



The Dragon's Tale

Volume XLI Issue 6 December 2023
P. O. Box 882
Gloucester, VA 23061



From the President *Jeff Wright*

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Dragon Run Will Hold Its First Christmas Bird Count

By Jeff Wright

The Inaugural Dragon Run Christmas Bird Count will take place on Sunday, December 17, 2023. [More](#)





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School Field Day presentation at the November 14, 2023 Gloucester School Board meeting. [More](#)

The Dream Continues By *Molly Broderson*

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Prothonotary Warbler 2023 Update By *Gary Driscoll*

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Stewardship Projects *By Jack Kauffman, Stewardship Committee Chair*

Volunteers at FODR's latest workday on November 14 successfully completed three water crossings at the Powcan property in Essex County. [More](#)

FODR Volunteers Collected Nearly Half-ton of Trash During 2023 *By Mark Alling, Trash Wrangler*

Total weight and number of items collected by 36 volunteers during the four 2023 cleanups were an astounding 16,957 items weighing 945 pounds, almost a half-ton. [More](#)



A Sweat Bee Marks FODR's 1000th Species!

By Maeve Coker, Citizen Science Committee Chair The Dark-winged sweat bee (*Lasioglossom fuscipenne*) marked FODR's quest to identify 1,000 species of flora and fauna in the Dragon Run watershed. [More](#)



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Unraveling the Indigenous History of Bacon's Rebellion *By Jeff Wright*

Work on a National Park Service Grant continued with our teammates the Pamunkey Tribe, Rappahannock Tribe, and St. Mary's College. We had productive meetings with our partners that included hikes and paddles focused on tactics, techniques and procedures used by the tribes to hide from Bacon's forces. [More](#)

Membership Update *By Anne Ducey-Ortiz*

As of November 13, 2023, we have 322 current annual members and 125 life members. This is up 31 annual members from this time last year and 14 new life members! [More](#)



Champions of the Dragon: Brent Heath, Founder

By Jeff Wright, President

This is the second in a series of articles about individuals and organizations who have championed the protection and preservation of Dragon Run. [More](#)



STREAMSIDE ATTRACTIONS Ready for His Wedding

By Kevin Howe, Treasurer

Artificial nest boxes have been around since the days of the Roman Empire when they apparently used nest boxes as a method to catch food. But the story of today's Wood Duck nest box is an intriguing one. [More](#)

Board of Directors for 2024



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From the President *Jeff Wright*



Jeff Wright

Reflecting on 2023 and Looking Ahead to 2024

As we stand on the cusp of a new year, I'm honored to reflect on the milestones we achieved together in 2023. It was a year filled with growth and a deep commitment to preserving, protecting, and encouraging wise use of Dragon Run and its watershed.

Our collective efforts brought a wave of change. Here are just a few highlights of our journey in 2023:

- **Membership Surge and Engaging Paddle Trips and Hikes:** Witnessing a surge in membership, welcoming numerous first-time guests on paddle trips during the spring, summer, and fall; and offering members and their families an opportunity



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to experience the Dragon by land on one of our fall, winter, and spring nature hikes.

- **Environmental Education at its Finest:** Hosting the Dragon Run Environmental Academy Mentorship (DREAM) which brought together area teachers who experienced the Dragon and who now will bring their students to the swamp.
- **Species identification:** Identifying more than 1,000 species in the watershed, including more than 55 species not previously documented in the counties where they were found. Plus, citizen science projects to support vernal pools, bird counts, butterfly counts and bioblitzes throughout the Dragon Run watershed.
- **Property Stewardship and Expansion:** Conservation management of our properties, refining stewardship management plans, and inaugurating the Friends of Dragon Run Teta Kain Nature Preserve to recognize this key FODR leader.
- **Community Outreach and Collaboration:** Collaborating with various organizations, membership in the York River and Small Coastal Basin Roundtable; conducting cleanup events, stewardship workdays, and species counts on the Middle Peninsula; continuing crucial conservation initiatives; participating with the Pamunkey Tribe, Rappahannock Tribe, and St. Mary's College on the National Park Service Grant to map the *Indigenous History of Bacon's Rebellion*; and continuing projects with William and Mary's Institute for Integrative Conservation.
- **Digital Enhancement and Growth of Volunteer Opportunities:** Improving business processes and enhancing our online presence through social media and our webpage; involving more volunteers in stewardship, citizen science and educational projects and field activities.

