

Mud Flats

Elizabeth
River
Project

5205 Colley Ave.,
Norfolk, VA 23508

Winter 2021

The newsletter for supporters of the Elizabeth River Project

ElizabethRiver.org

"Goo must go" - Impossible no more

Latest project may mark half-way with cleaning Elizabeth's bottom

Each day by small boat, Dave Koubsky heads to a small creek off the Elizabeth River's Southern Branch. There, watching a dredge lift dripping buckets of mud from the bottom of Paradise Creek, he feels the privilege of watching history being made, and in more ways than one.

When the \$5 million project of the non-profit, the Living River Trust, began in September, it was the first cleanup of its kind in Virginia to combine dredging with a new pellet-based technology to keep PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyl), a highly toxic compound, from harming river life.

Koubsky, managing the project for the Trust, saw in it another milestone. Involved with cleaning up toxics along the Elizabeth's bottom since the first such project, initiated by Elizabeth River Project at Money Point in Chesapeake in 2009, Koubsky estimates region-wide partners may be half-way done with a task once thought impossible: Getting the "goo" gone, or toxic contamination removed, from all known hotspots along the bottom of the Elizabeth, until recently considered one of the dirtiest rivers in America.

Koubsky gave his good-news estimate to the Elizabeth River Project's Watershed Action



Hodges & Hodges begins removal of PCB contamination in the main channel of Paradise Creek.

Team 2021, a stakeholder team meeting Sept. 30 at the Virginia Zoo to update our community-wide plan for restoring the Elizabeth. In each past version of the plan, beginning with the first one in 1996, the top goal has been some version of: "The goo must go! Clean Elizabeth's bottom to non-toxic levels."

Now Koubsky checks off six hotspots where such cleanups have been completed or are underway by partners ranging from the Elizabeth River Project and (Cont'd p. 8)



Dave Koubsky, project manager, thinks this project may mean regional partners are half-way done with cleaning up all known river hotspots.

A juicy surprise turns up in Lafayette trawl nets



Large shrimp, as many as 50 at a time, turned up in a fish survey this fall for the Lafayette.

The biggest surprise was big, juicy and numerous. Surveying fish species in September in the Lafayette River, three scientists caught more than 50 Atlantic white shrimp - the same kind served in restaurants - in a single haul of their trawl net near the Granby Street bridge.

"It blew my mind," recalled Joe Rieger, Deputy Director - Restoration, Elizabeth River Project. In conducting trawl surveys for the last decade with fellow scientists of partner, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, "I've never seen anything like this," he said.

Warmer waters from climate change appear to play a role in extending the range of the shrimp, once infrequently found above North Carolina, as well as cleaner water and improved habitat. With Chris Moore and Peyton Mowery, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, joining Joe for the survey, the scientists recorded species along more than a dozen oyster reefs recently restored by Elizabeth River Project and partners. They found a total of 14 species of fish.

Keep river life returning with your gift on the enclosed card or at elizabethriver.org.

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From the Executive Director

Jolts of joy you made possible

A handsome couple on a dock, holding a baby. Smiling, the man holds out his cell phone. Would we mind taking their picture, he asks, clearly revelling in the backdrop of lush wetlands at our Paradise Creek Nature Park?

It might seem to you an ordinary scene. For me, the recent chance encounter brought a jolt of joy -- the kind that comes when you work long years to create projects from nothing, and all in a moment sense that the impossible is becoming reality.

Thanks to you, loyal supporters, I experience such moments with frequency these days, across multiple initiatives. At our 40-acre park in Portsmouth, when I see people pouring out of cars with strollers and dogs; kids sitting in the grass at the park's sold-out Forest School, watching a rescued owl spread its wings, I think back to when the park's restored wetland was a barren crater dug by bulldozers. I'm grateful for your faith in our notion that one day visitors would stream to this once forgotten wilderness.

Then come moments of a different order. Over the decades, for example, I got used to a kind of giving up that people did when we talked about cleaning up the extreme pollution



Noah Bian, 3, meets a barred owl during Forest School at Paradise Creek Nature Park. Nature's Nanny Wildlife Rehab visited with rescued birds.

pooled on the river bottom from times past. No matter how many great cleanups were completed, there seemed an intractable sense of a hopeless remaining morass.

