



Belle Isle News

Newsletter of the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

October 1985

WETLANDS UNDER SEIGE

There is a struggle going on in Massachusetts which may determine if destruction of our nation's wetlands, which had recently been slowed, will once more become commonplace. It is ironic that this is happening in Massachusetts, which pioneered wetlands protection legislation, but it points out one of the weaknesses in Massachusetts wetlands laws: that the protection of wildlife habitat does not have "legal standing."

The site around which this struggle is being waged is Sweeden's Swamp, primarily a Red Maple wetland, located in South Attleboro. Pyramid Corporation, the developer, proposes to build a shopping mall at this site and to "relocate" the wetland. Environmental organizations throughout the state and nation, recognizing the importance of this fight, formed the Coalition to Save Sweeden's Swamp, and Friends of Belle Isle Marsh is now a member. Recent articles in *The Boston Globe* and elsewhere have detailed the various permit processes and activities by different agencies, officials, and advocacy groups. Currently, the Regional Director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has denied a permit, the developer has filed a preliminary injunction against his veto,

and the coalition is seeking to intervene in the lawsuit.

Why did FBIM join this coalition? We are of course concerned about the destruction of wetlands, but there are also some interesting similarities between Belle Isle and Sweeden's Swamp, one a salt and the other a fresh water marsh. Chief among these are that both provide excellent wildlife habitat, and that both have been significantly disturbed.



Sweeden's Swamp, like Belle Isle, does provide some protection against flooding and may also help to improve water quality. However, the EPA permit denial is based primarily on the value of Sweeden's Swamp as wildlife habitat and as open space for passive recreation. These are also the two primary values of Belle Isle. What kinds of wildlife do these areas harbor? Sweeden's Swamp provides excellent habitat for

small mammals, songbirds, reptiles, and amphibians. The edges of Belle Isle likewise shelter numerous small rodents, several species of snakes, and at least one family of Muskrats. Although songbird species diversity at Belle Isle is limited, there are a fair number of Savannah and Sharp-tailed Sparrows, several Seaside Sparrows (rare in the Boston area), and this year Marsh Wrens settled in as well. Waterfowl, including

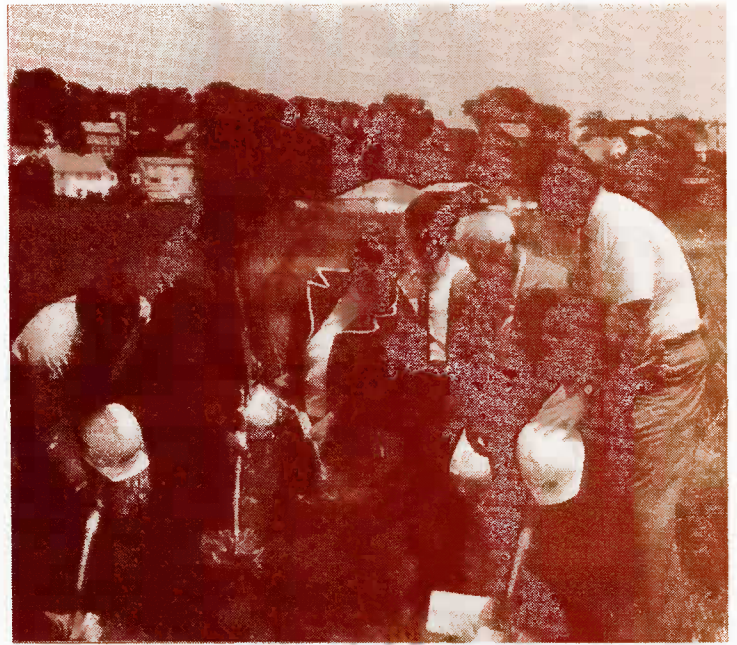
Mallards and Black Ducks, are found in both wetlands. The abundance of small prey animals in both areas provides ample food for herons and hawks, although the species found in each are different: Green-backed Herons and Red-shouldered Hawks in Sweeden's Swamp, Snowy Egrets and American Kestrels being most common in Belle Isle. The abundant fish at Belle Isle also provide sustenance for terns and shorebirds.

