

EVENTS



**Fall hawk watching
at Belle Isle Park:
Sunday mornings**

starting September 6. Meet at Sireen Reinstein Boardwalk. Call Soheil Zende 781-863-2392 to confirm.



**Weekly group walks
on Revere Beach:
Every Saturday,**

10:30 - 11:30 AM. Meet at Clock Tower across from State Police barracks, Revere Beach Blvd, Revere. (Stroller friendly.)

Memories of Revere Beach:

**Wednesdays, September 16 and
October 21, 11 AM - 1 PM.** Meet at Revere Society for Cultural and Historical Preservation, 108 Beach St, Revere. Contact: Matthew Nash at 781-485-2804, ext 105, or email Matthew.Nash@state.ma.us.



**Forum: Breeding birds
on our beaches:
Monday, September 21.**

Check FBIM website for time and place.

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Belle Isle News

Published by Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

Number 79



September 2009

Harvest Festival October 4

When: 1 - 3 PM

Where: Belle Isle Park

Park entrance on Bennington Street, East Boston, across the street from Suffolk Downs  Station

- Horse drawn hayrides
- Pumpkin decorating
- Live animals from Teacher Creatures
- Dave Limina *Supraphonic* blues band
- Dr. Joe Buttner from Salem State and his crab touch tank
- Andrew Jay from Massachusetts Oyster Project
- Mike Oliver's return as storyteller
- BNAN's Candace Cook makes pine cone bird feeders with peanut butter and bird seed

This event is free and open to the public.

Sponsored by **Department of Recreation and Conservation** and **Friends of Belle Isle Marsh**

Rivers be Dammed (part 2)

Part 1 of this article (Belle Isle News, June 2009) explored the conflict between private gain and public good in our nation's history, relating our "recurring political economic crises" to tension over the use and abuse of natural resources such as rivers.

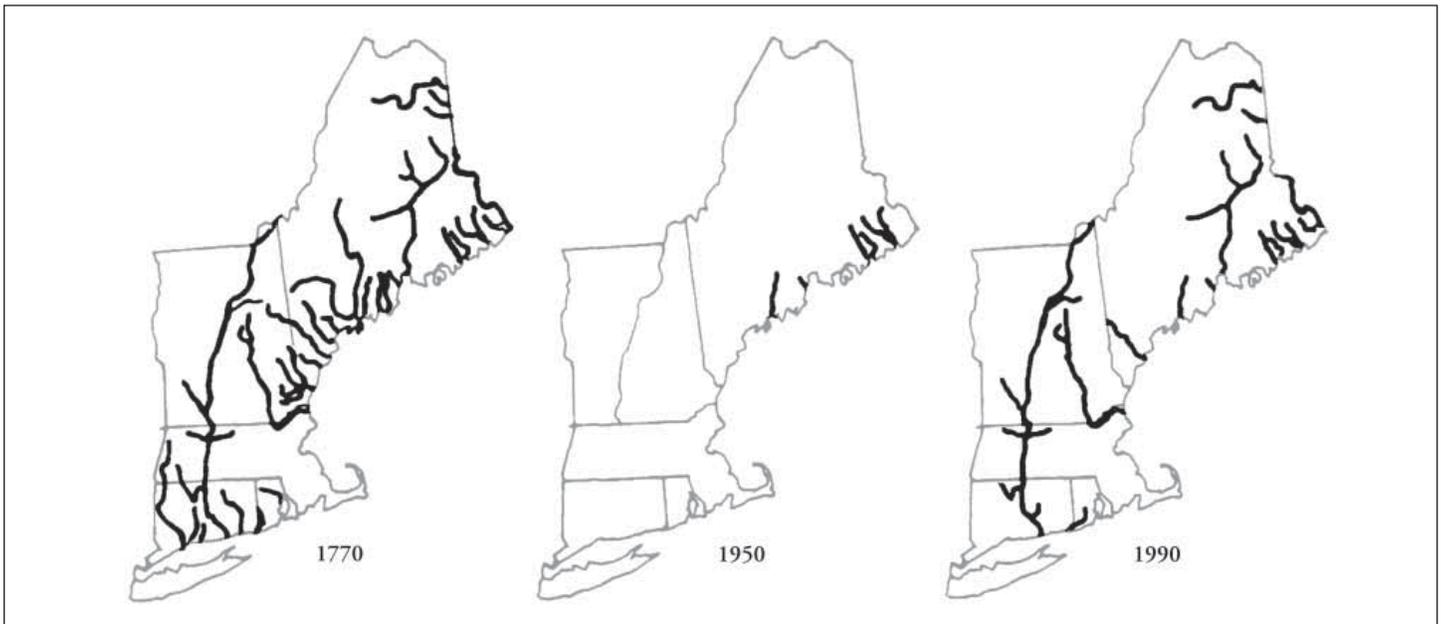
Upsetting the normal passage of fish in rivers was a major flash point feeding the fires of violent confrontation with Indians in New England; notably King Philip's War (1676 - 1677) in southeastern

