

Riverbend Naturalist

Winter 2022/2023



Riverbend Naturalist is the newsletter of the Friends of Riverbend Park (FORB). Riverbend Park is located at
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Coming Events

- The Annual Plant Sale is now open! Go to www.forbpark.org, then click on “2023 Native Plant Sale” to order your plants by April 1st. Pickup is on April 29th.
- April 8th is the date of the Riverbend Park Bluebell Festival.
- May 27th is the opening of Boating Season! The 16 new kayaks that FORB purchased for the park have arrived and will be available for rental then.

FORB's Annual Plant Sale Continues to be Great Success

One of the highlights of the year for the Friends of Riverbend Park (FORB) is its Annual Plant Sale, normally held during the spring in April or May. Its first plant sale was held on April 28, 2001 and resulted in a modest profit for the benefit of Riverbend Park. Now it has become FORB's single largest source of income during the year. FORB manages to purchase large quantities of plants at wholesale prices from a local nursery and then sell them to the general public at fair market value resulting in a net profit. For most of the annual plant sales over the past twenty or more years, FORB Director Eleanor Anderson has been the chief organizer and worker, acting as our liaison with the nursery, selecting the plants for sale, organizing individual orders (more than 100 orders in recent years), and even delivering plants to buyers' homes during the Covid years of 2020 and 2021.



Eleanor Anderson at the 2019 Plant Sale



Kevin Dillon and Hugh Morrow at the 2018 Sale

Many of the plants offered for sale may be found in Riverbend Park, and, of course, include the ever-popular Virginia Bluebells (*MERTENSIA virginica*), which is the state flower of Virginia and our best-seller every year. Ferns are also very popular including the Northern Maidenhair Fern, the Lady Fern, the Royal Fern, the Christmas Fern, and the Marsh Fern. Phlox are abundant in Riverbend Park in the spring, and a number of varieties of Phlox are being offered for sale this year. FORB has offered as few as 28 and as many as 63 species for sale over the past 23 years.



Plant pre-orders waiting to be picked up at the Riverbend Park Educational Pavillion at the 2021 Sale

Pre-ordered plants may be reserved and paid for on FORB's website between February 1st and April 1st. Go to www.forbpark.org, click on "2023 Native Plant

Sale” on the Home Page, and select the plants of your choice. The descriptions shown include photos of the plants, their full sizes, planting instructions, and best growing conditions. All plants pre-ordered online must be picked up on Saturday, April 29th at the Riverbend Park Educational Pavilion on Potomac Hills Street.

In addition to the online sales, FORB will be selling Bluebells on the deck of the Visitor Center on Saturday, April 8th from 10 AM to 4 PM during Riverbend Park’s Bluebells-at-the-Bend Festival. All Bluebells will be sold for \$12 each by cash, check or credit card on a first come – first serve basis. These plants usually sell out quickly and early, so come early to get your Bluebells if you don’t pre-order them at our website. This year promises to be a banner year for Bluebells, so we’ve ordered a total of over 500 for sale.



The Women's Club of Great Falls: Long-Time FORB Supporter

For many years now, the Women's Club of Great Falls (WCGF), formerly known as Great Falls Friends and Neighbors (GFFN), has been a loyal and long-time supporter through two annual events its Philanthropic Group sponsors. Traditionally, its *Bluebells and Bald Eagles* event is scheduled in early April to coincide with the blooming of the Virginia Bluebells in the park while its *Canapes and Champagne* fundraiser is usually held in the fall. In 2022, they also sponsored a highly successful tour of the Renwick Gallery in Washington D.C. for the benefit of FORB.



Riverbend Park staff guide, Marijke Gate, leads a WCGF group through the Bluebells and wildflowers

In most years, the resident American Bald Eagle couple on Minnehaha Island, Abraham and Abigail (Abe and Abby), are busy refurbishing their nest and protecting its precious eggs. Normally the eggs appear sometime in January, will

hatch by the end of February, and the juvenile fledglings will be visible in their nest in April. By May, they have left their home and gone out to seek their own territory. In years past, FORB Members, Scott Miller or Tom Blackburn, have set up spotting scopes and presented informal lectures to WCGF members on the Minnehaha Island American Bald Eagles and their environment and habitats. The Eagles' nest may be seen in the photo below at the top of the tall tree directly above the backpack hung on the fence post.



