Chair’s Corner

This has been a difficult year filled with uncertainty and change. COVID-19 has posed many challenges and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Although we started the year with the difficult decision to pause all in-person activities until February 1, we look forward to a very active 2021!

We already have a lot scheduled and being planned, including a few regular virtual events (Chapter Chats, Conservation Conversations, and even Chapter Trivia Nights!). We’re proud to kick off this year with a few stories and connections in this newsletter.

For those of you who haven’t yet attended one of our online events, keep an eye on the Activities Database, Meetup and our Facebook page for upcoming events. They are proving to be an excellent way to connect with others with a passion for the outdoors and all that AMC does.

As always, feel free to contact me with questions at any time.

- Lisa Novins, Potomac Chapter Chair, chair@amcpotomac.org

We have a couple backpacking trips coming up this winter where we will use mountaineering sleds to haul our gear. We also take advantage of every hill we can find. This photo is from a trip to Baxter Park in March 2010. Credit: David Mong.

Winter practice prepares us for more challenging environments. Here we are descending Hamlin Peak with the Knife Edge Trail on Mt. Katahdin in view. We spent 5 hours above treeline. This photo is from an AMC trip to Baxter Park in Feb 2011. Credit: David Mong
Announcements

New Potomac Chapter Website

A few months ago we embarked on a project to create a new Potomac Chapter website. Our goal is to create an easy to navigate and easy to update website that reflects the personality and priorities of our Chapter. While we continue the transition to a new website, our old website will remain active. Visit the new website at www.amcpotomac.org.

Potomac Chapter Welcomes New Secretary

At our annual meeting in November, the Chapter elected a new secretary, Kathy Campbell. With her addition, all four ExComm officer positions are filled! Kathy has been an AMC member since 2001. Growing up in New England she had the opportunity to hike the Whites, climbing Mt Washington many times with her dad and her two children. She has stayed in all of the huts and recently visited Maine and climbed Katahdin. She loves to hike, bike, kayak and ski. Kathy says she’s very happy to be able to spend more time and be able to focus on things she enjoys doing and has a passion for!

Thursday, February 18, 2021 @ 7pm: The History of Lewis Mountain in Shenandoah National Park

As the smallest campground in Shenandoah, Lewis Mountain offers quiet campsites, cozy cabins and a camp store. But did you know Lewis Mountain was once a segregated campground in accordance with Virginia’s Jim Crow laws. Join Ranger Claire Comer to hear the complex stories of Lewis Mountain and the desegregation of Shenandoah National Park. Find more information and register here.

Other Online Activities

Chapter Chats will continue to be scheduled during the first week of each month. Watch our Meetup page, our Facebook page, and the AMC Activities Database for monthly chat listings. We are also listing online events hosted by other AMC chapters on our Meetup page! For example, the NY-North Jersey Chapter is hosting several online events in February including a Wilderness First Aid presentation as well as a discussion of solutions to marine debris.

Future Activities

Watch our Meetup page, our Facebook page, and the AMC Activities Database to find activities happening in person or online. You can search for regional activities (by chapter or state) or online (search #BeOnlineWithAMC).
Leave-No-Trace Creativity

What do you do when you find more trash along the trail than you can possibly carry? You get creative.

In October on a Potomac Chapter AMC bike-packing trip to the Otter Creek Wilderness in the Monongahela National Forest in WV, Will Schaefer, co-leader of the trip noted a whitewall vehicle tire well in the forest as we headed toward our campsite. A pretty unusual thing to see this far into the woods.

For this family trip we were joined by a dad along with his 10-year-old son. A mom and her 13-year-old son also planned to join us but needed to drop out right before the trip.

Bike-packing trips combine biking and camping. It can be camping where you park your bike, or in our case, riding a bike with all of our gear. We rode 5 miles to the edge of a wilderness area where bikes are not allowed and then switched over to backpack mode, hiding our bikes in the woods. We then backpacked 1 mile to where we set up a campsite for 2 nights and in between went on an 11-mile hike. During the hike Will picked up a number of items of trash including a wine bottle and a balloon.

On our way out, Will noted the tire still in the woods.

He dug it out and hauled it a couple tenths of a mile uphill to the trailhead. The next challenge was what to do with it. Our cars were 5 miles away. Will came up with a solution.

(See photo on next page)

Conservation’s for the Birds

Do you love to watch the birds on your birdfeeder? Do you enjoy listening to birds on hikes or have a favorite bird you look for whenever you are outside? If so, the Great Backyard Bird Count is for you.