Neither of these areas is pristine! As anyone who has participated in our Belle Isle clean-ups can attest, a great deal of dumped trash can be found along its edge, and Sweeden's Swamp has similar refuse along its perimeter. Yet these aesthetic intrusions do little to destroy these wildlife habitats. This is an important point to remember: although dumping certainly destroys the beauty of a wetland, it does not significantly affect wildlife values unless it either encroaches upon or pollutes the wetland. Thus we should be wary that developers not be allowed to justify their filling of wetlands on the basis of previous disturbance to them.

EPA's position is that non-water-dependent projects may not be constructed in wetland areas unless it can be conclusively proved that alternative sites do not exist. This condition holds even if the developer proposes to construct an off-site replacement wetland. FBIM must also beware similar attempts to circumvent wetlands laws, and to develop portions of Belle Isle.

We urge our members to do two things: Please write Michael Deland, EPA Regional Administrator, (JFK Federal Building, Boston, MA 02202), in support of his decision to deny the permit to fill Sweeden's Swamp, and send a copy of your letter to your congressional representatives, urging them to uphold the decision. Secondly, since Massachusetts laws presently do not cite wildlife habitat as a legal condition for wetlands protection, we urge you to contact your state officials requesting that such protection be added to wetlands legislation.

Craig Jackson



Ground-breaking, July 12, 1985.
From left to right: MDC Commissioner Geary, Rep. Serra, Ms. DeAngelis, Sen. LoPresti, Mr. Musto, Mayor Flynn.

GROUND-BREAKING

Noon, July 12, 1985: All these well-dressed ladies and gents are celebrating the beginning of the final phase of construction at Belle Isle Park. State and city officials speak momentarily, then everyone grabs shovels and hard hats and poses for pictures.

Seven years ago, when the park was started, Jim Falk, the landscape architect in charge of the project, planned and constructed two hills and an island at the old drive-in theater at Belle Isle. Now the rest of the construction is to be finished: a fence all around the reservation, an observation tower, a bridge over the channel, a small parking lot, some landscaping, and walking paths.

At last, at long last, those who watched open lands in their beloved East Boston disappear, people like Edith deAngelis and Anna DeFronzo and Gus Serra, to name only a few, and who worked all these years for this new park to replace lost Wood Island Park -- all of them can now look forward to a park unique in metropolitan Boston. Belle Isle Marsh Reservation will officially open its gates to visitors sometime next spring.

EDITH DEANGELIS: Activist

[This brief biographical portrait of a gutsy lady is the second in our series on "old-time friends of Belle Isle Marsh."]

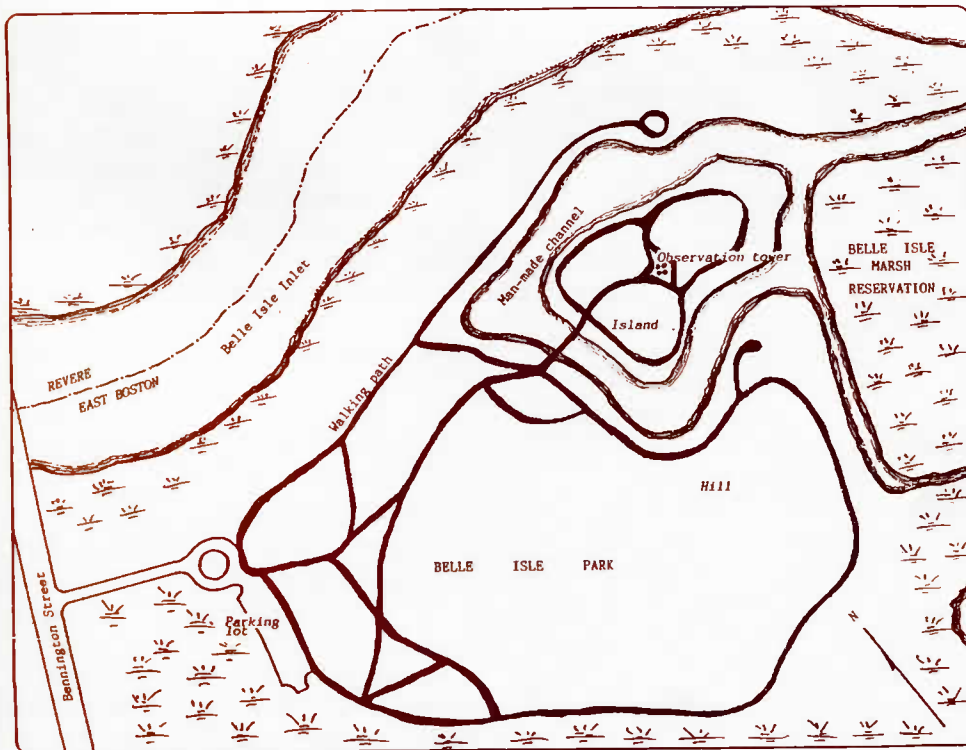
Edith DeAngelis is a lifelong resident of East Boston, a community activist, and an environmentalist. Her energy and dedication to community affairs over the years have resulted in the preservation of unique areas such as Belle Isle Marsh.

