

FALL

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

# POTOWMACK NEWS

*Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society*

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## HUNTLEY MEADOWS PARK



BY KARLA JAMIR

At over 1600 acres -- almost two and a half square miles -- Huntley Meadows is the largest park managed by the Fairfax County Park Authority, and it has the largest freshwater wetland. The half-mile boardwalk through the treeless central marsh is the most well-known and frequently visited part of the park. The diverse and seasonally changing native aquatic plants that grow here and the wildlife they support are obviously precious and rare in highly urbanized northern Virginia.

Another special habitat are the large meadows from which Huntley “Meadows” gets its name. Not only do open areas in many of our local parks tend to get used for athletics, meadows in the mid-Atlantic will tend to become forests unless some activity intervenes to interrupt this natural progression. In urban areas without farms or pastures, and where fires must be suppressed, meadows are rare. Because of the size of Huntley Meadows Park and its forest buffer, its meadows can be maintained not only by mowing, but with regular managed burns that mimic natural processes and allow a wider variety of native flora to thrive. Different species will be common in these coastal plain meadows and lowland woods than in the outwardly similar piedmont meadows and woods of the more western part of our metropolitan area.

The park entrance is at 3701 Lockheed Blvd, Alexandria. The visitor center and path to the boardwalk and wetlands are accessible here. The large meadows and western half of the park are accessed via a second entrance and trailhead on South Kings Highway at Telegraph Road.

### HISTORY

The land that forms the current park hasn't always had a boardwalk and

## Upcoming Events

### October

#### Volunteer Opportunity at the Chesterbrook Living Classroom

*Saturday, Oct. 26 and Nov. 16*

*9:00 am—12:30 pm*

*1800 Kirby Road, McLean, VA*

Enjoy a Fall morning and help improve this forest restoration and educational project located at the Falls Church Water Pumping Station across from Chesterbrook Elementary School. Wear work clothes and shoes, gloves and hand tools provided or bring your own for mulching and weeding.

### November

#### CSI: Plants

*Wednesday, Nov. 13, 7:30-9:00 pm*

*Huntley Meadows Visitor Center,  
3701 Lockheed Blvd, Alexandria*

Steve Carroll, Director of Public Programs at the State Arboretum of Virginia and Blandy Farm, University of Virginia will discuss famous cases, modern techniques, and some surprising ways in which plant evidence is used in the investigation of crimes. Event hosted by Friends of Dyke Marsh and co-sponsored by VNPS and Tree Stewards of Arlington and Alexandria.

*\*Note: All events are free and open to the public.*

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## HUNTLEY MEADOWS PARK (CONT'D FROM COVER)

open water, but for thousands of years it has always been a wetland. Originally a paleo-meander of the Potomac, this lowland depression rests between the long hills of the upper coastal plain that surround the Hybla Valley region of south Fairfax County. The park is located in the Dogue Creek watershed, named after the Indian tribe that once lived here. And the headwaters of Little Hunting Creek are located in the park. When the area became part of the large landholdings of George Mason IV and his heirs in the 1700's, it had to be extensively drained before it could be cultivated. Traces of the long "double-ditches" used to do this can still be seen throughout the park, now overgrown and lined with trees. Wheat, corn and oats were grown on the drained fields in the early years, and dairy farmers leased and worked some of the land as late as the 1940's. In 1929 Henry Woodhouse reassembled a large contiguous property as he bought up fragmented plots to build a dirigible airfield. Although that plan fell through, the Washington Air Terminals Corporation owned the land until it was sold to the government in 1941. The Bureau of Public Roads, the U.S. Army, and the Naval Research Laboratory used it in turn, with each department leaving its own mark on the land. Finally, in 1975 the property was transferred to Fairfax County, and Huntley Meadows Park was established.

At this point, the effects of human intervention began to taper off, but engineering enterprises continued as beavers moved in, dammed the stream, flooded out many trees, and created the current open wetland in the middle of the park.

### BOTANY

It would take a long time to list all the plant species that have been observed at Huntley Meadows – over 600 species have been identified. The park has been fortunate to have had an ongoing volunteer herbarium and plant database project, established in the 1980's, which has helped to identify and collect many of these plants over the years. Some



Cover and above photo credit: Karla Jamir

showier species that the park is known for include: swamp rose, swamp milkweed, elderberry, silky dogwood, button bush, New York ironweed, and crimson-eyed rose mallow along the boardwalk in the spring and summer. White turtlehead, the only larval food of the Baltimore Checkerspot butterfly, blooms in shallow water in September, soon after the brilliant red cardinal flowers. In the Spring the large forest sections of the park are carpeted with spring beauty; lush green sedges and ferns fill in the wettest spots.

The state rare purple milkweed flowers in several meadows in early summer. The meadows are also wonderful places to appreciate and learn about native grasses, with the tall stands of Indian grass, southeastern wild rye, little bluestem, sugarcane plume grass, and other grasses lasting well into October.

