



Back Bay Breeze

B A C K B A Y R E S T O R A T I O N F O U N D A T I O N

SKIFF TO THE LEEWARD, MY DARLIN' BY TODD BARNES

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

- Membership Meeting, Feb. 1 @ 7 p.m.
- New Bridge Road Cleanup, Feb. 11 @ 9 a.m.
- Winter Waterfowl Walks, bbrf.org for schedule
- Back Bay Forum, March 15, 8:30 a.m.—4 p.m.
- Music Blast, March 24, 2—6 p.m.

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That evening was as calm and brisk as you would expect for January. It was duck season and by the time I got home from school that day, Dad still hadn't come back in from hunting. So I dropped my books on the kitchen table and started to run across the stubbled soybean fields that separated our house from where we kept the boats at my grandparents' place. If I hurried, I could meet him at the dock and see what he had gotten. Mom yelled and stopped me half way across the field and made me come back to change. She knew I would come up short hurdling the east ditch and sling mud all over my school clothes, and probably burry my shoes into the soft ditch bank. On my way back across the field, I could hear the un-

mistakable sound of Dad's boat coming around Horn Point where Shipp's Bay and North Bay meet on the west side. The boat was made of juniper with a flat bottom, pointed bow, squared stern, and two bench seats. It was driven from the back with a tilled 40 horse Evinrude, painted battleship gray, and there was no mistaking the sound it made coming across the water. The cadence of the boat skipping on the waves made a smooth, light slap on the surface that reminded me of riding a horse at light gallop. Up until I reached my teens, this was the all-around type of utility boat for every waterman on the bay.

The typical Back Bay skiff was between 16 and 20 feet long, painted dark

green or gray so it blended in with the water and the edge of the marsh. Every skiff that I ever rode in leaked in some fashion and each one had a bail scoop made from an old plastic milk jug or an old empty coffee can with one side flattened so when you were underway, the water would pool in the back and could be bailed over the side. There were no bilge pumps or scuppers. Most of the wooden boats remained true to fashion in their construction and the only waterproofing was to patch cracks and use lots of thick, lead-based paint to keep the water out. The distinctive smell of a Back Bay skiff was unique and familiar to us when it was freshly painted and loaded down with canvas Canada goose decoys. Around August, every

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S K I F F T O T H E L E E W A R D . . . C O N T .

yard had several boats turned upside down on blocks to be maintained. Each year, the skiffs were dragged out of the water, the barnacles scraped off, sanded and repainted. If a boat was left out of the water for too long, the gaps between the boards would open up. There was a local technique used to get the skiff seaworthy again that actually required sinking the boat for over two weeks. When the boat was dry, lengths of thin rope were forced into the gaps using a screwdriver. Once the gaps were filled, the boat was taken to a canal and filled with water until it sank. We always waited until summer time to do this because the warm water temperature seemed to swell the wooden planks better. The wood would set around the rope making a seal. Once we were sure the boat had swollen, we would hook the truck or tractor to the bowline of the boat, and pull the boat out onto the land to dry. About 75% of the time, the rope would break and the boat would slide back into the water causing everybody to scramble. For some reason, we would repair the boat but the rope was just tied back together in a knot so

we could cuss it again next year. The boat was finally dragged up onto the ground, it could then be painted and was again watertight until we hit an old duck blind pole or the abusive duck season took its toll. At some point, the watermen started to fiberglass the boats but by that time, the new aluminum and fiberglass hulls started to show up on the bay and began to outperform the wooden skiffs.

Much like a fine musical instrument or wine, one could appreciate the workmanship and feel of a juniper skiff. The trapping boat that I used as a boy was a smaller, lower version of the ones used on the bay. It was "shoved" around to where you wanted to go without a motor. The shallow water throughout the creeks and bay made oars and rowing useless. A 12-foot ash 'push-pole' was used to shove the boat along. The push-pole, in itself, was a work of art as well. Tapered and smooth, round at the handle and then gradually flattened like a narrow oar at the end, it was as important to the skiff's functionality as any tool in the boat. There was skill required

in shoving a boat and things like wind, water depth, and weight all had to be considered but became unconscious movements by the time you were about 12 years old. The key to shoving was to stand in the boat where your weight made the bow ride slightly out of the water, then slide the push-pole along the gunnel of the skiff using pressure at the top of the pole to lean into or pull towards the back of the boat at the end of the shove. This guided the bow in the direction you wanted and also kept it from plowing directly into the water. A perfect shove would consist of a 6-foot stroke, a slight rise to the bow at the end of the push, and a glide of about 10 yards. If done correctly, it was as smooth as glass, felt as good as a back rub, and was almost effortless to complete. I still shove on occasion but the new aluminum boats just do not have that exquisite feel and absolutely none of the glide. If I remember one thing about shoving a skiff is the quiet pattering of the water under the bow. You knew that everything was perfect when you could hear the light strikes of water under the

Continued on page 5...