The FODR Board will meet in December to gear up for an impactful 2024, setting its sights on a range of key initiatives to deepen member engagement and bolster environmental stewardship. Here's a glimpse into the focal points for the upcoming year:

1. **Reviving In-Person Gatherings:** Plans are underway to reintroduce in-person General Meetings. We hope to hold Sunday afternoon sessions that will blend engaging guest speakers, refreshments, camaraderie, and interactive showcasing of exciting projects.
2. **Community Engagement for Environmental Literacy:** A pivotal focus remains on fostering environmental awareness within our communities. Efforts will emphasize the indispensable role of the Dragon Run ecosystem and as the



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headwaters of the Piankatank River. We will also foster planning and actions related to the threats posed by invasive species and by climate change.

3. **Immersive Environmental Opportunities:** A commitment to providing enriching and immersive environmental experiences, with tailored programs for both youths, adults, and families throughout the year.
4. **Preserving the Watershed:** Preserving the unique ecology of the Dragon Run swamp and its surroundings is paramount. The vision is to ensure that any future use or development aligns with preserving the ecological balance of this amazing and irreplaceable habitat.
5. **Dragon Run Environmental Academy Mentorship (DREAM):** Building on the success of 2023, the focus shifts towards expanding the reach and impact of this transformative program in 2024.
6. **Property Monitoring Enhancement:** Strengthening the roles of our property monitors and property monitoring teams to empower vigilant stewardship and conservation management of the lands and waters we cherish.
7. **Expanded Exploration:** Paddles and hikes will venture into new areas of the Dragon, extending across Gloucester and Essex Counties, unlocking more facets of Dragon Run's splendor.
8. **Strategic Goals and Growth:** Ambitious strategic goals encompass growth, streamlined business processes, and impactful community initiatives, charting a course for collective advancement.
9. **Treasuring the Dragon:** Above all, the vision persists to treasure and safeguard Dragon Run and its irreplaceable value for generations to come.

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Anne Ducey-Ortiz and Adrienne Frank Awarded Top Honor by Friends of Dragon Run

Anne Ducey-Ortiz and Adrienne Frank were both awarded the Bald Cypress Award by the Friends of Dragon Run (FODR). FODR's most prestigious honor, the Bald Cypress Award recognizes individuals for their significant service to the organization and protection of the Dragon Run swamp.

Anne Ducey-Ortiz received the award for more than 22 years of work carrying out FODR's mission to preserve, protect and encourage wise use of the Dragon Run watershed. Her outstanding service included serving on the paddle crew, as FODR secretary, vice president, and as a FODR Board of Directors member. She currently serves on the Board and as FODR Membership Chair.



Adrienne Frank was awarded the Bald Cypress award for more than 23 years on the FODR Board as Secretary, Treasurer, as well as in additional roles. We celebrate her conservation work, education of the public and FODR guests through paddle trips and hikes. She currently serves on the Board as Secretary.



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Dragon Run Will Hold Its First Christmas Bird Count