FORB Member Scott Miller describes the behavior of the American Bald Eagles for the Women's Club

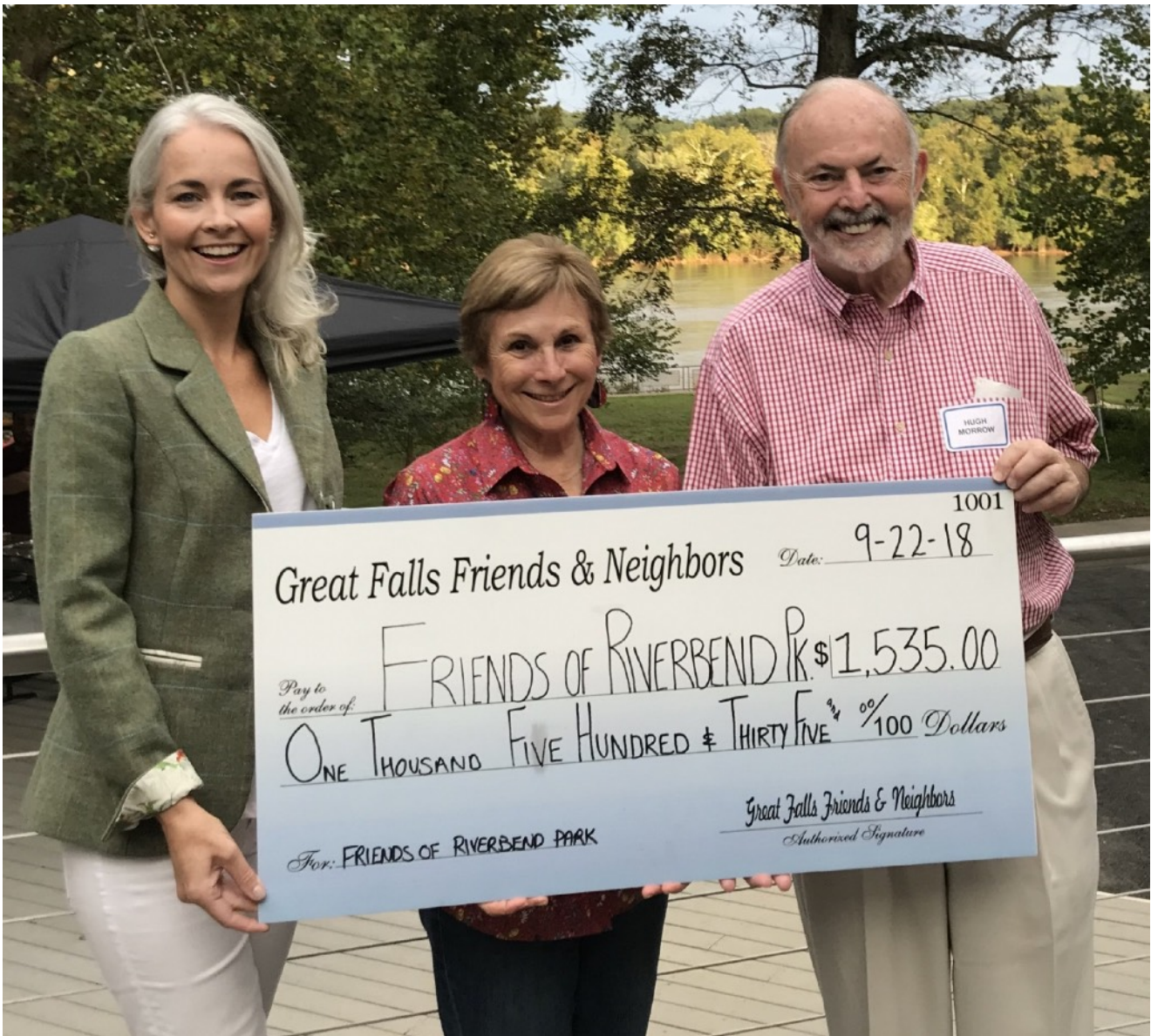
The WCGF's *Canapes and Champagne* event in the fall is a wonderful occasion for club members to hear about FORB, what it does, and how it supports Riverbend Park. FORB utilizes the donations it receives from the Women's Club of Great Falls mainly to award scholarships to needy students at the Riverbend Park Forest Preschool and to assist Title I schools to afford the costs of their field trips to the park. Both of these activities are consistent with the Women's Club

stated mission to support women and children in need. It is estimated that the WCGF has donated approximately \$15,000 total to FORB over the past five years.