Massachusetts and beyond; Lovewell's War over dam-building at Presumpscot Falls in Falmouth, Maine, beginning in 1727; and the extended Governor Shirley's War (1740 - 1760) over dam-building in the same Presumpscot River.

Conflicts over the Presumpscot dams are of interest because of a recent (2006) unanimous US Supreme Court decision. It required water quality improvements and the installation of fish bypasses to warrant state licensing of five dams in the Presumpscot watershed under Chapter 401 of the

Continued next page





Maps source : USFWS and A. Mesiter

Atlantic salmon rivers in New England over time. Bold lines indicate rivers with populations of returning salmon.

Rivers (continued)

Clean Water Act. The river, typical of New England rivers, had one time prolific seasonal runs of shad, alewife, salmon and smelt. The dams in question were long ago converted to provide hydro-electric power to paper and pulp mills. The court’s decision addressed abutters’ complaints regarding the obstruction of fish passage, as well as water quality. Their complaints echoed similar but futile grievances made not only by New England Indians beginning in the 1630s, but also by colonists who had moved into the Presumpscot area by the late 1700s.

The Supreme Court’s unanimous finding in favor of a fish ladder bypass is not the same as open passage for fish. Fish ladders result in reduced fish numbers upstream. Governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony struggled with growing Charles River communities to provide sufficient passage for fish amid protests and altercations among colonists themselves, and also with Indians throughout the 1600s and the 1700s.

James Madison ran into the same problem with Virginia citizenry in the late 1700s. Dam owners were pushing for maximum heads of water, and yet were constrained to, “...satisfy fish

passage requirements [which] made dams considerably less efficient and less profitable, some to the point of impracticability...”. Again, this illustrates the dilemma of our political economy at odds with itself as narrow private interests sought legal standing on a par with, and higher than, broad public interests to maximize their profits at the expense of a broader public good.



Looking at the underlying problems more closely we see a familiar pattern. Propaganda savaging the Indians was a ploy. Indian land and river laws were similar to English common law before England’s industrial revolution. Productive interaction among the earliest settlers and Indians, although rocky at times, was a welcome fact of life given the hardships of the new-comers and the diseases that decimated much of the native population. Even if we accept getting rid of Indians because they were “savages”, the dams should have been removed as colonists moved upstream. But farmers and settlers in new colonial settlements were also denied the wealth of inland fisheries by ruling commercial interests.

Clearing forests to grow grain to feed

cattle to feed humans was a cultural sea change for Indians given the abundant woodland and river resources they had enjoyed until recently. But the rivers of Native American and newcomer Europeans were to be sacrificed for the industrial revolution’s focus on the mechanical energy of water to power mills by which flour, oil, paper, snuff, gunpowder, iron forges, woolen cloths and lumber were prepared for shipment and sale.

In New England and elsewhere most of the various mills, factories and their dams have long since been abandoned, with a scattering of some dams providing electric power, although still blocking and polluting rivers. Since 1950 the number of rivers with returning salmon populations has shot up dramatically. The intriguing question is: Was the Supreme Court’s 2006 decision a partial admission that we learned at least something from English Common Law and the Indian Sachems of old? Or, is it an example of a happy coincidence that our own experiences, however plodding, finally lead us to restoring “a great public good”?

Conal Foley

This series on our rivers by the former FBIM President concludes in our next issue.