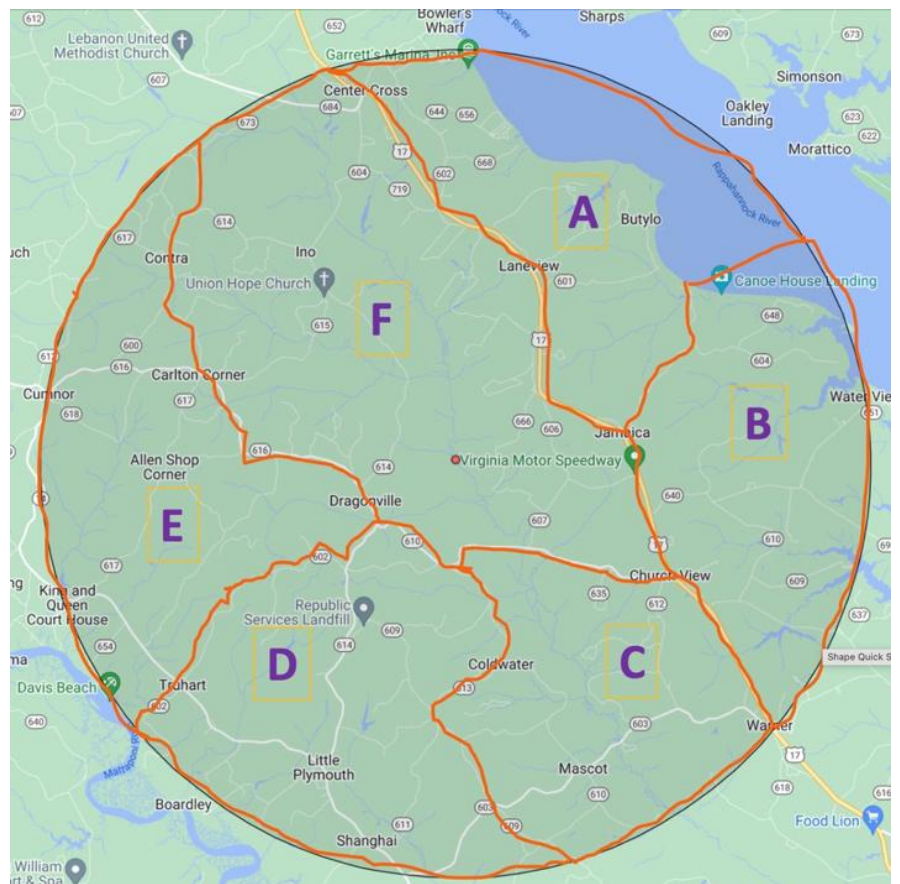
By Jeff Wright

The Inaugural Dragon Run Christmas Bird Count will take place on Sunday, December 17, 2023. This inaugural count within the Dragon Run Watershed is sponsored by Friends of Dragon Run (FODR).

This is the 124th year of the National Audubon Bird Count. The first Audubon Bird Count took place in 1900. Last year approximately 76,000 individuals participated globally at more than 2,600 individual counts. Dragon Run is one of the newest counts.

The data collected by observers allows researchers, conservation biologists, wildlife agencies, and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. The Christmas bird counts provide a picture of how the continent's bird populations – and local bird populations - have changed in time and space over the past hundred years. Data collected from Dragon Run will be a valuable addition to this long running study. It will be an exceptional event plus it's fun.

The Dragon Run count covers segments of Essex, King and Queen, and Middlesex counties on Virginia's Middle Peninsula. There are extraordinary habitats on public and private properties within this area and amazing biodiversity within the circle. The count will cover





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segments of Dragon Run, the Dragon Swamp, two state forests, areas along the banks of the Mattaponi and Rappahannock Rivers, and inland portions of the three counties.

For more information or to sign up, contact Jeff Wright at pec11908@mac.com

Sector Leaders

- A Sherry Rollins and Robin Mathews
- B Susan and Tom Crockett
- C Jeff Wright and Mike Grose
- D Maeve and Joey Coker
- E Anne Wilber and Dan Schlangen
- F Betsy Washington and Kevin Howe

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The Dream Continues

By Molly Broderson

The first DREAM 2023 program and ensuing school participation was deemed a success as evidenced by comments from Peasley Middle School students, participating student photos, and the Page Middle School Field Day presentation at the November 14, 2023 Gloucester School Board meeting. As part of our grant proposal, the DREAM committee asked students to respond to this sentence stem:

"Because I experienced the Dragon..."

"I am going to help keep our water clean. Thank you for your time, it was amazing!" – Brie

"I know how important it is to keep it clean and healthy. Thank you so much for taking your time to help me realize how important it is to keep it clean." – Savannah

"I learned to enjoy nature, thank you for having me." – Edward



"It was fun to experience Dragon Run cause it helped me to connect with nature and better help me to understand the watershed." – Ryan

"Thank you so much for your time to show me the Dragon. The Dragon is an incredible place. I would love to go back at some point. Thank you again, I had so much fun!" – Aidan



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"I want to keep it clean and continue to allow students to visit Dragon Run." – Willer

"I loved learning about the different types of things there, and the boat things were fun." - Carlie

"I learned about the ecosystem and how the dams were always the same. Thank you for spending your time teaching us about the Dragon." – Jocely

"Thank you for your time to tell us about the Dragon Run. One thing I loved about the Dragon Run is learning about the beavers. I didn't know beavers are so fascinating!" - Katelyn



"I learned that just enjoying nature is and can be better than staying inside." – Lendi

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Prothonotary Warbler 2023 Update

By Gary Driscole

Each spring, Prothonotary Warblers arrive in Dragon Run to nest and raise their chicks. The tiny birds, weighing just four ounces, fly from Colombia, South America to Virginia, a trip of more than 2,000 miles. Approximately 22 nest boxes scattered between Big Island and Mascot provide shelter for the birds and their broods.

FODR volunteer Gary Driscole monitors the nest boxes and records the number of boxes occupied, eggs laid, and fledges. He reports the data to Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) which has been studying the birds since the late 1980s. The statistics vary from year to year.



Photo by Tom Crockett

During spring and summer 2023, Gary monitored 22 nesting boxes along Dragon Run. He started the weekly monitoring on March 28 and ended on July 26.

Although this year's results were low, they were better than last year. The average number of fledglings between 2015 and 2021 was 60. In 2022, there were only 28 fledglings. This year there were 35 fledglings.

Fifteen boxes on poles are located north and south of the kayak put in at Big Island. Warbler activity was recorded in nine of the 15 boxes. There were 25 Prothonotary Warbler and three Chickadee fledglings in these boxes. (Chickadees sometimes nest in the boxes and their numbers are recorded with the Prothonotary Warbler numbers.)