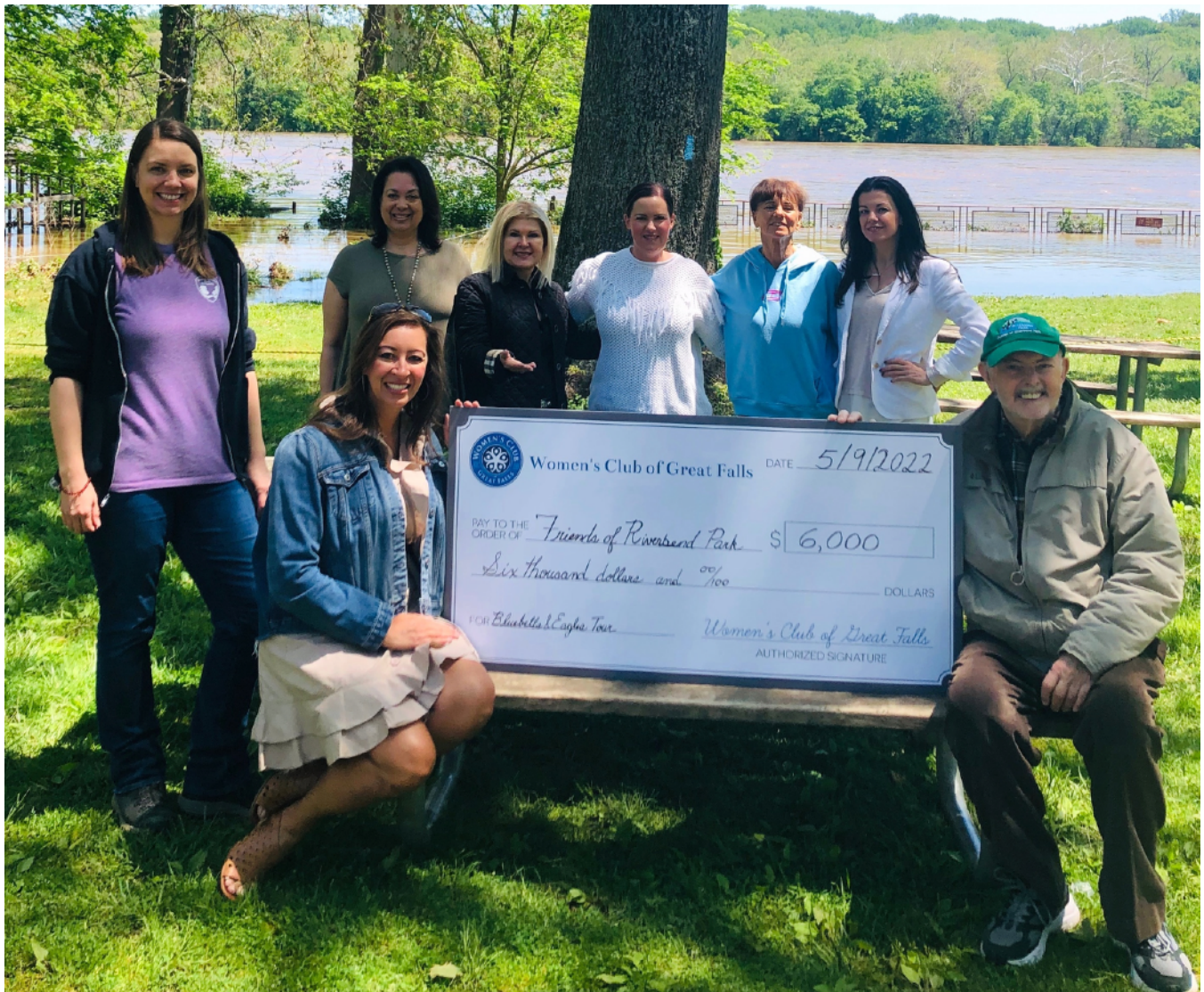
FORB President Hugh Morrow reviews the group's activities for members of the WCGF in 2021

Founded in 1980 and merging in 2012 with Newcomers of Great Falls, the Women's Club of Great Falls' mission is to develop friendships and community through social, cultural, civic and philanthropic activities. The Philanthropy Group within the club has raised money and provided services for numerous local charitable organizations over the years, with a primary focus on supporting women and children in need. The Women's Club of Great Falls currently has a membership of over 300 women and is an integral and respected part of the Great Falls community. The Friends of Riverbend Park has been one of those organizations which has benefited enormously by the Women's Club's philanthropic activities.



