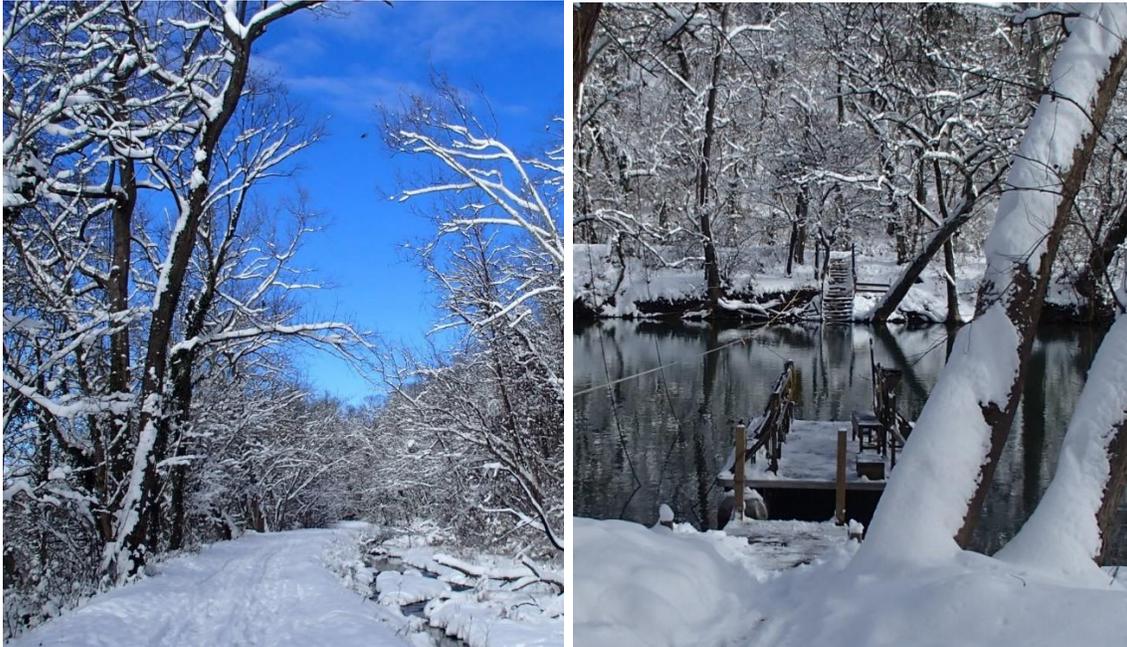


The Sycamore Islander

March 2019 | Volume 98 Number 3



Photos by Joe Hage

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March 13: Monthly Club Meeting, 8:00 pm, at the home of Meredith Griggs, 6506 78th Street, Cabin John

March 31: Spring Work-fest, 9 AM- 3 PM on the Island (April 14 rain date)

April 6: Spring Wildflower Walk (9:50 am at MacArthur Blvd parking lot across from Old Anglers Inn)

April 10: Monthly Club Meeting, 8:00 pm, on the Island

Relief Caretakers' Schedule and Online Sign-Up System

To sign-up to be a Relief Caretaker (any Saturday), you can access the "Sign-Up Genius" app from the [SycamoreIsland.org scheduling webpage](http://SycamoreIsland.org/scheduling_webpage) (or by clicking the Relief Caretaker Schedule and Instructions icon on the Club's home page). Click on the link. There are simple instructions. [You can also sign-up by contacting the Relief Caretaker Coordinator, Madeleine Carter, at madeleinecpcarter@gmail.com]. The app provides a calendar that indicates ALL of the Relief Caretakers that have signed up through March and provides reminders. Relief Caretakers signed up for the coming month are:

March 1-3

Island Closed Due to High Water

March 9

10 am to 2 pm: **Volunteer Needed**
2 to 6 pm: **Volunteer Needed**

March 16

10 am to 2 pm: Julia and Peter Smith
2 to 7 pm: **Volunteer Needed**

March 23

10 am to 2 pm: **Volunteer Needed**
2 to 7 pm: **Volunteer Needed**

March 30

10 am to 2 pm: **Volunteer Needed**
2 to 7 pm: Eric Aaserud

Thank You to all those that volunteered for February weekends, although your services were not required due to more high water!