The Nature of Belle Isle



Shorebirds: Win Some, Lose Some

Once again this summer some unusual shorebirds nested on local beaches. With the help and intervention of caring local residents and a few wildlife conservation groups such as MassAudubon, the number of young produced locally (relative to number of nests) vastly exceeded the average nest productivity for these birds throughout the state. But the apparent nesting success of our local birds is in sharp contrast to the severe population drops among long-distance migrant shorebirds stopping over to feed and rest in our area.

Shorebirds nesting on local beaches seem to be doing well. Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*), which were first recorded nesting on Revere Beach in 2007, had a successful year, with relatively high numbers of chicks fledged per nest. In Winthrop, it helped that a ferocious group of nesting Least Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) arrived the past two years and tried to declare a portion of Winthrop Beach off-limits by dive-bombing intruders, thereby protecting the nesting Piping Plovers. They did help the plovers but had limited success themselves, as people and dogs often invaded past their cordon of safety as well as the symbolic fencing erected by their human protectors.

These are all federally listed birds and public officials and the public are expected to protect them and respect their need for safe nesting territories. Those expectations are not always heeded during the heat of summer

beach season. But the protections and fencing do help a great deal, and are what enable breeding to succeed on crowded coastal beaches. For example, it is suspected that plovers have been trying to nest locally for several years, but not until they were officially recorded and accorded full benefits did they produce noticeable numbers of chicks.

About 30 species of long distance migrant shorebirds also stop on our beaches and wetlands en route from their arctic breeding areas to Central and South America in the fall. They reverse direction for spring migration, many of them flying tens of thousands of miles per year.

Until recently, the only way we knew anything about the numbers of these migrants was to count them as they passed. Counting them in their arctic breeding habitats has always been hard, and their wintering spots in the southern hemisphere were hardly known or accessible either. In 1975, Brian Harrington at Manomet Bird Observatory in Massachusetts and R. I. G. Morrison of Canadian Wildlife Service initiated the International Shorebird Surveys (ISS) which aimed at collecting shorebird migration data from volunteers throughout the Americas. Their pioneering study began with a few sites but has for decades gathered shorebird counts from across North America and increasingly from Central

and South America as well. Early on, I began to submit shorebird counts from Belle Isle, Revere Beach, Rumney Marsh and Snake Island.

The ISS study, over its almost 35 years of existence, has shown us one general trend: Arctic nesting shorebirds populations are shrinking. Recently, that downward trend has been dramatic.

Take Sanderling (*Calidris alba*), little grey and white sandpipers which we see as they run along the tide line on beaches, picking invertebrates from the sand as the water retreats. These birds nest in the far arctic. The ones we see on our beaches in July and August are either non-breeders or adults back from the Canadian arctic, where they laid eggs and hatched young in June and are already on their southward migration. They spread out along the coasts and keep moving south, with many of them eventually reaching the western coast of South America, where they winter in large numbers from Peru to Chile. Not all go that far south; Sanderlings are (or were) a familiar part of the winter beach scenery in New England.

Although Sanderlings used to be a common sight along our beaches at just about any season, over the past decade I have seen fewer and fewer, and this spring I did not see a single Sanderling on local beaches, which include Nahant and Lynn Beach. ISS estimates for Sanderling migrants along the east coast

Continued next page



Shorebird is a term with a specific taxonomic meaning to American birders. Brits use a different term, *wader*, to refer to the same group of birds. The taxonomic order **Charadriiformes** is currently divided into the following main suborders:

- *Charadrii*, consisting of avocets, stilts, plovers.
- *Scolopaci*, consisting of woodcocks, snipes, sandpipers, phalaropes.
- *Lari*, consisting of gulls, terns, jaegers, skimmers, alcids.

When birders speak of shorebirds, they mean members of the first and second suborders (*charadrii* and *scolopaci*).

Shorebirds *(continued)*

confirm my suspicion—there has been a huge drop in their numbers over the past few decades.



The numbers of many of the other long-distance shorebird migrants have also been decimated. The reasons that ISS researchers propose for these population crashes vary. Some, such as Sanderling, Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) and Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), are presumed to be affected by the over-harvesting of Horseshoe Crabs (*Limulus polyphemus*) in Delaware Bay, NJ in May. During spring, Horseshoe Crab eggs are known to be major food resource for migrating shorebirds. Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*), Black-bellied Plover (*Squatarola squatarola*) and Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*) numbers are also down, but no one knows for sure whether to blame environmental problems (hormone disrupters in the water, tundra melt-down), migration stopover difficulties or wintering area disruption. Changes in the breeding habitats of these shorebirds, destruction of their winter habitats and other factors we do not yet recognize may be important factors, but for Sanderlings and many other species, disturbance while feeding and resting along the migration path is an area of known concern.