In the Fall at least six different species of goldenrods bloom, alongside purple gerardia and a similar variety of thoroughworts, asters, and sunflowers. Hidden corners of the woods and less accessible wetland areas have rare gems like ragged

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## HUNTLEY MEADOWS PARK (CONTINUED)

fringed orchids and Turk's cap lilies, although they are elusive and not easy to find.

### WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW

Huntley Meadows Park has had an interesting year. Since June, the park has been experiencing some disruption from a long awaited and carefully planned restoration project, designed to help reverse the effects of siltation from the surrounding urban watershed, and keep the marsh from filling in. The installation of a water control device and other features is intended to ensure that the open water and emergent marsh areas of the wetland are able to continue in their present form far into the future.



The West entrance, "The Hike-Bike Trail", is closed to the public until the end of the year due to construction associated with the restoration project. Coincident with the park restoration, construction to widen Telegraph Road at this corner will give an improved parking area at this entrance.

Standing on the observation tower this Fall gives a view not only of open wetlands, but of bulldozers on the far side of the wide expanse of low plants, and of a mud-filled trench across the section where Barnyard Run heads south. Seasonal dryness is not unusual in this non-tidal inland wetland, but the bulldozers and trucks are new -- or at least they haven't been seen here much since the middle of the last century, when an antenna range was built by the U.S. government right in the middle of what is now the main wetland. Instead of a shimmer of water filled with diving ducks and stalking herons, only disappointed looking Canada geese poke along the barely moist central depression, while the turtles have made their slow tracks upstream toward perches on wetter logs. The restoration work is anticipated to be completed soon and the wetland will fill naturally over the Winter, providing habitat and forage for the Spring migration.

### OUTLOOK

Like all of our regional parks, Huntley Meadows faces threats from increasing urbanization, overuse, invasive plants, over-population of deer, and budget pressures. Huntley has the advantage of a small, dedicated staff with responsibility for just this one park. Although lacking sufficient resources to solve all problems, the park management is aware of issues which adversely impact the ecological health of the park. It is able to take action to counteract some of the worst threats, establishing deer management programs and targeted invasive plant control measures. In addition, there is a long standing and active "Friends of Huntley Meadow Park" group, and scores of deeply involved volunteers -- always with room for more.

Just like interventions undertaken to protect natural areas from invasive plants and deer browse, the restoration project was deemed necessary to preserve the freshwater wetland from the threat of silt-laden runoff from upstream development, and erratic water flows through the park. Although some vegetation was destroyed to complete this work, careful surveys were made to avoid sensitive areas, and over 600 plants were rescued and moved.

It is not easy in Northern Virginia to find locations where the urban landscape can be totally left behind and replaced by a view of only trees, water, and natural things. This is actually possible at Huntley Meadows Park, where it is sometimes hard to believe that the city is so near when none of it can be seen, or even barely heard. It has been described as being "a natural island in a suburban sea". Croaking frogs and calling birds change with the seasons, and the blooming plants are both the same and different each year. There is always something new to see, and plant lovers can also enjoy the butterflies, dragonflies, frogs, toads, lizards and other animals that thrive here. Although this year has been unusual because of construction in the wetlands, each year in this park is interesting as it continues to evolve and change as a dynamic natural system.





Photos credit: Margaret Chatham

By Margaret Chatham

Last May, Alan Ford received a request from the Natural Resources Division of Fairfax County's Park Department for someone from VNPS to lead a grass identification walk in early August. He gathered a small group of interested parties, none of whom felt competent to lead such a walk alone, and set us on the path to becoming familiar with grasses, sedges, rushes, and plants that might be mistaken for one of these. Charles Smith had suggested Sully Plantation, Huntley Meadows, or Wakefield Park as suitable locations. The group found Wakefield most convenient, and concentrated there, making 12 visits over two months, as well as one to Sully, one to Margaret Chatham's yard & one to Gaylan Meyer's home.

The Grass Bunch has included at various times Alan Ford, John Dodge, Diana Carter, Margaret Chatham, Gaylan Meyer, Karla Jamir, Jim Hurley and Donna Murphy, but the entire group has never been gathered in one place at one time. We went out armed with Lauren Brown's **Grasses, an identification guide**, Edward Knobel's **Field Guide to the Grasses, Sedges and Rushes of the United States**, Strausbaugh & Core's **Flora of West Virginia**, and hand lenses, and brought samples back to consult with weightier tomes and microscopes where available: **The Illustrated Companion to Gleason and Cronquist's Manual** and especially to trace through the keys in **Flora of Virginia**. **Flora of Virginia** always had the last word on the current name and whether a grass that looked right might actually be expected to grow in our area.