While the Island will also be closed due to high water the first weekend of March (when Joe is away), there are still lots of openings for other weekends.

Still Seeking Applicants for Club Leadership Positions

- **Entertainment:** Coordinating the Club's annual calendar of entertainment events by working with or recruiting event organizers
- **Deputy Captain:** Helping support and back-up Club Captain, Stan Fowler, and Caretaker Joe Hage in their efforts to maintain and use the club docks, ferry and other equipment
- **Website Understudy:** Assisting Tryon Wells in maintaining and improving the Club website and data base system
- **Swim Safety:** Overseeing Club efforts to ensure life-saving equipment is readily available on the island, and that all Island Members and Guests are informed of safe swimming practices for the Island and acknowledge the risks involved
- **Island Erosion Control:** To assess and develop a plan for addressing Island erosion issues, especially those arising from high water events and fallen trees

Contact Vice-President johnanoble@mac.com

Spring Wildflower Walk

John Parrish and RG Steinman will once again lead the annual Sycamore Island Spring Wildflower walk on Saturday, April 6 from 10:00 to 1:00 - RAIN or SHINE!

We will be exploring a new place along the C&O Canal near Great Falls - the high terrace gravel areas off the Gold Mine Loop Trail, in the hills above the Berma Road (which runs along the north side of the C&O at Widewater, from near Old Anglers Inn to just above Lock 16). These forested, high terrace gravel areas were left behind when the ancient Potomac River receded to where it is today. Together, we will discover what Spring Wildflowers occur in these soils, and we will also identify the upland forest trees that occur here. The winter snows will finally have given way to the Spring Wildflowers, and we hope to encounter such delights as Spring Beauty, Toothworts, Wood Anemone, Woodland Buttercups, and maybe even Bloodroots (depicted).



We will meet at the newly constructed bathroom building in the parking lot across from the Old Anglers Inn on MacArthur Blvd, at 9:50, and depart at 10:00. Since parking there can be difficult on weekends, especially when the weather is nice, be sure to arrive a little early so that you can find a spot and get to the meeting place on time. Bring a lunch or snack, water, and dress for the weather. If you have any questions, feel free to call - 301-565-2025 or email rg at lfeonurth@gmail.com.

Spring Work-fest

Please join us on Sycamore Island for the Spring Work-fest on Sunday, March 31, 9 AM- 3 PM. [Rain date is Sunday, April 14]

Bring your gloves, drills, hammers and side-dishes and join us for a day of Island maintenance and beautification!

The Club will provide main dishes [burgers, hot dogs, chicken and sausages], plus lemonade.

Looking for volunteers to buy and cook food for Spring Work-fest! [Please contact Joe Hage]

It's Fun!



Photo by Mark Friedrichs

CARETAKER'S LOG

Friday -- February 8, 2019

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.0 Water Temperature: 40

The ferry is closed, probably for the whole weekend.

But, I did get my internet back, so that's good. We were without the World Wide Web for exactly three weeks.

Sunday -- February 10, 2019

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.7 Water Temperature: 40

There aren't too many birds out there this morning, but last Sunday we woke up to an exciting array of avian visitors. It's too bad that there wasn't a winter bird walk planned for last Sunday, it would have been a barn-burner. First we saw a group of ten or so hooded mergansers that are so splendidly bedecked with colorful feathers that they look as if they were made of painted porcelain. There were ring-necked ducks, there were pied-billed grebes and there were scaups. We saw buffleheads and the rarest visitor of all was the canvas back duck. It's very distinctive with its large brown head and bright white body, which is larger than most ducks. I got a very close look at it when I went to answer the ferry bell and the canvas back came splashing out from under the dock when I got there. Scare the living day lights out of me. I thought that the canvas back would be a one-day visit but surprisingly that duck and at least one other canvas back, have been hanging around here all week.

