

Riverbend Naturalist

Winter 2019



***Riverbend Naturalist* is the newsletter from the Friends of Riverbend Park (FORB). Riverbend Park is located at 8700 Potomac Hills Street, Great Falls VA 22066. Phone: 703-759-9018**

The Winter 2019 issue of the *Riverbend Naturalist* is dedicated to and by the extraordinary staff that operates and manages Riverbend Park and makes it such a wonderful place to visit. The contributions each and every one of them makes throughout the year and their efforts and accomplishments are many, and should be noted and appreciated. John Callow, Riverbend Park Manager, starts this issue with thoughts on one of his favorite subjects, the winter birds at the park. Valeria Espinoza, Volunteer Coordinator, then describes the park's hidden gem, its volunteers, which so enhance what many have called Riverbend Park ("The Jewel in the Crown"). Two other items announce recent Fairfax County and Fairfax County Park Authority awards to Valeria, and a FCPA Elly Doyle Award for Lauren Hawley of the Riverbend Park staff as Outstanding Volunteer of the Year. A new Eagle Scout project at the park, supported by FORB, is yet another indication of how meaningfully the local community supports Riverbend Park. Finally, this issue contains announcement of a new and much needed Maintenance Leader, Laura Kratzer, at Riverbend Park.

Birds of Winter in Riverbend Park

John Callow, Riverbend Park Manager

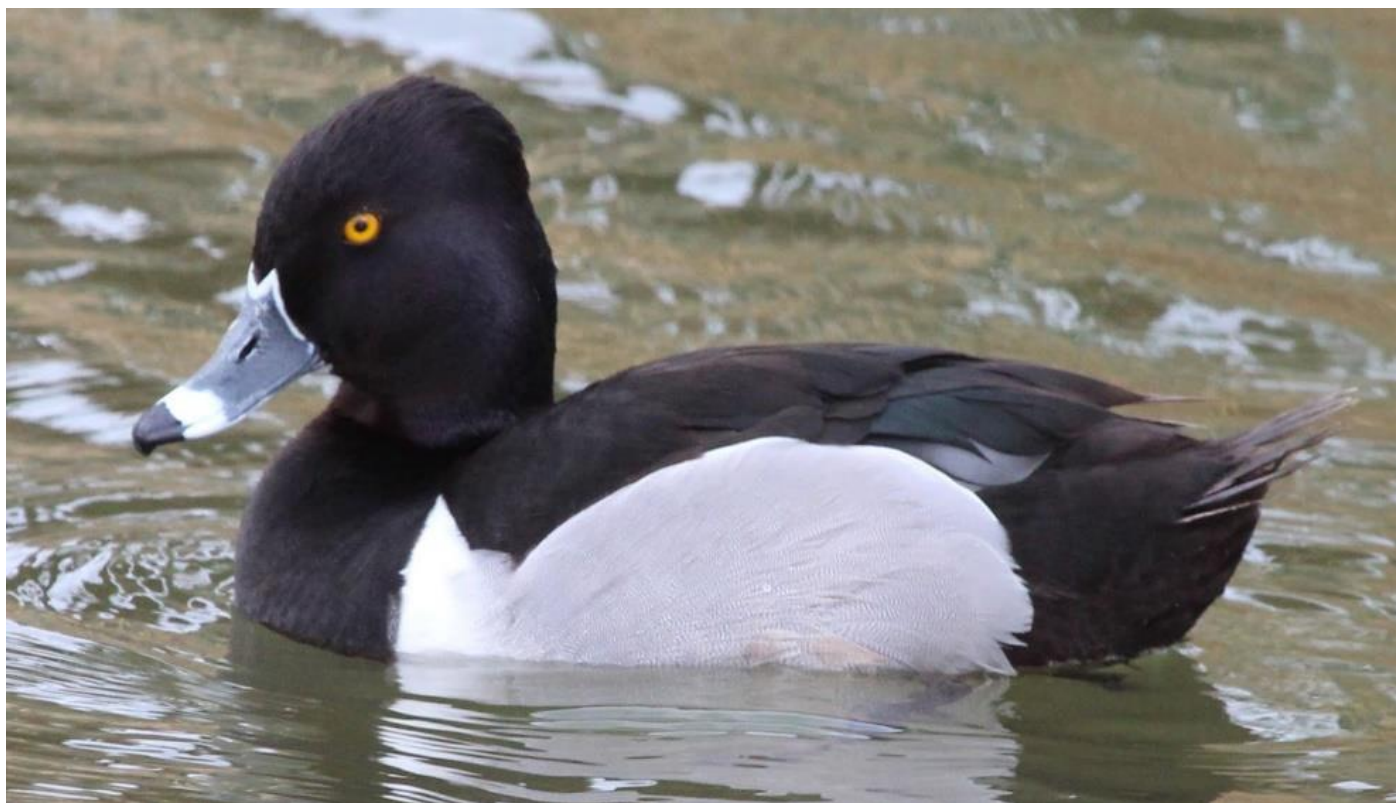
Through my binoculars, I see them coming. Descending from the sky, they teeter left and right with flashes of white and dark. Just before hitting the water, bright orange legs emerge for a soft and somewhat graceful landing. Male Buffleheads (shown below) are remarkable ducks that winter on the Potomac River bordering Riverbend Park. Named for its round head like a buffalo, these small ducks rely on coastal waters, rivers and lakes for their winter homes. In the light, the dark area on the head flashes in brilliant green and purple. The Bufflehead is one of my favorite winter birds, and the Riverbend staff have heard me exclaim “The Buffleheads are back!” many times over the years. Riverbend Park is a place of constant discoveries of nature all year round and each season brings new opportunities. At this time of year, many nesting birds have gone south to their wintering grounds, and the winter birds like the Buffleheads are filling in.



