo by Ed Eder.

Once this happens the dodder vine's roots die, and from then on it derives all its nutrients from the host plant. Common host plants include jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*) and buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*).

The vine can grow to be up to 6 feet long. The plant blooms in late summer (July through October); its tiny (1/8 inch) flowers are white, waxy, and bell-shaped, and grow in dense clusters.

Dodder is sometimes considered to be a member of the morning glory family (*Convolvulaceae*) and sometimes placed in its own family (*Cuscutaceae*). The genus name *Cuscuta* is of Arabic derivation, but its meaning is uncertain; it may come from a word meaning "to bend" or another word meaning "tangled hair." The specific name honors the Dutch botanist Jan Fredrik Gronovius (1690-1762), a teacher of Linnaeus.

How does the dodder seedling locate its host plant? In 2006, researchers at Pennsylvania State University discovered that at least one dodder species, *Cuscuta pentagona*, locates its host by scent, and even displays a preference for the scent of some plants over others. (Tomatoes and impatiens were favorites.) Dodder seedlings grew preferentially toward either actual tomato plants or volatile organic compounds extracted from tomato plants, in what one researcher described to NPR as "almost animal-like behavior." Other cues (such as light) may play a role as well.



The tiny, white, waxy flowers grow in dense clusters. Photo by R.W. Smith, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

A number of other dodder species, both native and introduced, are found in the U.S., and some of these are significant agricultural weeds. In the marsh, though, common dodder is a natural part of the ecosystem and has evolved along with its host plants. It rarely kills them—killing off all its hosts isn't a sustainable strategy for a parasite—although it does stunt their growth; it may even be helpful in keeping some rampant growers in check. And its orange tangles add a bright splash of color to the summer marsh.

References: USDA plants profile for *Cuscuta gronovii*: <http://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=CUGR>

Devious Dodder Vine Sniffs Out Its Victims (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6160709>)

Volatile Chemical Cues Guide Host Location and Host Selection by Parasitic Plants (<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/313/5795/1964.abstract>).

SURVEY (Continued from page 5)

ing a tributary of the Little Gut on a June 7 survey. That includes a definite breeding pair. Another breeding pair was found near the north end of the boardwalk and at least a territorial male maintained a constant presence at the southern tip of the peninsula just off the boardwalk. In contrast, Least Bitterns south of the Little Gut seemed to be found primarily in the extreme upper portion of the Big Gut. Survey teams in the Big Gut reported no definite breeding pairs. Sightings or heard vocalizations were all of single birds. It may be that the rapid erosion in the lower portion of the Big Gut is making the habitat unsuitable for Least Bitterns.

Unfortunately we were not able to confirm Least Bittern as a breeder anywhere in Dyke Marsh. Several light colored birds seen in flight along Haul Road towards the

end of the survey could have passed as either adult females or fledged young. So Least Bittern went into the probable breeder category for 2014.

This survey would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of so many volunteers who collected breeding bird data in 2014 as part of a Dyke Marsh survey team or who provided information as leader of a Sunday morning bird walk. I want to thank all those who contributed to the survey. In alphabetical order, they are: Bob Beard, Dave Boltz, Ed Eder, Myriam Eder, Sandy Farkas, Kurt Gaskill, Susan Haskew, Gerry Hawkins, Ellen Kabat, Elizabeth Ketz-Robinson, Dorothy McManus, Ginny McNair, Larry Meade, Roger Miller, Nick Nichols, Patrice Nielson, Marc Ribaud, Rich Rieger, Don Robinson, Peter Ross, Molly Ross, Trish Simmons, Ned Stone, Jessie Strother, Paula Sullivan, John Symington, Maggie Symington, Bill Whitacre, Margaret Wohler, Katherine Wychulis.

“Our” Ospreys

On March 12, FODM past President Ed Eder photographed an Osprey with its talons snagged on monofilament or fishing line that was twisted around some nails atop a piling at the Belle Haven Marina. FODMers contacted National Park Service officials and marina managers. George Stevens, President, Belle Haven Marina, Inc., removed the nails and monofilament. Thank you, NPS and George.



This Osprey at Belle Haven Marina snagged its talons on twisted fishing line. Photo by Ed Eder.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website notes that Ospreys may pick up fishing line for their nests. “Osprey young have been found in their nests entangled in fishing line or impaled with fishing hooks. Adults have also been spotted entangled in line. Legs, wings and beaks can become so tangled that the bird will not be able stand, fly or eat. Conservative estimates indicate that 5-10 percent of nests have fishing line present.” Commendably, the marina has a container for safely disposing of fishing line.