I also noticed that the red-shouldered hawk has begun to build a nest in the large sycamore next to the bird feeder. There are a few large sticks in place but not a lot of activity there yesterday. Maybe the hawks changed their minds about nesting here.



Photos by Mark Friedrichs and Joe Hage

Wednesday -- February 13, 2019

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.8 Water Temperature: 40

The ferry is closed and will be closed the rest of the week.

The sweetest thing happened to me last Saturday. I found a Valentines Day card on my windshield. It was from a young Sycamore Island waitlister. I guess she came to find the ferry closed and left me the card. So thoughtful. Thanks Eva! And Happy Valentines Day!

Speaking of St. Valentine. Our resident geese have paired up and are now looking for suitable nesting spots. Let's hope that they have better luck with their eggs and hatchlings this year. Last year one goose sat on a nest for months and the eggs never hatched.

Friday -- February 22, 2019

Water Level at Little Falls: 5.4 Water Temperature: 40

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The river went up, and then down and now it's going up again and we're back where we were last week, high water and a closed ferry for another weekend. That's why we can't have nice things.

I take that back. I did get one nice thing over on the ferry yesterday. I took advantage of the lower water and deployed the ferry just long enough to deliver a *new vanity* for my bathroom. I ordered the vanity over a month ago and since I've been commuting by canoe, I haven't been able to get it here from Mary's house. Sadly, I couldn't drive on the towpath because of the snow and sloppy conditions, so I had to haul the 75 Lb. box down the Sycamore trail. Not easy, but I was determined to get my bathroom finished. The side benefit was that I finally bought some puncture-proof tires for the Club's hand truck. Then, since the ferry was open for a change, I hauled six bags of construction trash and my other accumulated trash up the hill to my van.

We had to buy the new vanity because the silly old wall-mounted sink in my bathroom finally came off the wall. I've been trying for the last eleven years to make that sink usable but now I'm done messing with it. The new vanity is going to make a huge difference in the lifestyle of the caretaker. Whether it's me or the next person. The new sink has a flat surface around it so that you can place things on there like a cup or a brush. The old sink was so lame, there was no place to set anything.

While I was at it I decided to do some other much-needed upgrades in that bathroom. I recessed the medicine cabinet into the wall, as it should have been originally, which gives me room to put my head over the sink! Wow, what a difference. And, I took the time to add some more insulation in that wall. Back when they did the renovation, 11 years ago, they failed to add much insulation, just a 2 inch thick piece of styrofoam behind the waste pipe. I also enclosed the hot water heater that takes up the corner of the bathroom. That was a serious upgrade as well, hiding that eyesore behind a plywood wall looks so much cleaner.

Then I installed new towel bars and I added another wall cabinet with a beveled mirror. Then, of course, I had to paint the ceiling, walls and trim. Ceiling and trim are white, walls are a nice pale ocean green.

I'm happy to do these kinds of projects for the club in order to improve the facilities and to increase the value of the clubhouse and caretakers quarters. For this project, I provided all of the labor and a lot of the materials at no cost to the Club. I'm only asking to be reimbursed for the cost of the vanity and the medicine cabinet, since those things will stay here come the day I move away.

I can't share any pictures here but hopefully you can see some before and after pictures in the next Islander.

Tuesday -- February 26, 2019

Water Level at Little Falls: 8.3 Water Temperature: 40

Well, here we are, two months into the new year and the ferry has been closed for all but two weeks of that time. Where have all the good times gone!

The river seems to be cresting about now, but there is a lot of water and melting snow in the water shed. All of that moisture is headed our way and I'm afraid it might be another week before we can use the ferry again.

There were fox tracks on the Island yesterday! Gray fox.

I'm still waiting for my W-2 so that I can file my 2018 taxes.

[Minutes of February 13, 2018 Meeting of the Sycamore Island Club](#)

Attendees: Karen Possner, Larry Heilman, Gerry Barton, Sherry Fizdale, Bill Marmon, Tryon Wells, Jim Drew, Peter Levine, Mary Ellen Levine, Richard Bertaut, John Noble, Adele Seifried, Alison Levine, Marianne Ross, John Butler, Judy Lentz, Mark Friedrichs, Lucky Marmon

President Richard Bertaut called the meeting to order.