Then this fall, a scientist in the thick of the work made a calculation. Dave Koubsky (see p.1) thinks maybe half the "goo" is gone from Liz's bottom. Not that many sites left, he said -- and I got that joyous jolt again.

You're the reason we're able to persist with the many challenges of returning an urban river to life. Thanks in advance for your continued support.

Marjorie Mayfield Jackson
Executive Director

P.S. Please consider returning a special gift with the enclosed card or give online at elizabethriver.org.



Lush and beautiful now, the wetlands at Paradise Creek Nature Park are relatively new. Virginia Port Authority, helping us create the park, dug out old fill and planted the marsh in 2012.

Mission – To restore the Elizabeth River to the highest practical level of environmental quality through community, business and government partnerships.

Mudflats is the newsletter of the Elizabeth River Project, a membership-based non-profit working to restore the Elizabeth River through citizen, government and business partnerships. Email Jessica Pinsky, jpinsky@elizabethriver.org, for membership questions.

Elizabeth River Project
Making restoration a reality
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Stripers: Winter king creates river connections

Our scientists share fish stories from cool-weather casting

Casey Shaw, a scientist in charge of our marketing, landed a striped bass last year, then turned around to see her now husband kneeling in the boat with an engagement ring. In fact, “stripers,” also called rockfish, are so much a part of her life that her family serves one whole for Christmas dinner.

Similarly, Joe Rieger, a biologist who’s our deputy director for restoration, treasures winter for the return of striped bass season on the Elizabeth, Oct. 4 – Dec. 31. In his case, it’s for special times with his sons, Lucas, 7, and Walter, 12.

It seems that, at least on the Elizabeth, some scientists’ devotion to environmental restoration correlates with an intimate connection they make with river life through fishing. In the season of the huge predator fish, the striper, we share fish stories from two of our fisher scientists.

“I still got my rock”

“A striped bass was there for my engagement,” Casey says. “It was during the COVID shutdown. I had been working on my computer all day. Our annual scuba diving trip was cancelled. Scott said, ‘C’mon, we’re going fishing.’ I finally hooked a striped bass... When I turned around, Scott was down on one knee asking me to marry him. My ring is the pearl I wanted, but I still got my ROCK in the form of a fish.”

“Stripers become king of the river in winter,” Casey continues. “This harbinger of cooler temperatures begins to show up in fall, and you get the opportunity for a ‘river slam’ - a trifecta of puppy drum, speckled trout and striped bass.”

Bay-wide, rockfish are recovering from a severe decline in the 1970s and 1980s. Good fisher people not only get their license but carefully observe state restrictions. You can keep one striper a day, minimum size 20 inches, maximum size 28 inches per person, protecting larger breeding fish. “Striped bass feed on everything from menhaden to silverside minnows to crabs,” Casey says. “And they like to feed under lights at night, when their prey is blinded by the light.”

She recalls an astonishing sight with the late Ken Lampert, a renowned Elizabeth River angler. After fishing near the Hampton Boulevard bridge, they were cleaning striped bass.

(Cont’d p. 4)



Casey Shaw, Elizabeth River Project, considers striped bass the king of the river in winter. Below, Casey's engagement moment with Scott Graves.



Casey's Christmas Bass

1 whole striped bass, cleaned, scaled, and patted dry (Make sure the fish can fit on your pan and in your oven!)

1 lemon sliced, 1 onion sliced, Olive Oil
Garlic, Butter

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line baking sheet with foil and coat with non-stick spray. Sprinkle the inside and outside of the fish with salt & pepper. Fill the cavity with the sliced lemon and onion topped with slices of butter, and drizzle the inside and outside of the fish with olive oil. Feel free to add any herbs like rosemary, parsley, or dill. Roast the fish 20-25 minutes uncovered until the flesh is firm and flaky, or to 130-135 degrees. I like to slice up bell peppers and grate ginger for the cavity of the fish before it goes in the oven, and finish it with suka, or Filipino spiced vinegar when eating.

– Casey Shaw, Director of Marketing and Communications, Elizabeth River Project

(Cont'd from p. 3)

“Ken would always investigate the fish’s stomach contents to see what it had been eating. I’ll never forget the time there was a LIVE mantis shrimp inside that we released back into the river! Striped bass have voracious appetites. Many times, they don’t even fully swallow minnows before attacking your lure, as evidenced by the tiny fish-eyes looking up at you if you look into one’s mouth.”