During the mid to late 1960s Ms. DeAngelis and other members of the Parish of the Holy Redeemer in East Boston began to voice their concerns over a lack of open space within East Boston to the local government. They initiated a walking tour of East Boston to identify vacant and under-utilized sites. As they surveyed along the waterfront, Ms. DeAngelis observed "industrial buildings in rack and ruin, rat-infested, garbage-dumped," considering the fantastic potential of this land as open recreation space.

It became "a dream to create a water walkway around East Boston," states DeAngelis, comparing the idea with the "Emerald Necklace" of park land extending

through Boston, designed by the Nineteenth Century architect Frederick Law Olmstead. (Ironically, it was the destruction, in 1965, of one of Olmstead's most beautiful creations -- Wood Island Park -- to accomodate an expanding Logan Airport that incensed East Bostonians and led to a great burst of community activism. New dreams out of old wounds.)

Shortly after the Parish's initial survey, a recreation and a land use council were formed under the auspices of East Boston's "Little City Hall." DeAngelis served on these councils as a representative from her parish, and eventually became president of the Recreation, Master Planning, and Land Use Council, which resulted from the merging of the two councils. Discussing the factors that solidified the East Boston community, DeAngelis felt that "the greatest boon was when groups came together." In order to encourage cohesiveness in the community, the Recreation and Land Use Council invited community groups to send representatives to their meetings. In addition, whenever a hearing concerned a specific piece of land, the council strove to hold the hearing within the affected neighborhood.



Belle Isle Park

Belle Isle Marsh was one of the issues addressed over the years. And, as with other issues DeAngelis describes, "It took years of plugging and fighting." Perseverance, in the form of letter-writing to officials, research (see box next page), preparation of position papers, and attendance at hearings was finally rewarded when Belle Isle Marsh was acquired from the Port Authority by the Metropolitan District Commission.

DeAngelis' dedication to the community stems from the role models provided by family and friends during her childhood.

GUNS AND STONE

After the destruction of Wood Island Park, officials of the commonwealth began construction plans for an oil tanker terminal on the Belle Isle Marsh site, declaring that no further environmental damage could take place, that "the marsh was dead." Local activists responded to the attempted destruction by arranging for Catherine S. Stone, a Boston University graduate student, to study and evaluate Belle Isle's health during the fall of 1971. Ms. Stone's study, summarized in "An Investigation of the Belle Isle Salt Marsh," shows clearly what we all know so well: that Belle Isle contains most of the plants considered normal and essential in a healthy salt-marsh. Stone compared plant samples from the marsh with those from two "high-quality" marshes at

Wingarsheek on Cape Ann and at Barnstable on Cape Cod, concluding beyond a doubt that this "remnant" salt marsh was very much alive and worth preserving.

