

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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VNPS Registry Sites: GREAT FALLS PARK

BY CRIS FLEMING



PHOTO BY MARGARET CHATHAM

Niagara Falls may be more famous but our own Great Falls of the Potomac River are also spectacular, especially for an urban area. And nowhere can the falls be better seen than from the three overlooks at Great Falls Park in Fairfax County. Pounding over and between several high rock outcrops, the river drops eighty feet and then flows swiftly into Mather Gorge, a deep rock-walled ravine about a mile long.

Containing almost 800 acres and stretching for over three miles along the river, the park is very popular with kayakers, rock-climbers, picnickers, school and scout groups, and other visitors - so popular indeed that the line of cars to the entrance station is often backed up almost a mile on fine weekend days. And yet, despite the occasional crowds, Great Falls Park has a wealth of natural areas including both bottomland and upland forests, rocky bluffs, open bedrock terraces, and the deep valley of Difficult Run at the southern end of the park.

Archeological finds such as stone tools and projectile points have been found in the park, indicating human use of the area at least 8,000 years ago. Native Americans are thought to have used the area for hunting and gathering before European settlement. Later historical sites still seen at the park include the ruins of Matildaville,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Upcoming Events

VNPS Potowmack Chapter Annual Meeting

Sunday, Nov 9, 12:30-3 pm

New date to match our new fiscal year. Presentations by Alan Ford, Bob and Ginny Yacovissi, Margaret Chatham and Gaylan Meyer

Join chapter president Alan Ford, Margaret Chatham, Bob and Ginny Yacovissi and Gaylan Meyer for news about chapter activities. Alan will talk about the Plant NoVA Natives Campaign and its beautiful new book of native plants for Northern Virginia. Bob and Ginny will give a slide presentation on their week-long VNPS trip to the Mountains of West Virginia last June. Margaret Chatham and Gaylan Meyer will tell about the activities of the chapter's Grass Bunch.

After a short business meeting and the presentations, there will be a tour of the propagation beds behind the horticulture center led by Alan Ford, Propagation Committee member.

SOLD OUT: Rick Darke, co-author with Doug Tallamy of *The Living Landscape: Designing for beauty and biodiversity in the home garden*

Wednesday, Nov 12, 7 pm, 6:30 for book signing

Arlington Central Library, 1015 N. Quincy Ave, Co-sponsored by Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia, TreeStewards of Arlington & Alexandria, Friends of Arlington Library as well as our chapter of VNPS.

All events are free and open to the public

GREAT FALLS PARK CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

a small colony of houses built for the workers of George Washington's Patowmack Canal Company in the late 1700s. In 1906, an amusement park was built on the property and the popular carousel remained there until destroyed by high floods from Hurricane Agnes in 1972. The National Park Service acquired most of the property in 1965 and Great Falls Park was created as a unit of the George Washington Parkway in 1966.

PHOTO ASCLEPIAS VERTICILLATA, WHORLED MILKWEED, BY GARY FLEMING



The varied habitats and the introduction of seeds and plants when the river floods give the park a rich and diverse flora. Recent research and studies by Brent Steury, Supervisory Biologist of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, have shown just over 1,000 plant species currently and/or historically found in the park, including over twenty that are considered rare in Virginia. In addition, Gary

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Fleming, Vegetation Ecologist of the Division of Natural Heritage, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, has identified eighteen different plant communities in the park, including six that are globally rare. Because of these outstanding resources, our chapter of VNPS designated Great Falls Park as a VNPS registry site in 2003. Great Falls Park is an excellent place to look for early spring wildflowers. For twenty-two consecutive years, this writer has led field trips there in late March or early April to search for the earliest bloomers. Among the wildflowers seen in flower year after year are spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), harbinger-of-spring (*Erigenia bulbosa*), purple cress (*Cardamine douglassii*), round-lobed hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis var. obtusa*), rue anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*), sessile trillium (*Trillium sessile*), and trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*).