FEBRUARY MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Vickie Shufer, Naturalist and Interpreter at False Cape State Park, native plant cultivator and wild food expert, gave an informational presentation about the plants and animals inhabiting our marshes.

Thank you, Vickie, for informing our members about the amazing life we have around Back Bay!

Our next membership meeting is scheduled for February 1, at 7:00 p.m., at 3022 New Bridge Rd.

The guest speaker s will be local decoy carvers and experts including Gentry Childress and Charlie Seidel.

Our speakers will describe their work with decoys; decoys are widely used on Back Bay during

duck hunting season.

Join us at 7 p.m. for light refreshments (feel free to bring a dish to share!) and social time. The talk will begin shortly thereafter.



Swan Decoy donated by Bud Coppedge

**REPORT NUTRIA SIGHTINGS
CHARLIE ELLIN, BBRF BOARD MEMBER**

Back Bay, and its surrounding wetlands, is a unique and exciting place to live, a place to observe and enjoy a large variety of wildlife. Two of the aquatic mammals we often see are the Nutria (*Myocastor coypus*), and Muskrat (*Odontra zibethicus*). Nutria, the unwelcomed one, is an invasive species in Virginia that has the potential to cause considerable damage to native wetland habitats; but how do you distinguish a Nutria from a Muskrat?

Nutria are large aquatic rodents typically weighing 10 to 20 pounds; with a body length of 22 inches and a 12 to 18 inch long tail. They have coarse, darkish brown fur, a white patch on their muzzle and large bright orange-yellow incisor teeth. They swim with the top of their

head and upper back exposed with their shoulders underwater.

Muskrat, on the other hand, are much smaller aquatic animals native to North America, weighing upwards of 4 pounds, its body is 12 inches in length with a 9 inch tail. Their fur is rich brown with a greyish belly. Muskrats swim with their head and back exposed, and usually use their tail to aid in swimming.

The current population distribution of nutria in Virginia is unknown. The Conservation Management Institute of Virginia Tech, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have partnered to learn more about the distribution of nutria in Virginia to support subse-

quent eradication activities.

David Bishop, Regional Invasive Species Biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, is the local contact for this project. David is based at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

To learn more about nutria and report your sightings, visit CMI's website at

<http://www.cmiweb.org/nutria/>

Or, contact David Bishop at (757) 778-5387 or via email at: David_Bishop@fws.gov



Nutria photo, courtesy of Steve Kendrot, USDA-Wildlife Services

U P C O M I N G B B R F E V E N T S

Winter Waterfowl Walks at Back Bay NWR, select Fridays through February.
Check www.bbrf.org for schedule

Back Bay Forum, March 15, 8:30 a.m.—4 p.m.,
TCC Advanced Technology Center. This is an opportunity to hear the ongoing research and updates from Back Bay experts. Register online at www.bbrf.org or with form below.

Music Blast. March 24, 2—6 p.m., Cedar Hall Farms.
An afternoon of local music, beer, and food to raise funds for a clean Back Bay! This is a 21 and older event. Event is held rain or shine in a covered barn. \$40 advance/\$45 at door. Tickets include \$35 tax-deductible membership. Buy tickets at www.bbrf.org

Back Bay Forum Registration

The fee of \$15 (\$5 for Students with proper id) includes a morning break and lunch. Register by March 10th by phone, fax, email or mail, as seating is limited to the first 100 registrations.

Note: Register early. This popular event sold out in 2010!

Please mail registration form and fee to: **Back Bay Restoration Foundation, 3022 New Bridge Road, Virginia Beach, VA 23456 • 757-619-6429 • mary.tilton@bbbf.org**

Registration Information

Name(s):..... Organization:.....

Address: City:..... State:..... Zip:.....

Email:..... Phone:

Special dietary requests:

Receipt required (Y/N):

S K I F F T O T H E L E E W A R D . . . C O N T .

boat as you glided along.