Linda Cameron and Judie Keithley of the WCGF award a donation to FORB in 2018

The relationship between the Women’s Club of Great Falls and the Friends of Riverbend Park has been a long and enduring one. The ladies of WCGF enjoy the experiences of learning more about Riverbend Park and its wildlife and environment while at the same time carrying out their mission. For further information on the Women’s Club of Great Falls and their activities, please visit their website at <https://www.gffnva.org>. It is also worth noting that the events sponsored by the WCGF are usually covered by the local newspaper, *The Great Falls CONNECTION*, providing favorable publicity for both FORB and the Women’s Club.



*Stephanie Anderson of the WCGF awards a \$6,000 donation to FORB President Hugh Morrow in 2022.
Back row: Kylie Starck (Riverbend Park staff), June Kelly, Teresa Yurt, Grace McDaniel, Diane Lahey, and Sylvie Stankova (all of the Women's Club of Great Falls)*

Controlled Burn Rejuvenates Conn's Meadow

One of the unique features of Riverbend Park is Conn's Meadow, a large grassy area along Jeffery Road. This area used to be a farm but since the property became part of Riverbend Park in the 1960s, it has become a haven for migratory birds, butterflies, native plants, and other residential wildlife. In accordance with Riverbend Park's Natural Resources Management Plan, the meadow is rejuvenated at periodic intervals with prescribed or controlled burns. The Fairfax County Fire Department and the Virginia Department of Forestry assist with these burns under very carefully controlled conditions, and take weather, wind speed and direction, and moisture into account. Controlled burns are needed every few years to maintain a high-quality wildlife habitat. They invigorate plant growth, attract wildlife, and control non-native invasive plants. Most ecosystems in the Northern Virginia region are fire-adapted — they have evolved with fire as part of their lifecycle. Burning promotes plant health and seed germination, removes build-up of fuels that can lead to unplanned fires, and may inhibit non-native invasive plant species which are not adapted to fire. Hundreds of controlled burns are carried out every year in the state of Virginia, and the Fairfax County Park Authority has conducted numerous burns safely and successfully since 1998 with approval from the Park Authority Board. The most recent burn in the meadow took place in early February.



Fire-control personnel carry out the prescribed burn at Conn's Meadow on February 8th

Injured Barred Owl Rescue & Wildlife Protection

Injured Barred Owl article by FORB member Jonathan Foust

One of my passions is kayaking at Riverbend Park. I'm often at the gate when the park opens and pushing off from the boat launch at first light. I love the quiet, the natural beauty and inevitably, the surprises.

Most of the unexpected events are pleasant. A River Otter sighting. The eagles feasting on a rock in the middle of the river. A new migratory bird.

Sometimes, though, the surprises are unpleasant.

Last year in early spring I headed upriver and was shocked to find a Barred Owl hanging in mid-air along the tree line. I immediately made my way there, and found this creature suspended from fishing line caught in the tree.



I was concerned that if I cut the owl down it might attack me, but as I floated next to it, it was clear this poor thing was utterly exhausted. Fortunately I had a knife, maneuvered underneath it, cut the line, and gently lowered the owl onto my board.

It must have been in shock. It simply perched on a paddle, watching me, slowly blinking. It let me remove the fishing line without protest. It was a short paddle back to the boat launch. I was hopeful we might do something to help it.

Fortunately, Ian Zipfel was on duty at the park that morning. He called Animal Rescue, we fashioned a container with holes, and we covered the owl.



I heard later from Ian that the fracture was too great for the owl to be saved.

If you see fishing line hanging from trees along the water's edge, please do what you can to take it down or let the folks at the park know. It makes a difference!

What Can Park Visitors Do to Help Wildlife in the Park?

Since the park installed special disposal containers (see photo below) for fishing lines, the occasional problem of animals and birds becoming entangled in them has diminished, but it can still happen. If you see fishing lines or hooks, or any other trash, on the trails or in trees, please retrieve and dispose of them if possible, or inform park staff.