The January, 2019 Minutes were approved unanimously.

Treasurer's Report: None

Financial Secretary's Report: Sherry Fizdale reported that 60% of members and wait-listers have sent in their dues for the year. She will send out a reminder on Feb. 15th to those who have not paid. There have been no membership cancellations. Sherry said that some people who are eligible for Senior memberships opt out because they do not want to increase usage of the Island.

She noted that most people do not return the form that is mailed with the dues and requests members to state which activities or jobs they would be interested performing. Most simply mail in their checks.

As noted in the January Islander, there are several leadership positions – Entertainment, Deputy Captain, Website Understudy, Swim Safety, and Island Environment/ Erosion Control - that remain unfilled. It was suggested that an article in the Islander describing these jobs and urging members to help out might be a better way of recruiting new leaders. Wait-listers, the President stated, cannot be recruited for these jobs.

Captain's Report: Capt. Stan Fowler was not present, but President Bertaut filled in with information he had. Stan is building a curved metal device that will run in a semicircle from the upper ferry railing to the lower railing on both sides, at the end of the ferry. This will facilitate gentler landing of the ferry.



Photos by sTan Fowler

Once again, Verizon came to the island to string cable, but was unsuccessful. The DSL (Digital Subscriber Link) also stopped working, but came back on line exactly three weeks later, with no explanation from Verizon.

Stan is talking to Pepco about obtaining a “service disconnect” in case of flooding. Also, Stan has leftover chain link fencing and other “stuff” in his yard, which will be useful for erosion control. Judy Lentz has a friend with a pickup truck, who might assist with bringing the “stuff” to the island.

Both Karen Possner and Gerry Barton recommended “arborists,” who might assist with tree planting on the island.

Caretaker Joe Hage and Stan Fowler are working together on Joe’s living quarters. Among the improvements are: replacing the vanity and enclosing the hot water heater.

Membership Secretary’s Report: Anne Waidmann was out of town

New Business

Senior Membership Proposal: Proposed change to the current bylaw regarding Senior Membership was discussed at length. (see current and proposed change below)

Excerpt from Current Bylaws: “18. Senior Membership. A regular member in good standing who has maintained that status for 20 years or more may apply in writing to the Membership Secretary Proposed Bylaw Change for Senior Membership. Such application shall be approved and reported to the next Club meeting. A Senior Member shall be entitled to use of the Club facilities as specified in the Standing Rules.”

Proposed New Phrasing in Bold (by Richard Bertaut): “18. Senior Membership. A regular member in good standing whose age plus years of full dues-paying Regular Membership equals at least 85 may apply in writing to the Membership Secretary for Senior Membership. If the member is a couple, then the age to be used for this calculation shall be the age of the older member of the couple. Such application shall be approved and reported to the next Club meeting. If this application is made between January 1st and June 30th, and accepted, then the member will be due a refund of one-quarter of the club’s current annual dues. If the application is made between July 1st and December 31st, and accepted, then the member will receive no refund, but will be billed at the Senior Member rate the next year. A Senior Member shall be entitled to use of the Club facilities as specified in the Standing Rules.”

The proposed change was sparked by the fact that the Island’s membership, once heavily weighted towards older members, is rapidly getting younger. With the initiation of the two-tier lottery, one tier of which is for

persons 40-years-old and under, more young applicants and their children are becoming members. One by-product of this trend: A person joining at the age of 30, could be eligible for senior membership by age 50. This seemed unreasonably young to many members.

The purpose of the new proposal was to come up with a sound rationale for Senior membership. While the proposal was not designed to affect usage of the Island, some members fear that the new proposal will result in greater usage of the Island and argued strenuously for more data on this issue. Some members wish to abolish the two-tier system altogether and return to one waitlist. Still other members, who spent years on the old Waitlist, all the while participating in island Clean-ups and serving as substitute caretakers, felt it unfair that under the proposed new bylaw, their time as active wait-listers would not count towards their eligibility for senior membership. Jim Drew wisely suggested that a decision on this issue should be made soon as the under-forty cohort will soon be approaching fifty percent of membership. Jim noted that the proposed bylaw would accelerate membership in the short term and slow it in the long term. It would allow older people joining to become senior members earlier. Tryon Wells suggested that an ad hoc committee be formed to study the issue.