One of the best areas to find uncommon wildflowers is the Difficult Run Trail at the southern end of the park. This trail follows the cascading creek along steep wooded bluffs all the way to its confluence with the river. Unfortunately, heavy rains in the fall of 2011 washed out two large sections of the trail which has made access extremely difficult. However, Brent Steury reports that the National Park

Service should have funds available soon to repair the trail.

The Swamp Trail, on the west side of the park, is off the beaten path and is a good location to see various ferns. Field trips to this area in late summer or early fall have yielded uncommon ferns such as silvery glade fern (*Deparia acrostichoides*), intermediate wood fern (*Dryopteris intermedia*), and crested wood fern (*Dryopteris cristata*).

The most unusual habitats at Great Falls Park occur off the River Trail going downriver from the Visitor Center. Through thousands of years of flooding events, a series of bedrock terraces have developed along the river here. Along the highest terraces, the rocky bluffs support small prairie-like habitats with midwestern species that are uncommon to rare in Virginia. Trees are sparse and short in these small prairies where the dominant vegetation is herbaceous, mainly tall grasses such as big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), and Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*). Other species uncommon in our region that occur on these rocky terraces include whorled milkweed (*Asclepias verticillata*), wild blue indigo (*Baptisia australis var. australis*), tall





coreopsis (*Coreopsis tripteris*), western sunflower (*Helianthus occidentalis* ssp. *occidentalis*), stiff aster (*Ionactis linariifolia*), dense blazing-star (*Liatris spicata*), and narrow-leaved mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*).

Park staff have been concerned about the public's use of the rock outcrops along the river for many years. All along Mather Gorge, rock climbers, kayakers, and even casual visitors used the outcrops to access the river, in some areas creating well-defined trails and crushing vegetation, including rare plants. Recently, fences have been placed to block access to the bedrock terraces in order to protect the prairies and other very rare natural communities. There remains one designated trail to the river for kayakers and one for climbers. Hopefully, the closures will result in fewer accidents for humans and greater protection for these very rare plant species and ecological communities.

PHOTOS PREVIOUS PAGE: *HELIANTHUS OCCIDENTALIS*, WESTERN SUNFLOWER, AND *SCHIZACHYRIUM SCOPARIUM*, LITTLE BLUESTEM; THIS PAGE *BAPTISIA AUSTRALIS*, WILD BLUE INDIGO, ALL BY GARY FLEMING

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Fleming, Cristol, Marion Blois Lobstein, and Barbara Tufty, *Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area*, 1995. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland.

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Steury, Brent W., Gary P. Fleming, and Mark T. Strong. *An Emendation of the Vascular Flora of Great Falls Park, Fairfax County, VA*, *Castanea* 73(2): 123-149, June 2008.

United States Department of the Interior, Geological Survey-National Park Service, *The River and The Rocks, The Geologic Story of Great Falls and the Potomac River Gorge*, 1970.

Word of the Month: Ruderal

Describes a habitat subject to frequent disturbance, or a plant that grows in such a habitat. Examples: stream or river scour zones, roadsides, railroad rights of way, plowed fields.

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CATCH THE SEASON -- FALL

By Margaret Chatham



On the ground, leaves of Bigleaf Magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*), Black Willow (*Salix nigra*), Tulip-tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), and Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*) make an interesting fall montage. – But in the air, leaves twist or spiral, plummet downward or drift erratically in invisible wind currents. Can you catch one before it lands? Nancy Hugo reports in *Seeing Trees* (a book well worth reading, or re-reading, for all her thoughtful observations – and those wonderful photographs deserve revisiting every so often) a tradition that for each leaf you can catch before it hits the ground, you win one month of happiness in the coming year. I can't vouch for the month of happiness, but the joy of catching a leaf in the air is real.

If you would like to receive this newsletter (in full color!) electronically, contact Alan Ford at: amford@acm.com

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