Male Bufflehead at Riverbend Park

Migration is cyclical as birds move from nesting to wintering areas and back. These routes include important stopover spots for birds to feed and rest. Relatively speaking, some migrations are short, but some are arduously long, covering thousands of miles each way. Protection of these natural nesting, stopover and wintering areas is critical to birds' survival. The Bufflehead nests in tree cavities in arboreal forests near waters in Canada, Alaska and the western United States. When they return to the Riverbend area each Fall, they have flown a great distance, often over three thousand miles.

Other Winter waterfowl who have made similar journeys to Riverbend each year include Tundra Swans, Gadwalls, the American Wigeon, Redheads, and Ring-Necked Ducks.



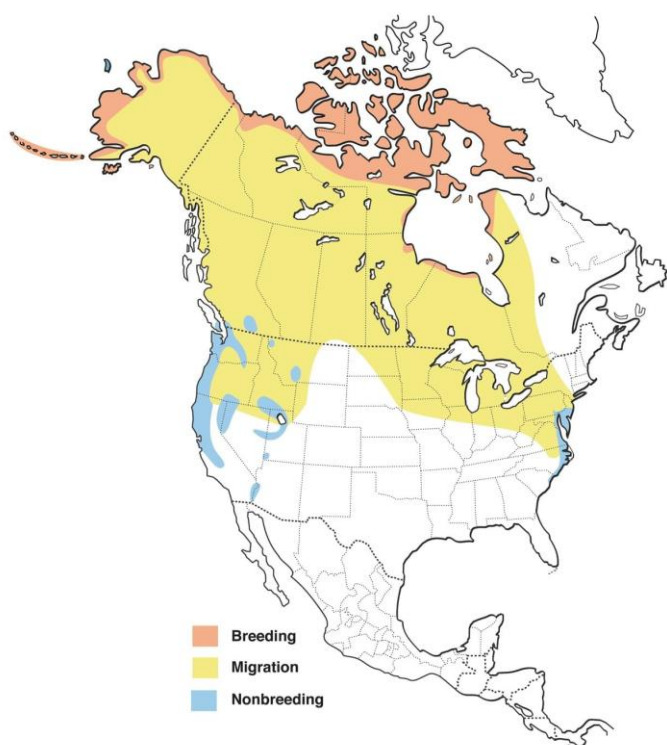
Male Ring-Necked Duck

As I was writing this article in mid-November, a park volunteer entered the Visitor Center and asked what the swans on the river were. I grabbed my binoculars and ran down to the river just in time to see a family of four magnificent Tundra Swans, two adults and two juveniles. I wondered about

where they had come from and what challenges they must have faced in their long journey. As the sun began to set they lifted off the river and flew away. Where will they go next? Riverbend Park represents the extreme eastern and southern extent of their migration from breeding grounds to wintering grounds, as shown in the map below (Tundra Swans photo and migration map from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology – www.allaboutbirds.org).



A pair of Tundra Swans rest on a river



My favorite Winter bird at Riverbend Park is the Bufflehead, but everybody has their own favorite. What's yours? Migrate over to Riverbend Park this winter and share photos and stories of your winter avian experiences. The boat ramp at the Visitor Center is a great place to observe winter birds and get great photos. Please feel free to share your photos and stories on the Friends of Riverbend Park's Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-Riverbend-Park-1860876507539239/>

If you are new to birding or would like to go on a staff-led birding hike, sign up for one of Riverbend Park's Winter Waterfowl Hikes at:

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/parktakes>

or contact Jordan Libera at the Riverbend Park Visitor Center at (703)759-9018.