President Bertaut called for a straw poll with three options:

- Option 1: No change
- Option 2: Further study
- Option 3: New proposal

Option 3 won out. Pres. Bertaut intends to contact Membership Secretary Anne Waidmann to discuss the formation of an ad hoc committee to further explore the consequences of a change in the bylaw governing Senior Membership.

Liability Release on the Ferry: Bill Marmon had been assigned previously the task of procuring a new sign to be posted on the ferry saying that by boarding the ferry, people were assuming their own risk. He has been working with our legal advisor, Rebecca Beynon, on this issue. She suggested the following language for a sign on the ferry:

“Members of the Sycamore Island Club and their guests are solely responsible for their own safety. By visiting the island, they release the Club from any liability.”

This language is brief and to the point. Approval for the new sign was unanimous.

Rebecca also pointed out that the current liability release posted on the ferry is invalid because minors cannot legally sign a liability waiver. It was pointed out that some people fail to sign in on the ferry. The ferry is often crowded and definitely not the place where the issue of waiving liability can be transacted.

Bill noted in his correspondence with Rebecca that there is a two-paragraph release of liability on the Application for Membership that all applicants must sign.

It was suggested that members be sent a waiver of liability along with their yearly membership renewal form. Parents would need to sign forms for their children. Waiver of liability is more complicated for guests and certainly for the guests at large parties. This aspect deserves further study.

Possible Future Presentation by Potomac Riverkeepers: Mary Ellen Levine, who works at the EPA in the General Counsel’s Office proposed inviting Potomac Riverkeeper’s Dean Naujok to speak at one of our meetings on the “state of the Potomac River.” This idea was well received. Mark Friedrichs, Editor of the Islander, said that he would also welcome an article along this line.

Startling Data on Island’s Wettest Year - 2018: Wait-lister James Kurtz’s intelligent and comprehensive article on this topic that appeared in last month’s Islander received universal kudos. Bravo and thanks, James.

Next Month's Meeting will be held at the home of Meredith Griggs, 6506 78th Street, Cabin John, MD 20818 on March 13 at 8:00

Thanks to Judy Lentz for graciously hosting the February meeting

Respectfully submitted

Lucky Marmon, Co-Recording Secretary

[Sycamore Island Preparations and Impacts at Various Flood Levels](#)

By Joe Hage

The following is a summary of the Sycamore Island precautions and preparations necessary at different Potomac River water levels, as well as a description of the specific effects on and around the Island of each level. All water levels are based on the USGS Potomac River gauge at the DC Pumping Station near Little Falls, just south of the Island. Water levels at the Little Falls gauge are widely used by the National Weather Service, the C&O Canal National Historical Park and others. Links to the data and river forecasts derived from this gauge are provided on the Sycamore Island website.

3.5 ft. River reaches caution level for boaters as defined by State of Maryland. Fast-moving water and changing currents will be experienced

4.5 ft. River reaches dangerous level for boaters as defined by State of Maryland, Conditions for boating will be hazardous.

5 ft. River reaches top edge of dock on Island side. Sycamore Island Ferry ceases all normal passenger crossings. Strong river currents make ferry crossing very difficult. Portions of Potomac Heritage Trail in Virginia begin to flood.

Ferry pull-rope will need to be raised. Bell rope will need to be raised.

5.5 ft. Ferry dock on Island will be under six inches of water. Billy Goat trail closes.

If it is summer and the swimming dock is out, an attempt should be made to bring it in closer to shore. The other docks will move inland naturally with the rising waters.

6 ft. Ferry dock on Island will be under six inches of water. All emergency ferry operations cease. Ferry will be near impossible to pull across.