Downstream from Big Island, seven boxes are located at the Friends of Dragon Run Teta Kain Nature Preserve. Warblers nested in two of the boxes and 10 warblers fledged.



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Survival of the Prothonotary Warblers is habitat related. Coastal areas here and in Colombia are experiencing habitat loss due to increased development. Sea level rise, which occurs first in lowland swamps, decreases flora and fauna that the warblers need to survive.

During the winter, Gary will clean and repair the nest boxes, getting them ready for the warblers return in 2024.

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Guest Hikes

By Robin and Steve Mathews, Hike Masters

Fourteen hikers turned out for the FODR member nature walk on December 3. Participants had the option to choose either a leisurely hike through the Revere tract or a brisk 2.8-mile hike around the Williams/Bulman tract. Everyone learned about the Dragon watershed and FODR's initiatives to protect and preserve the Dragon. Eleven volunteers assisted with the hikes and manned the fire pit. Participants finished the day with hot/cold cider and cookies.



Photos on this page by Tom Crockett





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What a wonderful day it was! The weather made things interesting for a few days, but it all worked out in the end. It seemed like our guests had a great time whether they took the leisurely hike or the longer one. One guest thanked me profusely for offering a slower hike. She said she learned so much that her brain was full. Her comments certainly made it all worth it.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you did to make the day successful. From baking cookies to scouting the trails you had it all covered. It is so gratifying to work with people who care so much about FODR and helping each other. You ARE the BEST!

Robin, Co-Hikemaster

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Fossilized Shells Found in the Dragon Run Watershed

On a recent Dragon Keeper expedition Art Gilbert and Andrea Mitman discovered fossilized shells along the banks of the Dragon Run channel. The Dragon Keeper program visits different sections of the Dragon annually, either by kayak or on foot.

Art and Andrea brought back two shells and asked Kevin Howe to identify them.



Art Gilbert on a recent Dragon Keeper paddle trip.



In the area of a taller bank, above and below water-level, were layers of shells, including scallop shells.

Kevin identified both shells as fossils—one a tree oyster and the other a scallop.



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Tree Oyster, *Isognomon maxillata*, a Miocene fossil, about 10-20 million years old. It is related to our living Virginia oyster and is identified on the basis of three characteristics: 1) looks like the shell of a mollusk (bivalve) and many mollusks have layers of shell which we can see in this specimen; 2) the odd, not-symmetrical shape of this piece of shell is characteristic of the tree oyster; and, 3) the *ligamental* area of the shell has grooves which resemble teeth; however they are for the *ligaments* which hold the two halves of the shell together. This is a common fossil in the coastal plain of Virginia and up and down the east coast. They are rarely found as a whole shell – after all, they are 10-20 million years old!

Scallop, *Chesapecten jeffersonius*, the state fossil of Virginia. These fossils are more recent than the tree oyster, about 4.5 million years old. It is not unusual to find some mix of older and younger fossils together which is very common in coastal plain deposits. It is identified by: 1) the distinctive shape (most scallops are shaped like this); and, 2) the number of *ribs*--the raised areas of the shell (between 9- and 12).



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2023 Paddle Seasons Highlights

By Jim Ewan and Carol Kauffman, Paddlemasters

Weather for the fall paddle season was fantastic and only one day was cancelled due to rain. Mornings were cool, the afternoons were balmy, and the fall colors were spectacular.

The season started October 16 and ended November 5. Training for the 30 volunteer crew members was held on October 13. It was the first paddle season for two of the crew members.

Students from Peasley Middle School, Page Middle School, and Ware Academy paddled and hiked during the first three days of the season. Teachers from these three schools participated in DREAM this summer. As part of the program, they brought their students to paddle and hike in the Dragon this fall.





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The fall kayak route went upstream first, and guests paddled through a cathedral-like route that opened into an area of mostly smartweed. They turned around and paddled downstream to a bald cypress with an impressive growth of resurrection fern on its branches and trunk. Initially, gates were installed in six of the beaver dams, but as the water level dropped, two of the gates were no longer necessary.

Fall paddlers totaled 138 and revenue for the season totaled approximately \$8,000.

Welcome Jim Ewan, FODR's New Co-Paddlemaster



This fall, Jim Ewan joined Carol Kauffman as a FODR paddlemaster. Jim became a FODR member in February 2023. He worked on the crew for the 2023 spring and summer paddle seasons and then became co-paddle master for the fall paddle season.

Jim's main responsibility this fall was crew scheduling. Jim has also volunteered for several workdays and gone on a few Dragon Keeper paddles.