Each year, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Audubon Society, and Birds Canada bring people together from around the world to watch, learn about, count, and celebrate birds. This year’s Bird Count will take place February 12-15, 2021. Over these four days, people will spend time in their favorite places watching and counting as many birds as they can find and reporting them via a mobile app or the organization’s website. The effort creates a real-time snapshot of where birds are across the continent and around the world, which helps scientists better understand global bird populations before one of their annual migrations. In 2020, 268,674 participants from 194 countries counted 27,270,156 birds and identified 6,942 species!

With almost 3,000 members spread across 55,249 square miles in the District of Colombia, Maryland, and Virginia, the Potomac Chapter of AMC can cover a lot of ground and make a significant contribution to this effort. And what a great excuse to get the whole family involved in the outdoors during the bleak winter days of February!

To learn more, visit the Great Backyard Bird Count website here. If you’re ready to sign up and participate, register here.

~ Peter Mason, Potomac Chapter Vice Chair
Leave-No-Trace (continued from previous page)

Five miles later and the next day it was disposed of properly at a local recycling center!

We applaud Will for his creativity and desire to leave the woods in better shape than he found them. While this extra effort is above and beyond, you can do your part to do the same when out in the forest to the extent you can.

AMC is a provider of Leave No Trace Master Educator courses and Leave No Trace Trainer Courses in partnership with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics. Master Educator courses are typically 5 days in length and designed for people who are actively teach other backcountry skills or providing recreation information to the public. Trainer courses are two days in length and designed to provide an in-depth orientation to LNT for those interested in developing their backcountry ethic. Watch for the Chapter to provide a LNT workshop this spring!

~ David Mong, Potomac Chapter, Excursions Chair

Photo credit: David Mong

Photo credit: Peter Mason
Places to Paddle

If you are looking for a place to really enjoy the slow but sure current of a river and some great scenery as well as some easy to navigate riffles and an occasional set of rapids to get the blood flowing, then the South Fork Shenandoah River is calling your name. It offers all of this and a lot more.

The South Fork Shenandoah River begins at the confluence of the North River and South River near Port Republic, Virginia and flows north 97 miles to meet the North Fork Shenandoah River at the Town of Front Royal. Running parallel to the Skyline Drive and Shenandoah National Park, the river literally snakes it way along the Shenandoah Valley with an S curve about every mile or two defining the lower half of the river. Its smaller twin—the North Fork Shenandoah River—snakes its way north on a parallel course on the other side of the valley, an equally beautiful river.

On any given day, depending on the season and where you put in and take out, you may have the entire river to yourselves or you may be sharing part of it with many others tubing down the river on a hot summer weekend. But given the amount of navigable waters, you will find what you are looking for on this river.

If you are new to canoeing or kayaking, this river is very forgiving during its journey north. But it will teach you some new skills about navigating some Class I rapids and how not to get stuck on rocks during low water conditions during the summer. It’s a perfect place to work on those different paddling strokes as well as to stop along the way and cool off in the waters. Much of the river is shallow, with islands scattered along the way, so mid-river or island stops for lunch are a given.

For more experienced paddlers, the scenery along the river is essentially non-stop, with the many S curves providing opportunities to see the surrounding hillsides and farmsteads from multiple angles as the current takes you west then north then east and then north again but always downstream. From the multitude of brightly colored dragonflies and damselflies who will seek out your kayak or canoe as a stationary though temporary resting place for the journey downstream to bald eagles, ospreys, great blue herons and ducks, there is plenty to enjoy. (And watch out for the occasional cow standing in the shallows for a drink and a cool bath.)

To us fisherfolk, the South Fork Shenandoah River offers up an interesting menu of species—smallmouth bass, green sunfish, fall fish, red eye bass, catfish and carp are just some of the fish you can catch during your trip down (or up as in north) the river. Whether you are a spin fisher or casting flies or watching your bobber and bait work through the current, this river will reward you with fish on the end of your line. And the great thing is you often don’t know which species you have caught until you get the fish closer to you and your boat.
Places to Paddle (continued from previous page)

For decades, this river was and has continued to be my favorite smallmouth bass river to float fish. The river has faced its share of challenges over the years—nutrient and sediment pollutant runoff from the surrounding valley, fish die-offs over several years, droughts and high flows—but so far it has always bounced back. It is truly such a fishable river, filled with pools, riffles, rapids, extensive shallow waters and occasional deep, deep sections you just know are home to some BIG fish! And you can fish while you float down the river, you can anchor just about anywhere and cast, or you can get out of your canoe or kayak and wade fish. That’s what makes this river so special.

You can take advantage of the canoe and kayak livery services offered by several outfitters located along the river—they will ferry your boat to a put-in location with your car parked at their facility. Or you rent one of their canoes or kayaks for the day or several days and let them do the work while you focus on enjoying the river. Given the length of the river, there are opportunities for multi-day trips with overnight camping. Talk with your outfitter about where along the river are there places to camp overnight.