Female (left) and Male (right) American Wigeon

Photos courtesy of FORB Members Scott Miller and Robert Young

Volunteers: Riverbend Park's Hidden Gem

Valeria Espinoza, Riverbend Park Volunteer Coordinator

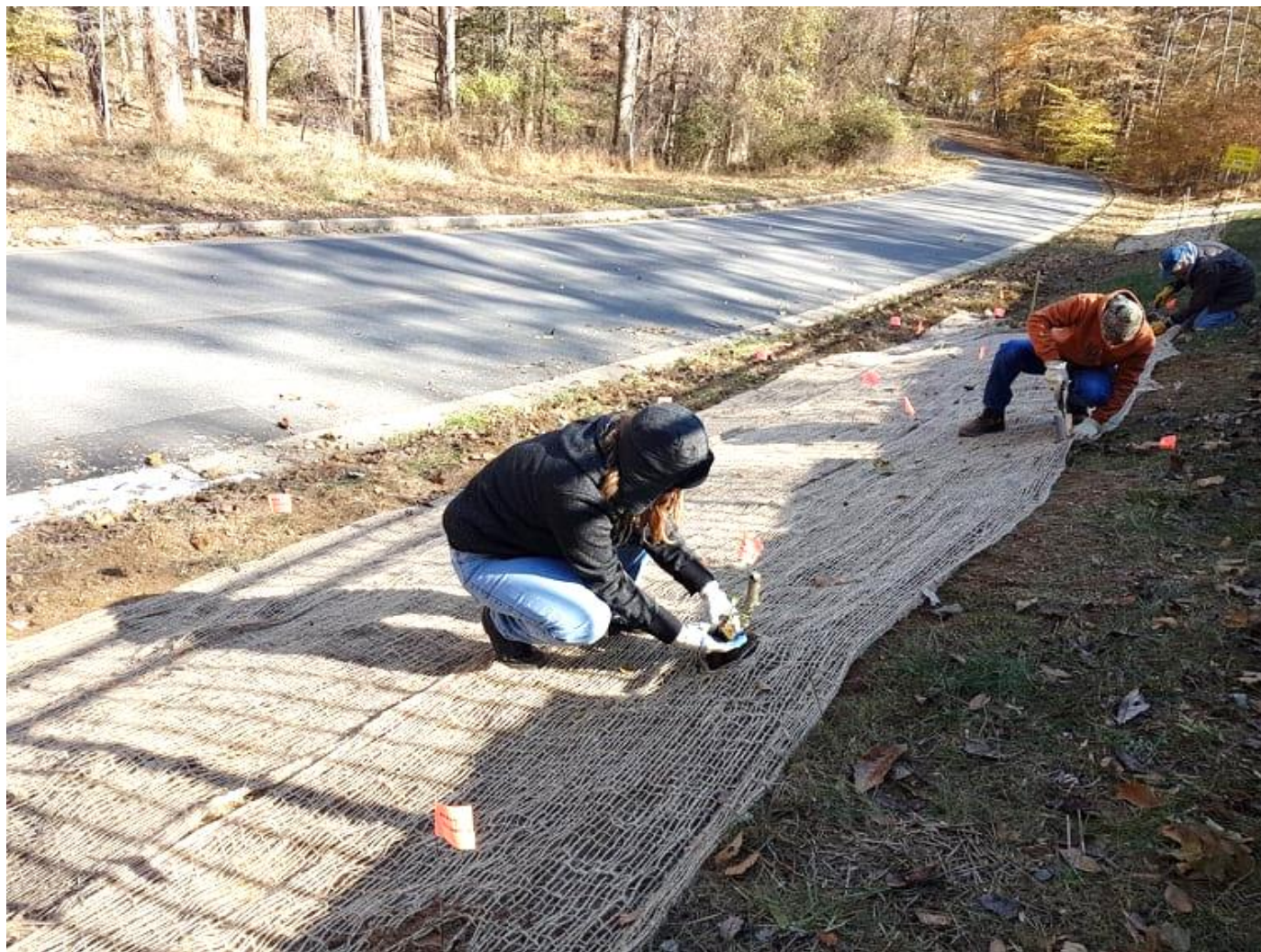
It is a lovely Spring Wednesday at Riverbend Park. As I enter the Visitor Center, I am greeted by Jean Ann at the front desk as she is checking in wildflower surveyors Nancy, Denise and Jan. The heavy back door creaks open as Tom comes through to help set up the day's fieldtrip program. With one final trip to the back room, we are all ready for the incoming children when, not surprisingly, Chris Reynolds passes by with a bag of trash she has collected along the trails.