Then there’s the role of stripers in this season’s celebrations. “A Christmas tradition at my house has been a whole broiled rockfish, often caught that morning,” says Casey. (recipe p.3)

“A fish almost as big as Walter”

“Fall is my favorite time on the river not only because the fishing is great, but because the fishing leads to more family time with my two boys,” Joe says. “They know once October hits, we are fishing as much as we can... I drag them out on the coldest days, because they say the nastier the weather, the better the catching.”

A lot of Joe’s days are spent restoring fish habitat with Elizabeth River Project and partners in the form of oyster reefs, toxic cleanups and “living shorelines,” or reconstructed natural shores. Growing up on the river, his sons see the results first-hand, Joe says, because “the fishing just keeps getting better.”

While it’s fun to catch fish, Joe also likes a second part: “Standing around talking about catching fish, what is going on in our lives, and deep thoughts from a 7-year-old about life.” Joe’s favorite fish story, though, begins with his now 12-year-old and a fishing buddy, Lee Nuzzo. “It was cool, so I wrapped Walter up in all the clothes he owned and put him on the boat. We rode out to an undisclosed location in the river... We were talking to Walter about how to fish the location and he starts saying, ‘Well, I cannot wait to out fish you guys here.’ Mr. Lee did not seem amused and says, ‘Whatever, Walter.’ Next cast, Walter pulls in



Joe Rieger (R), Deputy Director - Restoration, Elizabeth River Project, with son Walter and their stripers. “Even though Walter caught the bigger fish, he wanted to hold the small one,” says Joe.

a 36-inch striped bass. Walter says, ‘Guess I was right. You need to have a slow retrieve.’ Both Lee and I died laughing as we took a photo of a fish almost as big as Walter at the time.

“This past year, our fishing buddy passed away and I thought, ‘Lee would want me to take Lucas to our spot.’” A few weeks ago, Joe did just that with Lucas, his younger son. “And of course, Lucas was telling me how he was going to out fish me on the boat ride.

“Well guess what - first cast, Lucas catches a 25-inch-drum and his next words are, ‘Told you: Slow retrieve.’ These are the memories that will last a lifetime while also connecting the next generation to this river.

“As we were riding home from that stop, I thought, ‘I bet Mr. Lee is laughing with us.’”

Fishing questions? Interested in a living shoreline? Contact Casey at cshaw@elizabethriver.org and Joe at jrieger@elizabethriver.org. And thanks in advance for your support.

Keep returning a healthy river for fish - and kids.

elizabethriver.org | Click DONATE



Special thanks to Dills Architects of Virginia Beach for donating this design for expanding our Beazley River Academy in Portsmouth.

River education HQ to double in size

“Rarely can a small project create as large and as immediate an impact”

A once forgotten forest in Portsmouth is now so busy with river education programs that our “River Academy” there will double in size, with a groundbreaking expected this winter, thanks to YOU and the astonishingly successful Next Wave Campaign.

“Rarely can a small project create as large, and as immediate, an impact as the River Academy expansion will for our Hampton Roads communities and natural environment,” says Clay Dills, principal of Dills Architects, which donated design services valued at more than \$100,000 to make the expansion a reality at Paradise Creek Nature Park. The 40-acre park, which serves as the education headquarters of

Elizabeth River Project, is a partnership with the City of Portsmouth, which maintains the property as its third largest public park.

That’s far from all the good news regarding the campaign, though. Thanks to you, generous donors, the Next Wave is 97% there with a goal of \$13 million. Accolades are already starting for a series of regional projects the campaign makes possible.

The Elizabeth River Project’s Pru and Louis Ryan Resilience Lab, coming to North Colley in Norfolk, is already winning awards. On Oct. 28, the design concept by Work Program Architects of Norfolk won an Award of Excellence from the Hampton Roads Association for Commercial Real Estate at

the association’s annual event recognizing best construction projects in the region.

The Ryan Resilience Lab will demonstrate how to continue to live and work in the urban floodplain in ways that are resilient for people and the environment despite Norfolk’s infamy in leading the Eastern Seaboard in rising sea levels.

Meanwhile, in a partnership with the City of Chesapeake, we’re working to establish a new, high-visibility home port for the Elizabeth River Project’s Dominion Energy Learning Barge at Elizabeth River Park next to the Jordan Bridge.