You only have a half day available? No problem as you can make arrangements for floating a short section of the river. Talk with one of the outfitters about what you looking for in your half day experience so they can match your desires up with the right section of the river. Or you can plan to get on the river early and take the full day to experience everything the South Fork Shenandoah River has to offer.

Do I sound like a salesman? Absolutely! This river provides a host of reasons for you to get out and enjoy the outdoors, whether or not you own a canoe or kayak or are an experienced paddler. And the best news is this river is just one of hundreds of creeks and rivers flowing through the Potomac Chapter’s region of the mid-Atlantic. BUT, it’s one of the few that actually flows north. I always tell myself that I am actually flowing upstream as I let the river do most of the work and I either sit back and enjoy the scenery and wildlife around me or make that next cast hoping a fish will think I just delivered it its next delicious meal!

~ Rich Batiuk, Potomac Chapter Treasurer, avid kayaker and fly fisherman always looking for somewhere else new to paddle, explore, and fish

Livery Service and Sources of Paddling Information

One of several livery services located along the river:

**Front Royal Outdoors**, located at 8567 Stonewall Jackson Hwy, Front Royal, VA 22630 877-950-5918
info@frontroyaloutdoors.com

A great resource book for paddling Virginia’s tidal waters:

**Sea Kayaking Virginia**: A Paddler’s Guide to Day Trips from Georgetown to Chincoteague by Andrea Nolan
Film Review: My Octopus Teacher

This could be just another nature documentary, but it isn’t. The encounter between filmmaker Craig Foster—successful in his career but burnt out and no longer sure how to connect with his adolescent son—is full of surprises, not the least of which were those Foster himself experienced. Free diving off the coast of South Africa where he grew up, and on sabbatical from his work, Foster explores the sea kelp forest, camera in hand, when he stumbles upon a small, eggplant colored octopus camouflaged behind a pile of seashells artfully arranged on the sea floor. Foster is at first fascinated by the creature. He returns daily to the same spot to study it. Observation gives way to something else. The surprise is, he succeeds in gaining its trust and develops what can only be described as an interspecies friendship that Foster chronicles using an underwater camera. The result is the Netflix original documentary My Octopus Teacher.

Over time, the octopus accepts the diver’s presence and goes about its business while Foster films. At one point, Foster slowly extends his hand. The octopus cautiously reciprocates and unfurls an arm, using its tentacles to explore Foster’s outstretched fingers and palm. As a viewer, I had to keep reminding myself, “this is a wild creature, and a mollusk no less.” And indeed, it is the creature’s wildness that Foster returns to in the film’s narration. Much later, during one of his visits to the kelp forest, he comes upon the octopus deliberately situated beneath a large school of fish. The octopus stretches several arms up into the school and watches as the fish scatter, then repeats this action several more times while Foster observes from a distance. This behavior wasn’t about catching prey, Foster realizes, this was play. As if that moment wasn’t remarkable enough, the octopus realizes Foster is nearby, stops what it is doing, rushes over and—there is no other word for it—embraces him.

Foster eventually brings his son, already an accomplished diver, to meet his octopus friend. The dives that father and son take together enable them to find emotional footing that didn’t exist before. At the end of the film, Foster reflects on his fleeting time with the octopus. (The typical life span for this species is only one to two years). The octopus lives long enough to reproduce and guard her clutch of eggs until they hatch. Foster’s camera shows us the spent body drifting along the sea floor. Back at home, the filmmaker speaks into the camera about the “amazing wildness that she represented and how that changed me.” The film concludes by noting that Foster went on to start a foundation along with other divers in the area dedicated to the protection of the sea kelp forest and its inhabitants. He no longer dives alone.

My Octopus Teacher is a Netflix documentary released in September 2020.

- Kate Lawrence

Volunteer with your AMC Chapter!

There are plenty of opportunities to volunteer with the Chapter!

One way is by becoming part of your Potomac Chapter’s Executive Committee. There are still a few openings for this year including the Membership Chair, the Family Outings Chair, and the Young Members Chair.

Another way is volunteering with a subcommittee. We can always use help with communications! Do you love to write or design? We’re working on our newsletter and new website. Do you love to connect with people? We’re ramping up our social media presence. Or maybe you have a virtual conservation event in mind that you’d love to help plan?

Or are you more interested in leading people outdoors? The Chapter is in the process of scheduling leadership trainings for the coming year!

If any of these piques your interest - whether you want to join us for the entire year or one event - please contact the Chapter Chair, Lisa Novins @ chair@amcpotomac.org.

And, of course, you can always join us for online or in-person events. Watch the Activities Database, Meetup, or Facebook for details. You can access all of those pages on our new (still finalizing) website.