Even FCPA Board Member, Tim Hackman (right), enjoys volunteering at Riverbend Park

All of these people have something remarkable in common: they have all committed to making a positive impact on Riverbend Park by volunteering their time and talents. They have each taken a step from citizens to stewards of our park, and they have all made significant improvements possible this year.

Riverbend Park is often described as the hidden gem in the Northern Virginia park system, due mostly to its ecologically unique natural, geological and historical features, but I believe that Riverbend Park is also a hidden gem of extraordinary people. Starting with the park's management team and interpretive naturalists to its maintenance staff, Friends of Riverbend Park members and donors, and, last but not least, its volunteer community, this group has collectively accomplished an enormous amount this past year.



Rita Peralta leads volunteers in planting native grasses and plants at Outdoor Classroom

It is almost impossible to list all of the projects that Riverbend Park's volunteers have contributed to in the past year, but summarized below are some of the highlights, grouped together by the season:

Winter: By the end of 2018, staff and volunteers had planted over 170 native seedlings in two restoration sites led by Rita Peralta. The year 2019 began with a trail restoration work day, the first of many projects to restore the Potomac Heritage Trail after the heavy flooding during 2018. Staff also launched Volunteer Orientation events that filled the Nature Center with over 30 new volunteers by Spring. 482.5 volunteer=hours were recorded at the park from December 2018 through February 2019.



Christian Lansing directs volunteers removing invasive species at Riverbend Park

Spring: With many new volunteers in training, we kicked off six different field surveys and jumpstarted the wildlife camera project. Volunteers participated in the Bluebell Festival filling many crucial roles such as traffic management and parking, festival activities, and visitor services. Volunteers also collected 16 large bags of trash at Scott's Run and 10 at Riverbend during the Spring Watershed Cleanup Day. The Birding Walks were renewed once again and volunteers tackled several invasive plant species such as "Mile-a-Minute", Japanese Honey

Suckle, and Garlic Mustard. A total of 2,110.8 volunteer-hours were realized for the months of March, April and May 2019.



Volunteers sign up and organize for a trail cleanup effort

Summer: As many projects continued on through the summer, the focus shifted to Riverbend's summer camps. Staff had six Counselors-in-Training and four summer program volunteers to support summer staff and interns. Front desk volunteer Jean Ann doubled her shift starting June, and we also welcomed a new front desk volunteer, Kevin, who covered many shifts this past summer. Thanks to the Friends of Riverbend Park, we were able to hold our first Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon in June to celebrate our volunteers and recognize them for their contributions to our parks, both Riverbend and Scott's Run. Volunteers continued with surveys and cleanups at both sites throughout the summer. For the months of June, July and August, a total of 959.6 hours were volunteered.

Fall: Riverbend Park's Native American Festival came soon after the last week of summer camps. The entire staff with many volunteers once again contributed to an hugely successful event. The Fall Watershed Cleanup yielded 14.5 bags from Scott's Run and 9 at Riverbend. Resource volunteers stepped up once again for

seeding and planting season, especially at the new Outdoor Classroom. Additionally, several several group service projects were organized, including trail maintenance, invasive plant removal, and site planting with companies, school groups and Scouts in the area. Rita, Ian and Riverbend's new Maintenance Leader, Laura, spearheaded these efforts that significantly improved the park. After our Fall orientation event, we welcomed a handful of new volunteers as we continue to move forward and complete projects before the onset of winter. 812.6 volunteer-hours were registered for the months of September and October.



Volunteering is a family affair at Riverbend Park

As Winter approaches, activities begin to slow down at Riverbend Park, but volunteers continue to care for exhibit animals, assist with winter programs, and

cover the front desk on quiet Winter days. Riverbend's gems will continue to shine on for generations to come thanks to every individual and the priceless community of volunteers who support the park's mission.

Fairfax County and FCPA Awards for Valeria

Valeria Espinoza, Riverbend Park's Volunteer Coordinator, has been honored with both an Outstanding Performance Award (OPA) by Fairfax County and a FCPA PRAISE Award. In nominating her for the OPA, Valeria's supervisor, Julie Gurnee, Riverbend Park Visitor Services Manager, noted "Valeria Espinoza was hired as our Volunteer Coordinator in March of 2018. She quickly took over the management of volunteers, and her drive and passion for her work quadrupled the park's number of volunteer hours. During her first year, she increased the number of active volunteers from 42 to 91 and the volunteer-hours from 1209 to 4608 which translated into \$83,946 in increased park revenue."