If big flood (over 10 feet) is expected, take down bell rope. Ferry rope will need to be raised as high as possible with crank and lift-ropes. If over 12 feet is expected, take down ferry pull-rope. Ferry boat will need to be secured. Move safety chains so that both are together at front, or sharp end, of ferry. Attach new anchor line, 25 feet, to tree on shore and secure on post at front of ferry. Disconnect dock-line hook from dock and let ferry face into the current. All safety equipment, throw rings and other items near shore should be brought to higher ground at this time.

8 ft. No Ferry. Canoeing across will be doable but hazardous. Area near canoe dock, in front of club-canoe racks, will be inundated. Parts of the lower and upper Island will be submerged.

All picnic tables should be tied down. All chairs and grills should be brought to higher ground.

10 ft. Island will be inaccessible, except by canoe. Extremely hazardous. All of the Island downstream of zip-line will be under water and there will be a fast moving current across the upper Island by the swim float. The fire pit will be under water and there will be water under the rope swing. Club canoe racks will be submerged

and there will be a foot of water in the canoe sheds. Water begins to overflow banks into low lying areas on the Maryland side of the river near Little Falls. All of the *lower* steps on the mainland landing will be submerged.

All Club canoes should be tied off and flipped into upright position. All canoes on lowest rack of canoe sheds should be removed and tied off. Fasten a large chain to tree by the zip-line ladder. Attach all canoes to chain and flip into upright position.

13 ft. Most of the Island will be under water, only the high ground around the clubhouse and tool shed will be dry. There will be an eddy of calm water downstream of buildings but strong currents cutting diagonally across Island upstream of the tool shed and downstream through the canoe shed. All of the steps on the mainland will be under water. There will be many large logs and other debris passing by quickly. Crossing river in canoe will be near impossible. Significant portions of the towpath will be flooded. Water from canal might be flowing back into river at our steps. Large amounts of sand and sediment will be deposited on Island as the flood waters pass through and slow down.

All canoes on middle racks of canoe shed should have been removed and secured by this time.

15 ft. Water will be lapping at the front door of caretaker's quarters. Lower portion of tool shed will be inundated. Most of the C & O canal towpath from Pennyfield downstream will be flooded. The water will be touching the cable that holds the safety chains.

All items in lower tool shed should have been moved by now. Secure stockpiled lumber and carry lawn mower and other items up to clubhouse deck. All canoes from top rack of canoe shed should have been removed by now and secured upright to a chain.

17 ft. Flood waters will have reached the lower levels of clubhouse and caretaker's quarters. Island will be completely under water. Water will be close to touching the PEPCO line and the phone lines that are stretched across the river. Mud and sand will be deposited in club bathrooms, in lockers and in caretaker's bedroom and bath. Water overflows the overlooks at Great Falls National Park. *The Potomac River reached 17.99 on November 7, 1985, and 17.84 on September 8, 1996*

All items on lower level of buildings should have been moved to higher ground by now. Remove all items from lockers. Move caretaker's furniture up to living room level, which stays dry up to 20 feet. Remove all carpet tiles from lower level. Open all doors and windows to screen porch and caretaker's quarters to allow water to pass through. Turn off water supply. Turn off all electricity.

19 ft. There will be about three feet of water in the screen porch and caretakers quarters. Walls and flooring will be compromised by the saturation. Removing mud and restoring building will be a big job. Danger of losing power lines and phone lines. Could possibly lose all cables for ferry operation. *The river reached 19.29 on January 21, 1996. Some kayakers actually paddled through our screen porch that day.*

Prepare for a major clean-up and hope that the river doesn't get any higher.