Jim is a retired professional with the Boy Scouts of America and continues in a volunteer capacity as the current District

Commissioner for the local district. Jim has kayaked for more than 20 years and holds a certification as a sea kayak instructor with American Canoe Association. Jim worked as a kayak guide with Wild River Outfitters in Virginia Beach and Bay Country Kayaking and is a certified Eco Tour Guide.

Jim enjoys high adventure outings with scouts. He is certified in wilderness first aid and CPR. His favorite places for adventure are the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and, of course, the Dragon.

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Stewardship Projects

By Jack Kauffman, Stewardship Committee Chair

Volunteers participating in FODR's seventh stewardship volunteer day on November 14 successfully completed three water crossings at the Powcan property in Essex County. The Dragon's headwaters are located near this property.



For more than three hours volunteers carried lumber and built water crossings on trails that traversed low-lying areas which are frequently marshy and wet. Most of these locations were about 3/4 of a mile from our vehicles; so carrying 2 X 6 X 12 boards and cut 2 X 6 X 3 foot boards was no small task.

These water crossings will allow us to hold nature hikes at this property year-round. They will also allow our Youth Outreach Committee to use the property for school environmental education field trips.



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Paddlemaster; Adrienne Frank, Board Secretary; Tom Cramer, Wares Bridge Property Monitor; Andy Brown, Board Member; Jack Kauffman, Stewardship Committee Chair; Gary Driscoll, Prothonotary Warbler Monitor; Gary Grabb, 2024 Board Member; and Fritz Hoogakker and Tiffany Gould, first-time volunteers.

Attending the event were the Powcan Property Monitors Anne Atkins and Andrea Mitman; Jeff Wright, FODR President; Robin and Steve Mathews, Hike Masters; Jim Ewan,



After the work, volunteers hiked to the edge of the huge beaver dam that has created a beautiful pond on the property. Here they relaxed, ate lunch, and enjoyed one another's company.

An additional bridge and four more puncheons will be constructed at our next stewardship volunteer event, scheduled for December 12th.

Hope you will join us!



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FODR Volunteers Collected Nearly Half-ton of Trash During 2023

By Mark Alling, Trash Wrangler

The first cleanup of 2023 was held on February 25. Twelve volunteers collected 6,092 items weighing a total of 202 pounds. Seventy-six pounds were recyclables, and 126 pounds were trash. More than 1,600 cigarette butts were collected that day, mostly from Rt 17.

Ten volunteers completed the spring cleanup on April 8. The total weight of all items was identical to the February cleanup-- 202 pounds. There were 103 pounds of recyclables and 99 pounds of trash in this collection. However, the 3,044 items collected, were approximately half the February event.

The early fall trash and recyclable collection took place on September 30. We delayed this pickup to avoid insects and hot weather. Six volunteers collected 5,077 items weighing 234 pounds: 112 pounds of recyclables and 122 pounds of trash.

The final 2023 collection was held on November 18. Most of the leaves had fallen, which covered some of the roadside recyclables and trash, especially at the Rt. 603, 692, and Byrds Bridges. The 2,744 items collected weighed 307 pounds: 234 pounds of recyclables and 73 pounds of trash. Eight volunteers participated in this trash/recyclable collection.

Total weight and number of items collected by 36 volunteers during the four 2023 cleanups are astounding: 16,957 items weighing 945 pounds, almost a half-ton. Recyclables weighed 525 pounds and trash weighed 420 pounds.

FODR is exploring the possibility of expanding the number of bridges from which we collect recyclables and trash. We may add six or seven bridges upstream from Dragon Run.

Let's clean up the recyclables and trash at more bridges crossing the Dragon. But we need your help! Check the FODR activity calendar at DragonRun.org in January for the list of 2024 trash pickup dates. And plan on joining us in February, April, September, and November as well as other dates in 2024.

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A Sweat Bee Marks FODR's 1000th Species!

By Maeve Coker, Citizen Science Committee Chair

The Dark-winged sweat bee (*Lasioglossom fuscipenne*) marked FODR's quest to identify 1,000 species of flora and fauna in the Dragon Run watershed. This native bee (photo on right) was pollinating a beautiful native plant, the big-headed aster (*Symphyotrichum grandiflorum*), when it made history.

The Citizen Science Committee (CitSci) successfully completed its first year by meeting its goal to document the biodiversity of the Dragon Run watershed. With the help of global databases iNaturalist and eBird, historical data dating back to 2014 was used in addition to in-the-field identifications made this year.



*This sweat bee made FODR history.
Photo by Maeve Coker*



Ladies' tresses

The breakdown of our current 1,020 species includes 563 plants, 130 birds, 151 insects and arachnids, 120 fungi and protozoans, 30 reptiles and amphibians, 11 mammals, 10 fish, and 5 mollusks. Of the 563 species of plants identified, 23 of them are considered non-native and highly invasive.