Riverbend Park Manager John Callow (left) and FCPA Operations Branch Manager Mary Olien (right) present a 2019 FCPA PRAISE Award to Valeria Espinoza

Elly Doyle Award for Lauren Hawley

Congratulations to Lauren Hawley on being named as Riverbend Park's *Outstanding Volunteer of the Year* at the Fairfax County Park Authority's Elly Doyle Awards on November 22nd. Lauren began her Riverbend journey as a Resource Naturalist volunteer in late 2017. She participated in wildlife surveys, park cleanups, tree plantings, and removal of invasive species. Subsequently, she became involved with the park's programs, animal care, and even served at the front desk. Riverbend staff often wondered *what can't Lauren do?*



Lauren poses with Riverbend Park Manager, John Callow, on the deck of the Visitor Center

Riverbend Park has now managed to hire Lauren as part of its staff. Her volunteer work experience, dedication and commitment to the sustainable goal of the park, and her abilities to handle a wide variety of disciplines and tasks will make her a very valuable addition to the Riverbend Park staff.

Eric Wallace's Eagle Scout Project at Riverbend

On Saturday, October 19th, Eric Wallace, the son of FORB Member Bryan Wallace, along with a number of his friends and family, carried out his Eagle Scout project to replace and/or reburbush the stairs leading from the Visitor Center upper parking lot to the Nature Center. Over the years, many of these stairs had rotted away. Some were still serviceable and needed only to be removed and rotated, but others had to be removed entirely and replaced. Riverbend Park staff (Rita Peralta and Ian Zipfel) agreed that this project would improve both the appearance and safety of the staircase, and would help to control soil erosion around the staircase through the installation of water barriers above the staircase. Eric's proposed project was to consist of six main steps:

- Remove and replace worn or rotting beams
- Rotate remaining beams to expose a fresh surface
- Replace rotten elements of handrail
- Pressure wash staircase and handrail
- Install two water barriers alongside trail above staircase
- Apply an anti-slip coating during a follow-up visit



Rotted steps removed from the staircase



Eric (red shirt) with friends and family



Reburbished and repaired staircase



Staircase with anti-slip paint applied

Many Eagle Scout projects have been carried out at Riverbend Park in the past and a surprisingly large number are planned for the future. Most of these are labor-intensive and primarily involve the active planning of the Scout, with the approval of his Scoutmaster and the Riverbend Park staff, of the proposed project. The Friends of Riverbend provides support only to those projects needed to complete the project. which require the purchase of materials, and FORB has contributed towards those costs a number of times in recent years. However, part of the planning of an Eagle Scout's project is to establish different sources of financial support, to conduct careful planning of the materials needed for the project, and to explore how best to secure the materials necessary. Fortunately, Eric was able to procure a 15% discount on his construction materials at Lowe's, and Riverbend Park was able to provide the anti-slip paint for the staircase. At the end of the day, the Friends of Riverbend Park supported Eric with \$595 to offset the purchase of the lumber and other construction materials. FORB believes that Eagle Scout projects are a useful way to involve both the scouts and their families in the betterment of Riverbend Park, and we have invariably found that the parents of these Eagle Scouts remain generous and loyal supporters of both FORB and Riverbend Park.

New Maintenance Leader at Riverbend Park

On October 15th, the Riverbend Park staff welcomed Laura Kratzer on her first day on the job as the park's new Maintenance Leader. Laura is a George Mason University (GMU) graduate with a BS in criminology and a minor in sustainability studies. She comes to Riverbend with a strong interest in conservation and with experience supervising outdoor operations at GMU's recreation facilities at its Fairfax campus.

Laura will focus on facilities and equipment maintenance and management at the park under the supervision of Natural Resource Manager, Rita Peralta. During the busier part of the year, April through October, she will work alongside Ian Zipfel to supervise seasonal staff.

Laura's 'can do' attitude and easy demeanor make her a great addition to the Riverbend family. Please say hello to her next time you stop by the park!



Calendar of Coming Events at Riverbend Park

- Riverbend Park Bluebells-at-the-Bend Festival Saturday April 11th
- Pre-Orders for FORB Native Plant Sale open on January 15th
- FORB Native Plant Sale on Saturday, May 2nd

Friends of Riverbend Park Contact Information

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