



# Field Notes



The Monthly Newsletter of the Peninsula Chapter - Virginia Master Naturalist Program

Volume 4/Issue 4

Winter 2012

### Message from the Co-Presidents

Wow! What a productive year we had in 2012.

- Our training co-chairs, Sandy and Elisabeth, graduated an active group last spring and it seems the next cohort will be equally active.
- We were notified of many advance training venues
- We are learning about mushrooms on various hikes.
- Susan has kept up the newsletter as well being a wealth of information through her professional contacts. She is also working on a scrapbook to add to our out-reach displays.
- Speaking of out-reach, Chris and Paula set up many venues to let the public know we are a presence out there educating and caring for the environment.
- Ashley has kept us all informed of what is happening in the chapter through her accurate minutes.
- Larry and his committee have revamped and updated our website so that it is more user- friendly.
- Thanks to Glenn Workman for providing us a meeting room for committee meeting and training.
- Elisabeth created and up keeps a great Facebook page.
- Bonnie has kept very accurate records of expenditures and is helping us achieve our 501c3 nonprofit status.
- Charlotte has screened and approved many new projects.
- Elisabeth has secured a grant to revamp the blue bird trail at Bluebird Gap Farm.
- Our signature project is advancing thanks to all the workers and the leadership of Grady.
- Brad worked diligently to obtain our Federal and / state permits. We now have our salvage permit.

- Sandy has kept up with the annual reports and will see that members are rewarded for milestones. She also won 3rd place in the state photo contest.
- Megan has been very active in supporting our organization; kept items passed down from a previous president and will safeguard our permits. She has attended many of our meetings proving she is stakeholder.
- Special thanks to Dawn who has provided the room at Sandy Bottom for our meetings.
- Marjorie did an over-the-top job of hospitality until she had to step down to care for an older family member. Ashley has agreed to take over this task.
- We made monetary contributions to VLM for flood relief.

Thank you all again for your hard work and making 2012 such a productive year.!

Can we keep this up in 2013? Meet the challenge!

Pam and Brad

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# Peninsula Chapter

## Peninsula Chapter Board of Directors

### Co-Presidents

Pam Courtney and Brad Halcums

### Past President

Julia Horton

### Vice President

Dawn Currier

### Secretary

Ashley DeCarme

### Treasurer

Bonnie Baffer

### Historian/Newsletter

Susan Walton

### Advanced Training Committee Chair

Elisabeth Wilkins

### Community Outreach and Development Chairs

Chris Gwaltney & Paula Reichardt

### Hospitality Committee Chair

Ashley DeCarme

### Membership Committee Chair

Sandy Graham

### Training Committee Chairs

Elisabeth Wilkins and Sandy Graham

### Volunteer Service Project Committee Chair

Charlotte Boudreau

### Web Master

Larry Lewis

### Chapter Advisor

Megan Tierney

**If you haven't already "liked" Virginia Master Naturalists-Peninsula Chapter on Facebook, it is a great way to stay in touch with the many events that will be happening this spring!**



## Upcoming Meetings

Day: Second Tuesday of the month

Location: Sandy Bottom Nature Park

1255 Big Bethel Road Hampton, VA 23666

## General Membership Meeting

Date: May 14, 2013

Time: 6:00 P.M.

## Advanced Training

Date: May 14, 2013

Time: 7:00 P.M.

Presenter: Josh Froenberger—Cavity Nesting Birds

## General Membership Meeting, Graduation and Pot Luck

Date: June 11, 2013

Time: 6:00 P.M.

## Other Events:

April 14<sup>th</sup> Fungus Foray, 2 pm Newport News Discovery Center

April 20<sup>th</sup> Earth Day at VLM

May 4<sup>th</sup> Hampton Master Gardeners Plant Sale, Bluebird Gap Farm

May 5<sup>th</sup> Invasive Species removal day, Bluebird Gap Farm

May 5<sup>th</sup> Hampton History Days

May 18 Hampton Environmental Summit, Sandy Bottom

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# Peninsula Chapter

## Vernal Pools

An excellent presentation, highly relevant to our community, was provided by Anne Wright, Coordinator of Environmental Outreach Education at the VCU Rice Center. Anne has led Richmond area chapters in developing a monitoring program for vernal pools on local public properties. She highly encouraged us to consider starting a monitoring study in our area. Here are some points she made in her talk...

