



Photo by Rebecca Jones

The YRSCB Roundtable River Celebration On the Mattaponi

“Being on the river was a lovely way to spend the day.” Claire Jones, Environmental Planner, Hampton Roads PDC.

“It's really important to get people on the water to see things from the river's perspective. Only when you ride on its back can you see all that we're trying to protect and where we need to be better stewards. It's hard to make that connection sometimes sitting in an office or a classroom.” Dawn Shank, Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers Association

On July 16, 2009, a group of the YRSCB Roundtable steering committee members gathered along the shady banks of the Mattaponi River for a unique work day. Dawn Shank, who helped to organize the event, met us at the canoe launch located on the property of the Zoar State Forest in King William County, a 378 acre mixed pine/hardwood forest with walking trails and the historic William Aylett home. A 4 mile scenic, flat-water paddle would occupy the rest of our morning on this hot July day.

Garrie Rouse, our outfitter and local naturalist who runs Mattaponi Canoe and Kayak, gave us all a quick refresher on boating safety and handling. As we made our way down the Mattaponi, he shared with us the interesting phenomenon of the floating sand grains which he has observed many times for a number of years now. What appeared to be foam on the surface of the water turned out to be just sand grains which he has noticed on freshwater tidal sections of our area rivers on rising tide. Garrie speculated that the source of the sand grains is from the shorelines of the intertidal zone. During a receding tide, something is deposited over the surface of the sandy, intertidal shorelines. Perhaps it is a thin film of algal matter. During the period of low tide, this film is baked by the sun onto the surface grains of the exposed sandy shorelines, causing them to adhere to one another. On the rising tide, masses of the top layer of adhering sand grains are lifted up and carried on the water surface by surface tension until that tension is ultimately broken. Garrie has only observed this phenomenon on tidal sections of our area rivers and, seemingly, only at the beginning of the rising tide. Because of that, he often uses the floating sand grains as an indicator that the tide has switched and begun to rise.

But the fun part, which all of us experienced that day, was peering out over the edge of our canoes (or while immersed in the river) at the sand grains while dripping water onto the floating mass. The drops of water break the surface tension, causing the sand grains to "rain down" like snowflakes from the water surface to the bottom of the river. We were all so glad to experience this curiosity along the Mattaponi.



Photo by Garrie Rouse

Garrie also educated us all on the local dragonflies. We saw what he refers to as the "signature" dragonfly for the upper (tidal) Mattaponi River, the Russet-Tipped Clubtail (*Stylurus plagiatus*). While not common, it is found regularly on the upper Mattaponi. We saw them most of the day of our trip (see picture by Garrie Rouse). Dawn Shank thought it should be the mascot of the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers Association. Another dragonfly we saw that day was, we believe, the very common Eastern Pondhawk (*Erythemis simplicicollis*). Other dragonflies often seen regularly on this stretch of the Mattaponi are the Lancet Clubtail (*Gomphus exilis*) and a type of River Cruiser (*Macromia* sp.). Some of these species rarely light, making it difficult to positively identify them.

After seeing the banks of clay used by the Pamunkey Indians for their pottery, the location of an old barge used to carry goods along the river, and remnants of an old bridge, we departed the river to Zoar State Forest for our picnic lunch and a short meeting. We were greeted by a special visitor, Mr. Todkill, who was camped on the hill at Zoar and joined us for lunch. He told about his travels with Captain John Smith on the tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. He shared with us his map of the Chesapeake Bay, and even offered us some of his moldy cheese and bread that appeared to have made the trip along with him from England. However, we opted for our boxed lunches that were waiting for us.



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Mr. Todkill is a character created by Willie Balderson, a historical interpreter who frequently partners with the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers Association, the National Park Service and other organizations to take students and citizens back in history on the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network water trails. MPRA has more than a dozen interpretive sites on its Algonquin Trace water trail in the Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers watershed, part of the Gateways Network.

As we were wrapping-up a short meeting, where Pam Mason shared the work by VIMS on the water supply concerns in the York Basin, we were visited by another guest, Michael Steen, a historian and troubadour based in Williamsburg. Michael made his way up the York River to the Mattaponi, just beyond Aylett, to share the

music of the rivers and guide us in a sing-a-long. He began, "Where you find water, you find life" and gave us a bit of background on the indigenous people, settlers, and their connection to Virginia's waterways.



Photo by Rebecca Jones

The Virginia Indians lived along the waterways and depended on the rivers as not only a source of food, but also as the primary means of transportation. When the English arrived in 1607, they also relied on the waterways for their existence.

During the colonial period there were few roads. Everything and everybody moved on the water. It is here that the cultures mingled together as the traffic flowed from the hinterlands into the tidewater, Bay and eventually into the ocean. The music of the rivers reflected that mixing of cultures.

At Yorktown, a major inspection and shipping center you might hear work shanties from the deep water sailors. Single rhyme songs such as "Haul on the Bowline" or "Paddy Doyle's Boots" were used for short haul work. Longer tunes such as "Johnny Comes Down to Hilo", "Roll the Chariot" or "Pump Away" would help to make the longer tedious jobs more bearable.

The people of the river are unique. Songs such as "Roudy Soul" drift down stream mixing with English drinking songs like "The Flowing Bowl" or Irish songs like "Molly Malone" or "Jug of Punch." African music blends in as well and songs like "Drinkin' That Wine" meld into the ebb and flow of sounds heard along the river banks. These songs have become part of the American traditions that we can all embrace as we appreciate our shared maritime heritage.

Our workday ended mid afternoon, with all of us bit weary from the paddling and fresh country air. Many expressed that we should continue this tradition, a reward of sorts for our hard work in the conservation and restoration of Virginia's waterways.

~May Sligh, YRSCB Coordinator

(with contributions from Garrie Rouse, Dawn Shank, Michael Steen and Claire Jones)