What if you come across an animal that looks vulnerable, sick, or wounded? Besides informing park staff, a valuable resource is the Wildlife Rescue League of Northern Virginia, www.wildliferescueleague.org; the website contains a page of animal help tips. One of the more common questions park staff gets is about baby birds who seem to be on their own and lost. The rescue league advises that it is best to wait and watch; in most cases, the mother is close by. The same advice holds true for deer and foxes. If the situation looks more serious, please consult park staff or call the Wildlife Rescue League at 703-440-0800.

In our area, it is not uncommon to come across turtles crossing roads, driveways, or lawns. What to do? The Wildlife Rescue League has tips on how to help turtles: www.wildlifecenter.org/tips-helping-turtles. The most important tip: assist turtles crossing the road by carrying them across in the direction they are headed: Do NOT try to help them by moving them to a “better location.” Many such turtles are egg-laden females looking for an appropriate nesting place.



Romeo, a rescued box turtle, missing a leg, lives at the Riverbend Park Visitor Center

One of the most frequent human/wildlife encounters that occur in the park happen by accident along the entrance road in the park, with cars killing reptiles and amphibians as they cross the road. Tips for decreasing the accidental killing of wildlife include slowing down and driving 10-15 mph on the entrance road, staying off cell phones, and paying attention and being alert to anything in the roadway. This is true all the time, but is particularly so in the fall; according to the Wildlife Rescue League, autumn is when young male squirrels tend to change territories and are less “car savvy.”

The park believes that it is never too young to learn about protecting wildlife, so the Riverbend Forest Preschool invited Catherine Sevchenko, a wildlife rehabilitator at Diva Crows Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Alexandria, to talk to the kids about bird rehabilitation and to introduce them to Apollo, a crow who was born with a wing malformation. This wing malformation prevented him from learning to fly along with his siblings, and he was therefore brought to the rehab center. It took lots of care and extra time, but he did learn to fly. Apollo now lives at Diva Crows because he was not able to learn to be a crow when he was

young, so he does not have does not the skills to live in nature. He is incredibly smart, however, and can stack cups and do other tricks.

Diva Crows talked with the preschoolers about what to do if they find a baby bird on the ground. Before doing anything, look around. *Does the bird appear injured? Is the bird's head down or are its eyes closed? Can you see its skin or does it have feathers?* If you can answer “no” to these questions, it is likely that this is a young bird just learning how to fly. Please leave the bird alone unless it is in an unsafe location. If so, very gently move it to a safe spot nearby so its parents can find it again.



Photo credit: Amy Cullen

Riverbend Park Volunteer Celebration

Riverbend Park hosted a holiday party to celebrate its volunteers on December 10th in the new Maintenance Building. A buffet lunch was provided for the approximately 25 attendees. FORB contributed \$300 to support the event, and Board members Cindy Gersony and Ahalya Sharma attended to represent FORB.

Two of the volunteers explained how they help the park by identifying and removing invasive weeds, which they do at least every two weeks. They learned how to do this through an orientation training program by park staff.



Attendees at the December 10th Riverbend Park Holiday Party

For those interested in becoming a park volunteer, there are a number of opportunities at Riverbend Park. These include school field trip leaders, animal care in the Nature Center, front desk volunteers, as well as natural resource project volunteers. The latter involves invasive plant removal, seasonal natural resource data collection of plants or animals, and trash cleanups. There are also roving trail monitors who act as a presence on the trails to keep an eye out for any changes on the trails that staff should know about, interact with visitors by answering questions and sharing park rules, and trash collection. All these volunteer opportunities require a 6-month to 12-month commitment and include an interview process and reference check.

There are also one-time volunteer opportunities such as assisting with large events or seasonal watershed trash cleanups not only at Riverbend, but also at other sites close by, including Scotts Run Nature Preserve and Turner Farm Park. These one-time opportunities do not require an interview process and are generally for just a few hours. The park's volunteer needs change throughout the year depending on the season and availability of openings. To see a listing of all of current volunteer opportunities, please check out the website here: https://volunteer.fairfaxcounty.gov/custom/1380/organization_details/71673. If you would like to move forward with any of the opportunities, submit an application on the website. Park staff will then reach out to follow up with more information and next steps.

Friends of Riverbend Park Contact Information

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