The study, on file with the Boston Conservation Commission, is worth perusing for its evaluation of the salt marsh and the threats to its health: trash dumped along the edges, chemicals leached from Winthrop dump, airplane noise and pollution, and pollution by Boston Harbor water. It also contains the astounding and amusing statement that Stone was unable to adequately study the East Boston side of the marsh as she was deterred from docking her boat with threats "by the purported owners of the Belle Isle Marina, who had guns."

Soheil Zende

She speaks especially of the Trinity Neighborhood House and Trinity House Camp in which she participated as a girl, and whose leaders conveyed a strong dedication to the community and the environment. These influences led to her career as a teacher in the physical education department at the University of Massachusetts and to her community activism.

Describing Edith DeAngelis, John Lewis, a long time friend and a member of the Boston Conservation Commission, states, "She has persistence and a clear vision of what's needed. Officials will come and go. People like Edie are eternal."

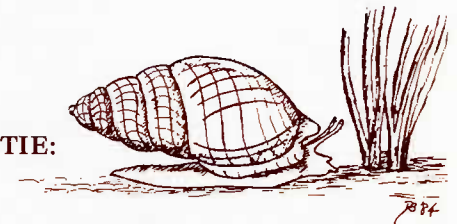
Margarita Drozdoff

ZOPPO CONDITIONS

On September 10 the Winthrop Conservation Commission issued its final Order of Conditions for Neponset Associates' project on Revere Street, which includes building over one hundred residential units on 17 acres of land-fill in Belle Isle Marsh. (In the March Newsletter we covered the history of Mr. William Zoppo's project.) The current ruling from the Conservation Commission represents the

best that can be done within the framework of the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. However, Mr. Zoppo must go through many more steps to acquire approval for this massive project. Winthropites concerned with traffic congestion in their town, and environmentalists worried about the immense effect of this project on a unique and fragile wetland all need to watch the proceedings carefully and make their views known to Winthrop officials at every turn.

CLEAN-UP IN EASTIE: July 20



Neighbors, volunteers, supporters, we thank you for taking the initiative to preserve precious open spaces. Special thanks also to Mario Traficante of MDC, who coordinated the clean-up, and to maintenance crews from MDC, Revere and Winthrop DWP, the National Guard, Dunkin Donuts of Bennington Street, Osco Drug of Saratoga Street, Woolworth's and McDonald's of Central Square, Coca-cola Corporation, and Resco.

GO FLY A KITE

A big falcon rested three stories below the roof of a high-rise building, on the sill of a casement window, seven windows from the east edge. Some people said the bird was a Gyrfalcon from Canada that visits us rarely in winter. But it wasn't big enough.

Some said it was a Peregrine Falcon, one of those raised in Maryland and released on top of the Post Office building downtown in Boston. But the face of our bird was like an American Kestrel's, bearing not a single sideburn, but two.

Something trailed from a leg. A jess we thought: a strap or a string or a leash of a falconer. Some said, surely the bird is a falconer's, escaped, maybe a Lanner or a Saker Falcon, from Europe or Asia: surely, very surely, a bird that men fly from their wrists.

We went to the high floor of the building where the falcon was. In the hall a young woman was carrying a baby on her hip. I showed her pictures of falcons, saying we think it's this one, but not pointing at a picture of the Peregrine.

She put her finger on the picture of the Prairie Falcon, a bird native to the western United States. She said, oh yes, she had heard it coming before she had seen it, because it was belled on one leg. The bell jingled like a sleigh bell when the falcon walked along her window ledge.

Later, I told people what she said. They said they didn't believe her. She couldn't have seen a Prairie Falcon. She must have seen an American Kestrel. But I believe her, for no one would bell an American Kestrel.

The female is small and the male is smaller: the smallest of our falcons. Her wingspan is twelve inches, and his is nine. Because of their pointed wings, Kestrels are easily mistaken for Mourning Doves. To Forbush, they looked like big swallows.