As Gaylan Meyer said: "Hooda thunk this botanizing could be so much fun!! To identify the three *Dichanthelium* plants I had to look up no less than 27 botanical terms, learn to measure tenths of millimeters, and figure out that even though we're near the fall line, Wakefield is in the Piedmont." On the other hand, this gave us a great appreciation of species like velvet grass (*Holcus lanatus*) or timothy (*Phleum pratense*) that look like nothing else and can be identified by sight.

We watched the sweet vernal grass (*Anthoxanthum odoratum*) and reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) fade, the timothy spring up, bloom a lovely lavender, and fall apart, to be replaced by wood reed-grass (*Cinna arundinacea*), purpletop (*Triodia flava*) and Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*). We wrestled with the difference between the native (*Echinochloa muricata*) and exotic (*Echinochloa crus-galli*) barnyard grasses, concluding that this is one where you really need a microscope to make a proper identification, but you can make a fair guess by how disturbed a site is. We practiced saying "*Coleataenia anceps*" (beaked panic grass, formerly *Panicum anceps*) and "*Brachyelytrum erectum*" (bearded shorthusk). And when we couldn't identify something, we learned to say, "We require an inflorescence!" and wait for one to develop.

By the planned August walk, we had a spreadsheet of 72 species (thank you, Gaylan!) and a map of our route (thank you, Alan!), about as many leaders as walk participants, and we managed not to notice any newly blooming sedges we had not yet identified: success!

But we couldn't stop there. The grasses continue to change with the seasons & we had to know which *Saccharum* it was that we'd seen starting to spring up, & up, & up. There are more grasses to explore at other locations: we finally made it to Huntley Meadows in September, where we found *Saccharum giganteum*, & confirmed that it was not the same as the *Saccharum brevibarbe* var. *contortum* a couple of us had examined at Wakefield. And then there are all the spring wood sedges we missed by not getting started till the end of May, so the Grass Bunch goes on.

We'll be leading a walk at Wakefield at 1 pm on Sunday, Oct. 20, to share some of our discoveries: see separate announcement to sign up for that. For our exploration forays, we usually get together on a Tuesday or Friday morning, arranged by consensus to maximize attendance. If you would like to explore with us, contact Alan Ford at [alanscapes@gmail.com](mailto:alanscapes@gmail.com) to find out when & where the next Grass Bunch foray will be.

## NEW GIFT CARDS AVAILABLE

B.J. Opfer, chapter member and local watercolor artist, has completed another series of original paintings of native songbirds and native plants. We have printed a new series of 5x7 notecards.

The cards are available in sets of four with envelopes for \$15. The sale of these cards support our mission of conservation, restoration and education about the importance of native flora to supporting the biodiversity and maintaining habitat. These, as well as the previous sets, are available at our talks and plant sales.



Yellow-shafted Northern Flicker  
Spreading Jacob's Ladder



Northern Cardinal  
Flowering Dogwood



Cedar Waxwing  
Redcedar



White-breasted Nuthatch  
Virginia Pine

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## HOW YOU CAN HELP

### Falls Church Habitat Restoration Team

Help restore the local ecosystem in city parks. Remove invasives and plant natives that will then benefit local birds and butterflies. For more information contact Melissa Teates at 703-538-6961 or [melanite@verizon.net](mailto:melanite@verizon.net)



### Reston Association's Habitat Heroes Program

Help restore local wildlife habitat through invasive plant removal and replanting with native plants. For more information contact Ha Brock at 703-435-7986 or [ha@reston.org](mailto:ha@reston.org)



### Arlington County's Remove Invasive Plants (RiP) Program

Help rescue Arlington parks from alien plant invaders! Bring your own tools. For more information contact Sarah Archer at 703-228-1862 or [sarcher@arlingtonva.us](mailto:sarcher@arlingtonva.us)



### Fairfax County's Invasive Management Area (IMA) Program

Help remove invasive plants and learn about new species. For more information contact Erin Stocksclaeder at 703-324-8681 or [erin.stocksclaeder@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:erin.stocksclaeder@fairfaxcounty.gov)





# POTOWMACK CHAPTER FALL WALKS

ALL CHAPTER PROGRAMS AND WALKS  
ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

PLEASE CHECK OUR FACEBOOK PAGE AND YAHOO LIST SERVE  
FOR THE MOST UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION ABOUT ALL PROGRAMS.

**October 20, 1:00 pm**  
**Wakefield Park**  
**8100 Braddock Road, Annandale, VA**

The VNPS Potowmack Grass Bunch will lead a grass and sedge identification walk on Sunday at 1:00pm to look at grasses in the Fall. Plenty of other Fall flowers are sure to be on display.

Registration required at <http://vnps20131020.eventbrite.com>

PLEASE STAY TUNED FOR INFORMATION REGARDING OUR 2014 CALENDAR OF EVENTS.

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