**Virginia vernal pools** are home to several obligate species – species that must live in this habitat. It is important that they have vernal pools that are not long lived enough to support fish populations as they would be wiped out by predators. In the Commonwealth we have six species of salamanders and the wood frog that inhabit vernal pools. Of these, the spotted and marbled salamanders would be most likely to be found in our pools.

**Marbled salamanders** are the first salamander larva that will be found in the pond. They will hatch in fall and metamorphose in late winter. At this time of the year we would see the larvae with their feathery gills.

**Spotted salamanders** move into pools in late winter/early spring when hard rains occur at temperatures of about 55 degrees. They migrate to pools to reproduce. She lays her eggs on a substrate, such as a stick. The egg mass will take up water and swell to softball size. If she lays her eggs and the weather isn't wet enough, the eggs will dry out. The egg mass has a symbiotic relationship with an alga (*Oophila amblystomatis*) that is only found in association with spotted salamander eggs. The alga uses the waste products and carbon dioxide that the embryo uses and the larva uses the oxygen that the alga produces. It has been proven through a series of experiments that the alga actually gets into the cells of the embryo and for a while the salamander is actually photosynthesizing. (You can Google photosynthetic salamander to find the articles.)

**Vernal pools and the landscape:** The seasonal pool depression is surrounded by a seasonal pool envelope (100 feet). Vernal pools are very low in oxygen, so what lives there needs to have extra mechanisms to get oxygen. Larvae grow elaborate gills, which resorb as the salamander morphs. They tend to stay in an area around 100 meters around the pool where it is moist for about a year. Then, they may move out to about a 1000 feet. These areas need to be considered when asking a landowner to protect a vernal pool site.

**Other species** include fairy shrimp (aka sea monkeys) and clam shrimp.

If we find either of these species at Grafton Ponds, we should collect about 15 and get them to Anne or another Herpetological Society person.

Put in a 70% isopropyl alcohol.

Record date, when, county, waterbody, GPS coordinates on a slip of paper and put it in with the specimens. (We can work out the details on this when we plan an excursion AND when we have our collecting permit.)

### References noted:

Virginia Herpetological Society

PARC (Partners in Amphibian Conservation)

Vernal Pools Elizabeth Colburn

Science and Conservation of Vernal Pools Aram Calhoun

Freshwater Invertebrates of N. America J. Reese Voshell

Bugs of the Underworld (CD/DVD) by Ralph and Lea Cutter

EPA Mid-Atlantic Seasonal Pool – available at no cost in pdf form at <http://www.epa.gov/nscep/index.html> OR

<http://www.dnrec.delaware.gov/fw/dplap/information/Documents/Mid-Atlantic%20Seasonal%20Ponds%20-%20EPA.pdf>

Anne also gave everyone present a copy of A Field Guide to the animal of Vernal Pools. Additional copies are available for \$12.00 each from The Vernal Pool Association at [www.vernalpool.org](http://www.vernalpool.org).



# Peninsula Chapter

## Hoffler Creek Wildlife Foundation



Helen Kuhns, Executive Director, led a tour of the Preserve on March 3rd. Helen described the history of the Preserve and guided those present along Lake Ballard and Hoeffler Creek. Almost falling into the hands of developers, the site now offers a convenient site for those in the northern Portsmouth/Suffolk area and Peninsula residents wanting a nature break.



Helen is in need of volunteers to help with stations at neighborhood watershed parties from 12:30 to 4:15 pm on April 14, 21, and 28th. Contact her by emailing [hofflercreek@hofflercreek.org](mailto:hofflercreek@hofflercreek.org).



## Larval Fish of the York River

VIMS grad student Alison Deary provided the March Advanced Training. Alison discussed her work on tracking larval fish. She would like to have volunteers assist—look for notes on Facebook when her next schedule is available.



## Bike Trail Removal at Grafton Ponds

March 30—work with Newport News Park Rangers to remove an illegal dirt bike trail



# Peninsula Chapter

## Bringing the Bluebirds Back to Bluebird Gap

The bluebirds at Bluebird Gap Farm will be more likely to raise babies this year thanks to a cooperative effort between the farm, Peninsula Master Naturalists, the Virginia Bluebird Society, and the Yorktown location of Wild Birds Unlimited.