The demise of the wooden skiff, in Back Bay anyway, more than likely arrived at the same time as the aluminum duck boats, higher horsepower engines, and plastic duck decoys. The Polarkraft was the first aluminum utility boat on the bay according to most reports. My Mom’s father actually sold the very first one at Princess Anne Marine to a local waterman (Spooky Gilbert) back in the early 70s. Five years ago, that very boat came back into my possession and I use it today. I believe the term “Full Circle” may apply here. Once the new metal boats performed on the bay, during ice and rough conditions, the juniper skiff’s days were numbered. The aluminum boats could carry more weight in some instances, bust through ice where the skiff would get damaged, had internal floatation, and also handle larger horsepower engines. It wasn’t long after that, you rarely saw a wooden boat on Back Bay being used for

hunting or fishing. Even the decoy skiffs that were used to haul the heavy wooden rigs of mason decoys behind the main boat, found their way to people’s yards and given embarrassing retirement jobs like flower beds, restaurant signs, or simply left in the edge of the marsh to rot away. Some survived in barns hanging next to those old traps in the rafters, and have since seen a resurgence in their use. Kind of like the old vintage cars, people are realizing the tradition and importance of the skiff and are bringing them out of retirement or building their own replicas. It is comforting to hear them again ‘porpoising’ around the points and skipping around the bends. (Porpoising is a term used locally that describes the cadenced up and down motion a skiff makes as it runs across the water).

I made it to the dock just in time that evening to watch the boat come in from mid-bay. Dad would sometimes come into the landing

running wide open because it was too shallow and he needed to stay on plane as long as he could, or he saw us standing on the shore wanting him to do the patented spinout with the boat. One thing about the skiffs, you could turn them sharply and they would slide and skip sideways like a skipped rock. He had a few ducks that day and we helped get all the guns and gear out of the boat and carry them over to the truck listening to how the canvasbacks were very cooperative and how the teal just would not come close enough. You could still smell the paint and canvas in the boat even from months of heavy use. The skiff just sat there quiet like an old dog tied up waiting for another run tomorrow. Dependable, weathered, leaking just a little and full of the new style plastic Herter’s decoys probably knowing that her days were numbered. But, it would be there tomorrow for more work just the same.

And, I did clear the ditch.

www.bbrf.org

T H A N K Y O U T O O U R N E W & R E N E W I N G M E M B E R S & S P O N S O R S S I N C E D E C E M B E R 2 0 1 1



MEMBERS

- Dr. and Mrs. Steve Vinson
- Edward Baird
- Gray Baird
- Don and Kay Ashby

DONORS/SPONSORS

- Vickie Shufer
- Jim and Marla Nock
- Jean and Edward Snyder, Checkered Flag Motors
- Mary Reid Barrow
- Sharon Robey

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**BACK BAY
RESTORATION
FOUNDATION**

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COMMUNITY EVENTS

BACK BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Federal Duck Stamps are now on sale for \$15 at the BBNWR entrance station between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Proceeds of these stamps support acquisition of wetlands and include entrance fees to National Wildlife Refuges.

Blue Goose Tram Tours are on the winter schedule, please check www.bbrf.org for schedule. Trams leave at 1 p.m. from the BBNWR Visitor Center. First come, first served. Cost is \$8/ Adults, \$6 for seniors (62+) and children (3-12). Cash or check only, please.

Winter Waterfowl Walks. A partnership between BBRF and BBNWR, these walks leave from the Back Bay NWR Visitor Center on **Fridays through February**. A short walk around the bay trails that surround Back Bay. Wear sturdy shoes, weather appropriate clothing, and bring binoculars and a camera. Walks are lead by a Refuge staff member, BBRF representative, and an expert birder. Free, but call for reservations: 619-6429 or 301-7329. Dates and times are: Feb. 3 at 9 a.m., Feb. 10 at 3 p.m., Feb. 18 at 9 a.m., and Feb. 24 at 3 p.m.

FALSE CAPE STATE PARK

March 10, 1—4 p.m. Walk on the Wild Side. A one-mile (round trip) guided hike to find out what plants grow in the coastal environment and how they were used by the American Indians.

March 17, 1—4 p.m. Finding Your Way. Discover ways to find directions as a guide, use a compass, and a GPS.

March 30—April 1. Wild Women Weekend. A weekend in the outdoors dedicated to women, ages 21 and up, to discover the natural and cultural history of False Cape State Park.

Reservations required for all events. Fees may apply. Call 757-426-7128 for info or to sign up.