The Committee is working with our Stewardship Management Committee to mitigate impacts of these species on FODR property. In 2024, we plan to engage other organizations within our communities to help mitigate the impact of invasives within the watershed.

Work on the Flora of Virginia Project has continued. Of the more than 55 species identified as first county record



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occurrences, 10 of them have been collected for herbarium documentation. Because of the very limited public access, and the logistics of accessing the Dragon Run Watershed, many species are underrepresented in their distribution and emphasize the importance of the CitSci Committee's work.

We sponsored the inaugural Dragon Run Butterfly Count on August 22 with great success. Areas of Essex, King and Queen, and Middlesex Counties were surveyed by 26 participants. They ended the day with 46 species of butterflies identified and more than 1,000 butterflies counted.

Several groups were hosted this fall. The Entomology class from Christopher Newport University visited our Teta Kain Nature Preserve to better understand the riparian and alluvial insects that inhabit the Dragon Run watershed.



Great blue lobelia, Lobelia siphilitica, one of the new county record plants discovered.



Eastern musk turtle, one of the new herpetofauna documented this year. Photo by Kevin Howe.

On October 7 and 8, Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) members participated in a botany field trip during the annual VNPS State Meeting. Participants were smitten with the diversity of the flora. Many participants saw species normally not found in their hometowns. The oval lady's-tresses, *Spiranthes ovalis*, were blooming and we recorded this new find as a species not previously known to occur locally.



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Committee members conducting a bioblitz.

During August through November, the Committee visited multiple private properties within the Dragon Run watershed. With help from these partners, the CitSci committee documented the biodiversity on the properties and added more than 40 species previously missing from our iNaturalist and eBird data.

The CitSci team collaborated with the Clifton Institute to collect native plant seeds for their Virginia Native Seed Pilot Project. The Dragon

Run watershed hosts many of the species on their target list and we were able to ethically source seed for their project. To learn more about this collaborative effort, visit [Virginia Native Seed Pilot Project – The Clifton Institute](#)

The inaugural Dragon Run Christmas bird count will be held this year on [December 17](#).

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Unraveling the Indigenous History of Bacon's Rebellion

By Jeff Wright

Work on a National Park Service Grant continued with our teammates the Pamunkey Tribe, Rappahannock Tribe, and St. Mary's College. We had productive meetings with our partners that included hikes and paddles focused on tactics, techniques and procedures used by the tribes to hide from Bacon's forces.

The team continued to learn about living off the land and foraging on the Dragon during September. And yes, there are a lot of different things that could be eaten; but how did this process work for the approximately 500 to 700 people hiding in the Dragon Swamp? We conducted soundscapes and view scapes at historic crossing points along the Dragon. Of note was how the density of vegetation in the swamp during September muffles sound and adds distracting noises when the vegetation is rustling in light breezes. The density and maturity of vegetation limits visual ranges and makes it difficult to either see objects or people hiding in the vegetation. Work continues with planned meetings with both the Rappahannock and Pamunkey Tribes in early 2024 to refine the team's findings and begin writing the projects preliminary report.



Dr. Julia King, St. Mary's College (C), and Rappahannock Tribe members Jerry Fortune (L) and Mark Fortune, Assistant Chief (R)

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Membership Update

By Anne Ducey-Ortiz

Members are the backbone of the Friends of Dragon Run (FODR) and make the best volunteers and long-time supporters. One of the main reasons we started our paddle trips was (and still is) to get people excited about protecting this beautiful natural and cultural resource and to get them to join FODR in our mission to protect the Dragon.

And it's working! As of November 13, 2023, we have 322 current annual members and 125 life members. This is up 31 annual members from this time last year and 14 new life members!

When I became membership chair, I inherited an excel spreadsheet that was handed down from membership chair to membership chair since the beginning of the organization, as far as I could tell. But we are always working to improve and simplify our membership process. A few years ago, FODR invested in software to manage our member and volunteer database. We now manage all our information through a single online program. This has been a huge help in accurately tracking and contacting all members, volunteers, property monitors, and those who participate in various activities.

Our current membership levels are Annual (Individual membership--\$25) and Life (An individual or couple \$1000). Members now have the option to set up automatic renewals when they join online. This has been very successful, and we currently have 117 members who are using the auto renewal option. For more information about membership and how to join, visit our membership page on our website, www.dragonrun.org.