Sunday Morning Bird Walks

Bird walks are held every Sunday morning, all year. Meet at 8 a.m. in the south parking lot of the Belle Haven picnic area. Walks are led by experienced birders and all are welcome to join us.

Welcome New FODM Members

We welcome to our organization our new **Regular Members**: Mr. and Mrs. Michael Coco, Ryan Dreelin, Taylor Fleet, Jennifer Kalletta, Amy O’Donnell, Pamela Park, John Person, David and Allyne Pittle and Michael Sieracki.

Special thanks to Regular Members Peggy Bestrain, Robert Blandford and William Byrnes who have converted to **FODM Life Members**.

FODM Meeting Calendar

September 16 – Joe Marx will discuss eastern forest ecosystems and their challenges. Cosponsored by the Potowmack Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society.



November 18 – LoriAnne Burnette, the National Phenology Network, will explore nature’s exquisite timing, phenology.

Be sure to visit www.fodm.org and “like” FODM on Facebook.com to keep up with what’s going on in the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve.

OTTERS (Continued from page 8)

year. They often have one to three siblings. As adults, they will den in river banks below the water line and feed mostly on fish, but will also eat frogs, crayfish and freshwater mussels. They will begin their own family groups after two to three years if they are able to avoid being hit by vehicles or if the vehicles are able to avoid them.

U.S. Park Police, Emergency Number: 202-610-7500

FODM Membership - Dues and Contributions

Support the Friends of Dyke Marsh by becoming a member or renewing your membership. Benefits include the Friends’ quarterly publication, *The Marsh Wren*; quarterly membership meetings with knowledgeable speakers; Sunday morning bird walks and notification of activities in and around the marsh. Most importantly, your membership lends your voice in support of the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. We encourage you to save paper (trees) and mailing costs by becoming a member or renewing your membership online at www.fodm.org. Just click on the “New Member” or “Renewal” button on our membership page to make your tax-deductible contribution by credit card or from your bank account securely through PayPal. If you prefer, you can send a check, payable to FODM, P.O. Box 7183, Alexandria, Virginia 22307. The annual dues are \$15.00 per household; \$250.00 for life membership for an individual. Renewal reminders will no longer be sent with *The Marsh Wren*. You will receive a separate notice by mail or by email when your renewal is due. Thank you for your continuing support of FODM.

DUES AMOUNT..... \$ _____
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 TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED..... \$ _____

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Please address any questions or comments about *The Marsh Wren* to Dorothy McManus and about membership to Bob Veltkamp. You may contact them by mail at FODM, P.O. Box 7183, Alexandria, Virginia 22307 -7183, by telephone or by email (see page 2).

Northern River Otter at Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve

BY BRENT STEURY, National Park Service

The northern river otter (*Lontra canadensis*) is a rare animal in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area and the top-level, aquatic predator in the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. D. W. Webster, J. F. Parnell, and W. C. Biggs, Jr. (1985) reported that northern river otters appear to be declining in abundance throughout their mid-Atlantic range and are rare or absent in much of the Piedmont and mountains of Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas.

Until 2010, there were no recent records of northern river otters from the George Washington Memorial Parkway (GWMP), the national park that manages the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. The first documented evidence of an extant population within GWMP came on March 16, 2010, when a dead, adult male otter was found along the roadside in Turkey Run Park. The water in the Potomac River Gorge was extremely high in March 2010 and the otter had evidently left the river to avoid the turbulence, only to be struck by a vehicle on the parkway after cresting the ridge top. Then, on February 26, 2014, a live adult otter was spotted and photographed by Anthony Peritore in the Potomac River at Dyke Marsh just off the boardwalk and the end of Haul Road. Whether this was just a transitory individual or a member of an otter family that had taken up

residence in the marsh was unknown.

Northern river otters have home ranges of 15 miles or more. Sadly, the third reported sighting of a river otter in GWMP was another roadkill found on March 7, 2015, by Ian Steury (see image). This otter was a juvenile, providing the first evidence that perhaps there is a family group living in the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. Young otters, called kits, are born during the spring in shelters near water such as hollow trees or abandoned muskrat lodges. Kits come into the world blind but fully furred. They get their first glimpse of light after about 25 days, are weaned after three months and remain in family groups for about a



Roadkill river otter hit on GWMP while crossing road at Hog Island Gut, DMWP, 03/07/15. Image Ian Steury.

OTTERS (Continued on page 7)

The
Marsh Wren

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