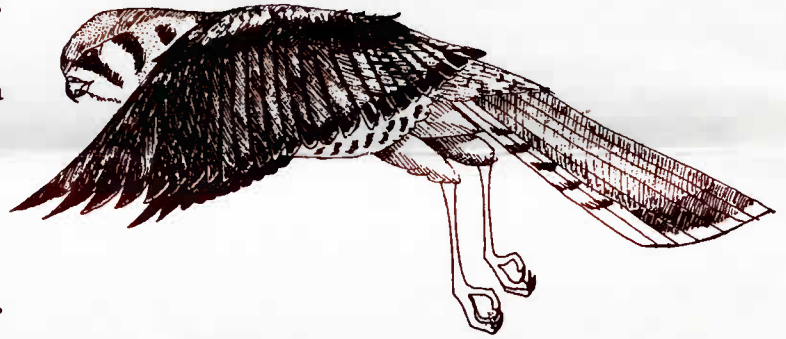
I doubt a sportsman would joy to fly her, to see her watching over a victory garden in early autumn, from a fencepost, sometimes taking a migrating sparrow; to see him hovering over a field in late

summer, like a kingfisher above a stream, often taking a grasshopper.

I doubt a princeling would pay to fly her, pay so much to get her that armed men would have to guard her nest, and guard it the clock around and weeks on end, and sometimes guard it at the peril of their lives, as now a dedicated few must guard the nests of Peregrines and Gyrs.

I don't know who would want to fly her, a falcon that hunts insects, not creatures that fear her, that flee from her, that bleed. A raptor untrue to her calling, unworthy of her name. Like the Bald Eagle that in summer takes defenseless fish that cannot see her coming, and in winter takes carrion when the vultures have gone south — deer that have fallen on the ice at Quabbin and have starved.

Jim Barton



Kestrel hovering

[A pair of American Kestrels can often be seen perched in the trees or hunting over the marsh at Belle Isle. As they fly off, voles or mice can often be seen grasped in their talons. We used to speculate as to where they nested: Had they formerly used the old drive-in building? Were they now nesting in the tops of billboards? Nothing so mundane! No: their nest is among the rafters at the top of the grandstand at Suffolk Downs, where, when not busy hunting or feeding their young, they too engage in the "sport of kings."
-Editor]

FIELD TRIP SCHEDULE

The following field trips have been scheduled to start at 2 PM. Please meet at the entrance to Belle Isle Marsh Reservation on Bennington Street, East Boston. Dress warmly and wear waterproof footwear.

Saturday, October 5
Saturday, October 12: COAST WEEK
Saturday, October 19

These field trips start at 1 PM:

Saturday, November 16
Sunday, December 1
Saturday, January 11

Field trips are free and open to the public. Please call the following trip leaders for further information.

David Desmond	324-7527
Kermit Norris	567-2339
Soheil Zende	628-8990

DON'T FORGET YOUR CAMERA

Our photo competition was launched in late spring and announced in our last newsletter. We'll be happy to send you a copy of the rules: just write to Photo Competition, 380 Broadway, Somerville 02145.

Remember, the deadline is January 31, 1986.

FALL HAWK-WATCHING

Now is the season to start looking to the northern horizon -- the hawks are on their way south. Join us on the following coordinated hawk-watch week-ends. The meeting place is the hill in the middle of Belle Isle Park. Bring a lawn-chair.

September 28 and 29
October 26 and 27
November 2 and 3

For more information please call the Belle Isle Hawk Watch Coordinator, Soheil Zende: 628-8990.

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

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East Boston, MA 02128

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MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Printing and mailing this newsletter, as well as all other activities of Friends of Belle Isle Marsh, is financed by membership dues and donations from generous members.

Membership dues are as follows:

Individual:	\$3
Family:	\$5
Seniors:	\$1
Under 16:	\$1

Please join today. Any amount you can contribute above and beyond membership dues will be highly appreciated.

This newsletter was produced by Soheil Zende, with editorial assistance from Craig Jackson and Tim Driscoll. Graphics by Denise Braunhardt.

Groundbreaking photo by Joe Schrafft. Map by Soheil Zende.