Member benefits include email updates about opportunities to volunteer for or participate in FODR activities. For example, we hold several popular hikes on FODR properties in winter and spring so that members can experience the Dragon beyond the river's edge. We also hold trash pickups four times a year. Plus, we hold periodic workdays when we check property lines, clear trails, and perform other maintenance duties on FODR lands. Members receive a subscription to our quarterly online newsletter, "The Dragon's Tale," which provides interesting articles



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about the ecology of the Dragon Run watershed and updates on FODR activities.

Our activities for FODR members are a great way to get outdoors and make a difference in something we all care about. The Stewardship Management Committee has developed property management plans for each FODR property. And on workdays, volunteers have improved and created trails which will enable us to offer member hikes in different areas of the Dragon.

The FODR Board brings interesting and engaging speakers to our annual meeting and three general meetings. Due to Covid, the meetings have been held via zoom for the past few years, but we hope to go get back to in-person meetings soon. Whether in person or online, these meetings are a great way to meet other FODR members and hear speakers present topics related to Dragon Run, conservation, nature, and environmental issues.

Membership dues provide a steady income used to cover FODR's operational expenses, such as real estate taxes and property insurance. Paddle trips provide income that is used to help continue to protect the land and water around the Dragon. All Board, committee, paddle, and logistic crew members are volunteers and 100% of the funds we receive support our mission of being good stewards of Dragon Run, educating others about the Dragon, and continuing preservation and wise use of this pristine resource in our back yard.

Your ideas and suggestions for future membership activities or ways to improve our membership experience, are always welcome. Just send an email to MembershipDragonRun@gmail.com.

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Champions of the Dragon: Brent Heath, Founder

By Jeff Wright, President

This is the second in a series of articles about individuals and organizations who have championed the protection and preservation of Dragon Run. Some of the individuals and organizations we will cover pre-date the founding of Friends of Dragon Run. The series also presents the stories of the amazing collection of individuals who founded FODR or played a major role in its growth and the work to preserve, protect, and encourage wise use of the Dragon Run. They are all champions!



Brent Heath's family has been growing bulbs in Gloucester since the 1900s. Brent's grandfather, a devoted lover of the daffodil, moved to the area to start his farm. His love of bulbs was passed down to Brent who, along with his wife Becky, turned the family's love of bulbs into Brent and Becky's Bulbs. Brent is one of the FODR founders and he and his family are committed to preserving and treasuring the Dragon.

Jeff Wright interviewed Brent to learn about his experience with the Dragon and creation of FODR. This article paraphrases Brent's answers to Jeff's questions.

How did you become one of the founders of FODR?

Through the Boy Scouts, participating in work led by Jimmy Morgan to clear trails and remove trees blocking the Dragon. After college, continuing to follow Jimmy's vision that we needed to work to preserve, protect and assure wise use of the Dragon. Concerns were growing about some aspects of development and the need to further protect lands, waters, and our natural heritage. I got to make a lot of presentations about the Dragon to various groups in the community. Was truly hooked by the pursuit of the Big Island property. Also got to work with some great organizations and people such as those from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Jerry Stokes, and many others.



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What was the greatest challenge in building the organization?

Getting the word out. Encouraging donations to protect land. Getting people in the community involved. I was not tremendously involved in this at the very beginning but soon got onboard to work with, help resource, and be a part of the amazing group Jimmy Morgan gathered.

Looking back what was your favorite memory of FODR?

Loved to talk about and show nature to people. Becky and I paddling folks on the Dragon and always loving every day on the Dragon and spreading the word about the Dragon and conservation. We had a canoe touring company called Heaths Trails. We got to take well over 100 people on tours of the Dragon Run. Loved to do the trips. To help get the word out about the Dragon Run we took reporters from most of the local and regional papers as well as members of conservation groups such as the Nature Conservancy. It was amazing to see people's reactions to meeting a Dragon! The Dragon did most of the talking - Becky and I paddled, navigated, and reinforced what species and habitats from the majesty of nature they were witnessing.

A funny story from the past?

There were many! But they all kind of involved "clanging and banging" in canoes, cold water, falling in the water, beaver dams, church groups, and people urging us to turn around as there was "white water ahead." The white water ahead was always the flow over the never-ending beaver dams. Great fun.

Any ideas you want to share to further protect the Dragon Run?

Three thoughts:

- The need to continue to champion the preservation and protection of the Dragon through conservation easements, FODR owning land, and working for environmental meaningful best practices for agriculture, forestry, and our economies.
- Help our communities become knowledgeable about the amazing biodiversity and benefits we get. I like FODRs initiatives on environmental literacy.
- Feed the biome!

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STREAMSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Ready for His Wedding

By Kevin Howe, Treasurer



The male Wood Duck, *Aix sponsa*, is among the most beautiful birds in North America, although I admit there are quite a few birds on the list. But the male Wood Duck is stunning! And by the way, the Latin name means “dressed in finery ready for his wedding”. Pretty bird!