Put the Next Wave campaign over the finish line - Elizabethriver.org/TheNextWave

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The Elizabeth River Project is proud to recognize members of our leadership giving societies. Thank you for contributing \$500 or more annually to support our award-winner restoration and education programs. Join us! For more information about our donor societies, contact Susan Smith at 757-399-7487 (o) or 757-407-1406 (c) or ssmith@elizabethriver.org.



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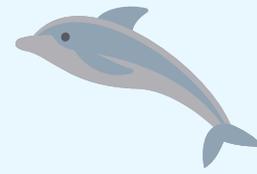
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*Treat the Earth well. It was
not given to you by your
parents. It was loaned to
you by your children.*

~ Ancient Proverb

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(Cont'd from p. 1)

Goo progress - 50,000 truckloads removed so far

the Trust to industrial partners, federal, state and local agencies and the US Navy. Reporting to our action team on behalf of its sub-committee of scientists assessing goo progress, Koubsky made a rough calculation: 50,000 dump truck loads of “goo” removed so far; maybe 50,000 dump loads left to go.

“You look at the remaining hotspots and there aren’t that many of them,” Koubsky says. The action team still voted continued sediment cleanup to be a priority, but maybe no longer the top priority – a historic shift in itself. A draft of the plan is expected late this year. So far the team also prioritizes increased pollution related to rising sea levels and the need for improved equity.

Meanwhile, in the main channel of Paradise Creek in Portsmouth, the Trust is carrying out the project to remove 500 dump trucks worth of PCB contamination, dispose of it at an approved landfill and replace it with clean sand. In less contaminated areas of the creek, pellets of “activated carbon” will bind with the PCBs, making them unavailable to river life. (Note, no contamination has been found at our Paradise Creek Nature Park. The cleanup is outside park boundaries.)

The funds were set aside by developers to offset impacts to the bottom of nearby waters.

“The Living River Trust is excited to have begun work in improving the health of Paradise Creek and to be using a new technology,

SediMite, to absorb pollutants,” said Elizabeth Friel, Executive Director of the Living River Trust, which also works to conserve lands in South Hampton Roads. She joined the Trust in June and previously was Executive Director of the Northern Neck Land Conservancy.

Koubsky, a geologist who earlier managed projects for Elizabeth River Project, now has his own company providing project management of sediment cleanups for the Trust. He’s loving watching contractor Hodges and Hodges operate that dredge.

“Oh man, I wouldn’t want be anywhere else,” he says. “I’m on the water watching contractors restore the river – and I’m part of it.”



The draft new action plan for the Elizabeth River prioritizes equity. Here the Elizabeth River Project’s board takes part in an equity retreat with Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown of Stetson University (front row, fourth from left), also advising the stakeholder team.

See you in “Paradise” for winter bird walks & more

Join the fun and learn something, too - Paradise Creek Nature Park, 1141 Victory Blvd., Portsmouth.

Register at paradisecreek.elizabethriver.org. Questions? 392-7132.

Made possible through your membership support. Join or renew today at www.elizabethriver.org.

Volunteer Service Days

Dates: Saturdays, Dec. 11; Jan. 8, 15;

Feb. 5, 12; Mar. 5, 12.

Time: 9 am – 11 am.

Target age: 16 and above

FREE: Register at paradisecreek.elizabethriver.org

Seasonal tasks; dress for outdoors.

Winter Bird Walks

Dates: Saturdays, Dec. 18, Jan. 22, Feb. 19, Mar. 19.

Time: 8:30 am – 10 am

Target age: 16 and above

COST: \$5 pp

Our master birder helps you observe some of 160 species.



Power Walks

Dates: Saturdays, Jan. 8, Feb. 5, Mar. 5.

Time: 8:30 am – 9:30 am

Target age: 16 and above

FREE: Register at paradisecreek.elizabethriver.org

Brisk 1-mile walk on the trails. Strollers, dogs welcome.

Kids! Meet the Critter of the Month

Dates: Saturdays, Jan. 15, Feb. 12, Mar. 12.

Time: 10 am – 11 am

Target age: All ages of children, accompanied by adults.

COST: \$5 per child

Ranger Seana leads a walk to discover park wildlife.