On her first visit to Bluebird Gap Farm years ago, Master Naturalist Elisabeth Wilkins noticed that the boy-scout-installed bluebird poles and predator guards were not up to current standards, and since the baffles were unmovable as installed, certain nestbox predators could use them as merely a stepping stone to gain access to the nests. When Bluebird Gap Farm Foreman Josh Froenberger (Cohort 5) talked to her about the lack of successful nesting attempts by bluebirds at the farm over the 2012 season, she decided to try to fix those poles & baffles, to see if it would help.

At the September 2012 Virginia Master Naturalist Statewide Conference in Martinsville, members of other chapters who saw our Bluebird Gap Farm display and heard the story of our non-successful bluebirds suggested that we try to get a grant from the Virginia Bluebird Society to improve the bluebird trail. Elisabeth is beyond thankful for that recommendation! As soon as she got back from the conference, she contacted BBGF Park Manager Jim Seward about her plan. With a green light, she wrote a 3-phase grant proposal to improve the bluebird trail.



Phase One of the plan was to replace the existing predator-friendly poles with the “bluebird setup” from the Wild Birds Unlimited Advanced Pole System. powder coated to brave the elements; the baffle is long enough to keep raccoons out, and moveable so that long snakes can’t scale it. Phase One was funded by a reimbursement grant awarded to our chapter from the Virginia Bluebird Society, with a bit of a chip-in from the chapter funds. The Phase Two plan is an expansion of the bluebird trail to include 10 more boxes in and around the parking lot area. Phase Two does not yet have a funder. Phase Three is a plan to use the bluebird trail as a teaching tool for public and group tours in the future.

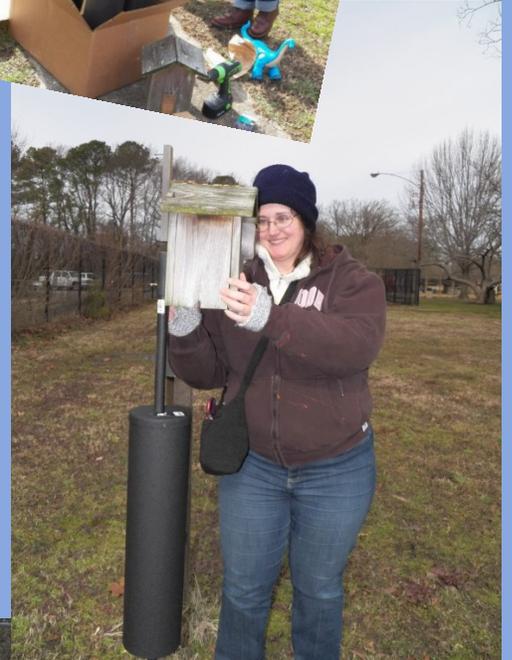
In early 2013, Wild Birds Unlimited Yorktown owners Gregory and Kristin Millslagle met with Josh, Jim, Elisabeth, and Peninsula chapter Co-Presidents Pam Courtney and Brad Halcums on a chilly day to drop off all of the supplies we ordered, and we had a nice photo session with the help of the Millslagles’ cute dogs. A picture and caption was featured in the Daily Press’ Hampton edition. In addition to giving the chapter a generous discount on the poles and baffles, the Millslages also donated 3 specially designed House sparrow-resistant bluebird boxes to the project, as well as a new Purple martin house for the farm. House sparrows have been a serious problem for bluebirds trying to nest at BBGF. House sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) are a very aggressive invasive exotic species, and evict nesting birds to take their cavities. They attack the docile Eastern bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), and will also tear apart other birds’ nests, kill their nestlings, pierce their eggs, and build their own nest right on top of the carnage.

Generally, experts recommend that new Eastern bluebird boxes be set up by Valentine’s Day, so on February 10, 2013, a crew of Peninsula Master Naturalists, many of whom were from our newest cohort, teamed up to upgrade install all the bluebird boxes at BBGF to the new poles & baffles. Because we had so many volunteers, our work was completed in only an hour and a half!

Information provided by E. Wilkins

# Peninsula Chapter

## Installing Bluebird Boxes at Bluebird Gap Farm



Photos on this page provided by Elisabeth Wilkins

# Peninsula Chapter

Bluebird Boxes at  
Bluebird Gap Farm  
(and a few bluebirds from last year)



Chickadee nest in BBGF  
nest box April 2013