Disturbance by walkers, joggers, dogs, and even well meaning birders is one of the biggest problems for local breeders, but they do have the benefits of some fencing and the legal definition of harassment. Sanderlings and other long-distance migrants are not similarly protected from disturbance. Most people, as they watch the flocks wheeling and turning over the waves or dunes, don't realize the birds have far to go and they need every minute to feed and rest. When they fly to avoid a jogger, they are burning calories, not packing on fat. The journey from Massachusetts to South America is often



Photos by Susannah Corona

Which beach do we want? 1. Graded and raked, ready for beach-goers; 2. Seaweed and shorebirds; 3. Wrack, dried seaweed, food and hiding places for creatures.

flown straight over water for thousands of miles. When the flock leaves, they all go, whether they have gotten enough to eat or not. If disturbance has been too great during the refueling stop, migrating birds will literally fall out of the sky and die.

Besides high quality food, Sanderlings and others also need cover in which to roost. The wrackline along the beaches provides both. Removing the wrackline by beach raking accelerates erosion and removes food and cover for migrating shorebirds. Unfortunately in recent years beach raking has been all the rage up and down the Atlantic coast. The effect of this practice on shorebirds could prove to be disastrous.

We don't know all the reasons why Sanderling numbers have crashed, but we do know that as raking and disturbance increase on our local

beaches, completing migration safely becomes more difficult for these birds. Fencing, which limits raking and disturbance, did help local breeders. Leaving the fencing up a few more weeks for the migrants has been quite helpful on the sites that have tried this approach.

These are challenging times for shorebirds, who have staged transcontinental migrations for thousands of generations. The next time you see that Piping Plover chick on Winthrop beach in July, being guarded by its parent, look around for their long-distance cousin, the Sanderling, who arrived just the other day after laying eggs and hatching young 2000 miles north of here on the Canadian tundra, and is now looking for rest and food so it can be off on the next leg of its journey—perhaps to Chile.

Soheil Zende



Dark and Stormy Night

It was a dark and stormy night. I can hear the loud groans already but clichés usually contain a bit of truth. Say sunrise and the late sleepers groan loudly. Who needs to hear another piece about rosy-fingered dawn? All of which may be true but dawn is when you get to see sixty egrets chattering away in a cloud of white feathers at Belle Isle Marsh.

My morning starts with a short bike ride over to the Boardwalk. The sea breeze which in January can cut you with its sharp-bladed touch, is now a warm comfort. The city and the airport are just starting to wake up and the clouds are pink from the glare of lights, not the sun. A Great Blue Heron takes off, insulted by my intrusion, while a

few gulls float past doing whatever it is that gulls do. The false dawn has lit up the landscape and the morning haze is in tatters. It's 5:08 am.

I wish that I had a cup of coffee to savor while waiting for the egrets to arrive. It is peaceful for now. The first Great Egret cruises past and continues over to the Winthrop side of the inlet and then nothing. The starlings are starting to wake and flock together. I know by now that none of the herons or egrets will really show up for a while but I can't stand to miss the spectacle and am always too early. I start to feel like an adolescent afflicted with major boredom, and then another Great Egret plops into the pan by the Overlook. Oooh, oooh, oooh, and then nothing.

Still I can barely tolerate the counsel of my own experience. When are they going to get here? Maybe something happened? Maybe it'll be a bust year for the biggest, showiest birds of the marsh. Maybe I need to get a grip? So, on with the swivel neck and a quick pirouette. (I am no dancer but I do like pretending.) Nothing to see.

Of course it happens behind my back. Four Snowy Egrets and a Great

land in the Boardwalk pool. I turn and there they are. It is a rush to see such birds so close to home. My plans mean nothing to these birds and so what comes next happens further out. Clumps of four and five birds cruise down and land. More come in and then more still. Finally there are over fifty Egrets busily grooming themselves, hunting in the shallow water, and bickering with each other. They are further out and so it is harder to hear them. They are very social when in a crowd and make some noise. The planes drown them out momentarily but the birds squawk away even as the jets are only a few hundred feet away. It's like watching my granddaughter play. I can only smile with contentment and pleasure. There's no room for any other emotion. I watch and smile.