Wood Ducks are commonly found in swamps, freshwater marshes, and riparian habitats. You might

wonder about its choice of habitats to live and breed in; but the Wood Duck is in an environment with fewer predators and many hiding places. Black snakes, a major predator of bird eggs and young chicks, are not the snake of swamps or marshes; so right away the Wood Duck has increased its survival rates by choosing wetlands. Further, with its slim body and large eyes for flying and dodging tree branches, the Wood Duck is well adapted to live in these areas.

In North America seven species of ducks are cavity nesters, and the Wood Duck is one of them in our area. Cavity nesting birds are those who nest in a tree cavity, usually in a dying or dead tree. The cavity can be a natural cavity created by fungal infection or one created by a Woodpecker. In addition to the Wood Duck, we have 84 other cavity nesting birds in North America; No other bird in North America, aside from a woodpecker creates nesting cavities.



One of the Wood Duck nesting boxes in Dragon Run



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Woodpeckers create a new nest cavity each year, meaning they abandon last year's cavity making it available to other cavity nesters sometimes including mammals such as possums and squirrels. Wood Ducks require a larger cavity than most other cavity nesters (i.e., chickadees, wrens, etc.) so they must search for large cavities, ones with a four-inch entrance hole such as those created by the large Piliated Woodpecker. As mentioned earlier, some cavities are created by fungal decomposition, but research suggests that decomposition takes more than 80 years to hollow out a cavity of sufficient size for a Wood Duck.



A pair of wood ducks: female (on the left) and male (on the right)

for a nest cavity together, the male plays no role in selecting the cavity. Their nest sites are in mature forests, usually within 1.25 miles from water. One study of nest site fidelity by Wood Ducks found that 42% of the females returned and used the same site the following year.

Interestingly, one research study found that more than 60% of nesting Wood Ducks used natural cavities for nesting although I'm not sure I fully believe that study. Typically, Wood Duck nesting cavities are 20-50 feet above the ground or water. There are reports of Wood Ducks nesting on the ground, but this appears to be quite rare.

While research shows males and females hunt



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The female lays between 6 and 15 eggs and she is solely responsible for incubation which lasts approximately 28 days. About 24 hours after hatching, the females call the young out of the nest and the chicks *leap* out to the water (if lucky) or to the ground. One duckling reportedly *sailed* 291 feet to the ground and was unhurt. Once the ducklings

are out of the nest, the female gathers and leads them to a rearing site. It takes between eight and ten weeks for the young birds to fly.

Artificial nest boxes have been around since the days of the Roman Empire when they apparently used nest boxes as a method to catch food. But the story of today's Wood Duck nest box is an intriguing one. Wood Ducks were considered the most abundant duck east of the Mississippi in the mid-1800s. By 1900, however, the Wood Duck population had vastly declined due to hunting pressure and habitat loss (cutting dead and live trees, draining wetlands, and concomitant loss of cavities for nesting).

A new nest box ready to be placed. FODR member and Founder Davis Rhodes makes the boxes by hand.





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The interior side of the nest box entrance. The chick's wings are equipped with a tiny hook where they bend. They will use the hook along with their feet to climb out of the box a day after they hatch.



Although various laws to protect birds (Lacey Act of 1900 and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918) and outright prohibitions came into effect after 1900, by the 1930s Wood Ducks were still rare. Although as early as 1912, nest boxes were used to attract Wood Ducks, they did not come into widespread use until after 1937.

In 1937, two biologists, Gil Gigstead and Milford Smith, biologists with the U.S. Biological Survey (precursor to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) proposed to their refuge manager that the refuge build and place the nest boxes to increase the population of this highly valued but declining waterfowl species. It is reported that the refuge manager told them “no, that it was a waste to build and erect them on company time.” As devoted biologists, however, they built and erected 486 nest boxes in Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge in Illinois on their own time. In that first year, more than half the boxes were used to raise young.

Over the next two years, two other biologists, Art Hawkins, a former grad student of Aldo Leopold, and Frank Bellrose, a biologist, built 700 nest boxes and erected them all over Illinois and again found more than 50% nesting occupancy. They kept detailed notes about the boxes, predators, etc. to refine the design and placement.



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Their efforts, and those of Gigstead and Smith, started a movement leading to thousands of nest boxes being erected for Wood Ducks. Frank Belrose went on to spend his entire career—more than 50 years—studying Wood Ducks and much of what we know about Wood Ducks today can be credited to him as well as the stability of today's Wood Duck population.

We are fortunate to have the work of these scientists lead to the abundance of the beautiful bird we have today.



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