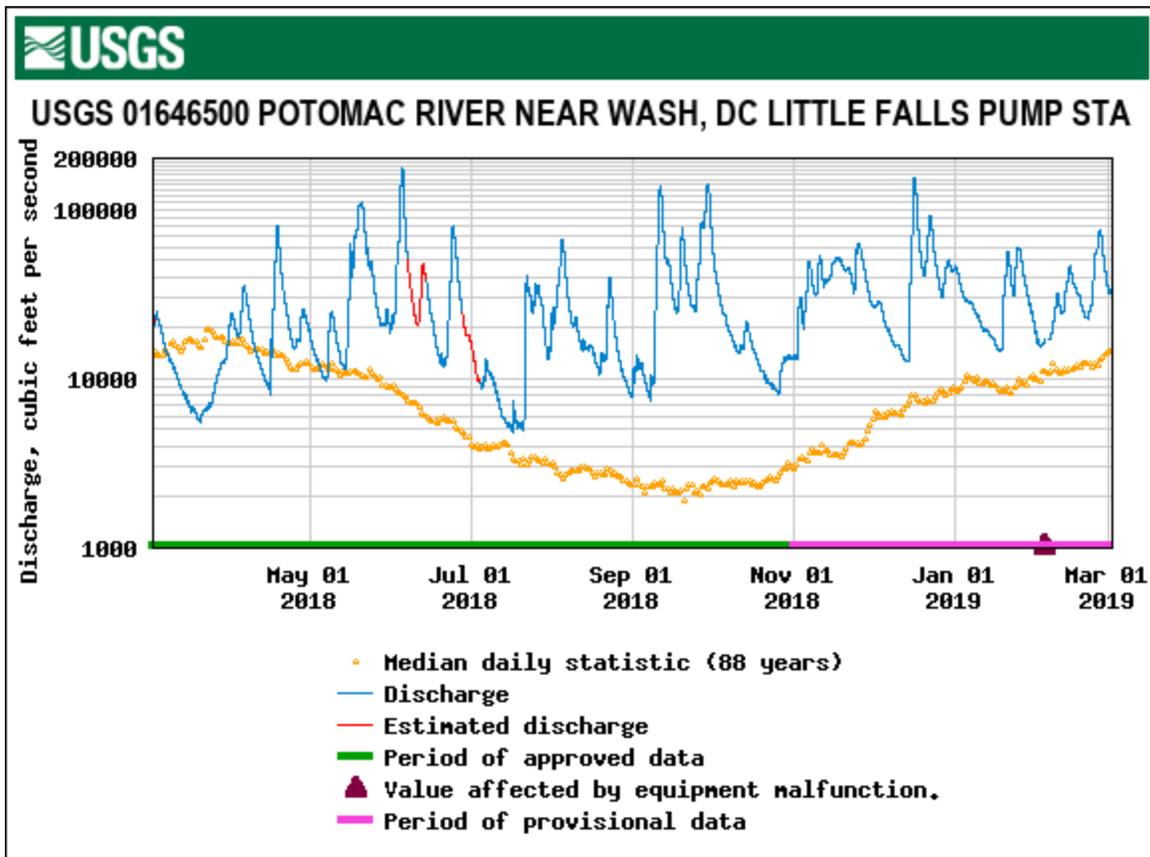
Why has the Potomac stayed so high for so long?

By Mark Friedrichs

As a follow-up to James Kurtz's great article on the Island's Wettest Year in last month's Islander, a member asked whether I could try to answer the above question.

I think the best answer is that all of the rain over the past year has saturated the entire Potomac River Basin and, as a result, the river continues to run quite high even during periods when there is little or no additional rainfall. As can be seen by the following graph, the volume of the water passing Little Falls ("discharge") has been continually above normal (the "median daily statistic") since May 2018. During that period, the typical

flow has been 2-5 TIMES normal, and it does not seem likely to return to normal levels soon. As those who have been walking outdoors on lawns, unpaved paths or through forested areas have noted, the ground is saturated everywhere. One result: recent wind storms have uprooted a lot of trees that normally would not have been so vulnerable. Another result: even moderate rain keeps the river at or above the 5 feet threshold (measured at Little Falls) that closes the Island Ferry, as well as the Great Falls Billy Goat Trails. Could all this rain be caused by climate change? Maybe, in small part. Climate change models have often predicted increased precipitation, especially for certain regions (like ours), but there has been little agreement among models and much uncertainty. It seems likely that the increased rainfall over the past year is attributable primarily to normal weather variations. Unfortunately, this means that, as always, we can all talk about the weather, but nobody can do much about it -- except possibly pray for a lasting dry spell and sunshine.



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