After a while, my stomach reminds me that it is six AM and that I need feeding. The sun has finally started to poke through the overcast and so I mount my trusty bicycle, and pedal off home. It's going to be a great day.

George Cumming

George Cumming's blog OrientSee is at www.georgemacumming.com/.



Friends of Belle Isle Marsh (FBIM) membership dues:

- Family \$15
- Individual \$10
- Seniors and Youth (under 16) \$5

FBIM is a registered nonprofit corporation; contributions are tax-deductible. Thank you for your continued support.

FBIM is a volunteer organization dedicated to the preservation of this marsh. We believe that protection ultimately depends on public awareness of the value and beauty of this natural resource. Our focus, therefore, is mainly educational.

For extra newsletters to share or leave on tables at your coffee shop, public library or boat club, etc., call 617-567-5072 or email:

friendsofbelleislemarsh@comcast.net

Our web address:

<http://www.friendsofbelleislemarsh.org>

This issue was produced by Soheil Zende with help from Barbara Bishop, Susannah Corona, Daniela Foley and Christine Zende.

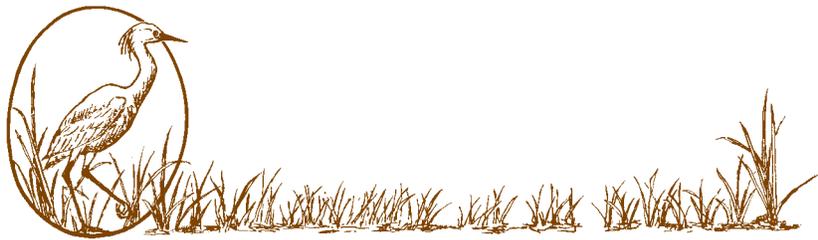
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Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Our Osprey family did not produce any chicks this year, but we hope they'll be back next year to find the new Osprey platform that was built just for them. Our September 21 forum leader, Heather Warchalowski, presents an account of other special birds nesting in our area, birds such as Piping Plover and Least Tern. See the Friend's web site for time and place: **www.friendsofbelleislemarsh.org**

One of the highlights of our annual **Harvest Festival** on Sunday, October 4th, is the live music of Supraphonic, featuring Dave Limina on the Hammond B3 organ. Dave teaches at Berklee College of Music and is the band director of the Winthrop Concert Band. Bring a chair or blanket, listen to this great blues band and enjoy the afternoon's events. Bring the family.

Barbara Bishop
President, Friend of Belle Isle Marsh

Events (continued)



Canoe Constitution Beach: Sunday,

September 20, 1 - 2:30 PM. Pre-registration required. Call Ranger Justin Dawkins at 781-286-2439.



Canoe Rumney Marsh: Wednesday, September

23, 3 - 5 PM. Pre-registration required: Call Ranger Justin Dawkins at 781-286-2439.



Fly a Kite at Nahant Beach: Sunday, September 27, 3 - 6 PM.

Catch a breeze and let out the line as your kite joins a kite gathering in the sky above Nahant Beach. *Be sure to bring your camera! Meet at Nahant Beach half-way bathhouse, Nahant.*

Healthy heart walk at Belle Isle Marsh:

Monday, October 14, 2 - 3 PM. Meet at Belle Isle Marsh Reservation parking lot off Bennington St, East Boston.



Fly a Kite at Nahant Beach: Sunday, October 14, 2 - 5 PM.

Catch a breeze and let out the line as your kite joins a kite gathering in the sky above Nahant Beach. *Be sure to bring your camera! Meet at Nahant Beach half-way bathhouse, Nahant.*

Arts and crafts on Revere Beach:

Sunday, October 18, 2 - 3 PM. Meet at Shirley Ave bathhouse, Revere Beach Blvd, Revere.

Basic outdoor skills series at Belle Isle:

Sundays, November 1, 8, 15, and 22, 3 - 4 PM. For more information, contact Ranger Justin Dawkins at 781-286-2439. Meet at Belle Isle Park main parking lot off Bennington St, East Boston.



Boston Harbor TASL census (water bird count): Sunday November 15, 8 AM. Call leader for details: 781-863-2392.

