

SPECIAL ISSUE—CELEBRATE TREES!



Friends of Little Hunting Creek

October Newsletter

What is stressing them? How can we help? Tree huggers, unite!



Champion Swamp Chestnut Oak, Huntley Meadows Park (headwaters of Little Hunting Creek)

Oak Mortality

by Jim McGlone, PhD (Urban Forest Conservationist, Virginia Department of Forestry)

Recently, there has been much concern about oak mortality in Fairfax County. Let me start by saying there is no specific pest or pathogen that is attacking and killing healthy oaks in Virginia. Instead it is a combination of environmental and biological factors that weaken oaks and eventually make them susceptible to native pests and pathogens. The US Forest Service noticed unexplained oak deaths starting in the 1940s and began investigating the causes. After decades

of research, they settled on the cause of death as Oak Decline Syndrome. Although it is called Oak Decline Syndrome, this process can affect any tree species.

Oak Decline Syndrome is a process that begins with an initiating stressor - defoliation, drought, flooding, sudden and large temperature changes, excessive heat, construction etc. Before the tree recovers from this stressor it gets hit with another and another. Eventually the tree is too weak to fend off native endemic secondary pests and pathogens or to survive a large stress and dies. The late summer of 2019 saw a lot of oak death throughout Virginia. Locally, it was particularly noticed in the south part of the county. In 2018 and first half of 2019 we had 150% of normal rainfall culminating with a 10,000 year storm on July 8, 2019; then it stopped raining and we started having heat with repeated stretches of 3 or more days of higher than 95 degrees. In mid-August healthy looking trees, primarily chestnut and white oaks, started dying. Researchers at the Smithsonian Research Station in Front Royal examined some oaks that died in 2019 and found they had effectively been dying for a decade or more.

Given oaks' reproductive strategy of filling forest gaps, this decline and death is probably part of the population dynamics of oaks. This type of decline and death cannot be blamed entirely on climate change, though the environmental stressors that can drive the process have been getting worse and more frequent as a result of climate change. Another part of this issue in Fairfax County is the history of development. Just like people as trees get older they are less resilient and are more affected by stress, so older areas of development with older trees will be more likely to see tree death.

Of course, that this is all part of the natural history of oaks is little solace to a homeowner faced with the cost of removing a large dead oak.

Fortunately, there is one thing that a homeowner can do to help their trees that also addresses the three greatest environmental issue we currently face: climate change, the insect apocalypse, and declining bird populations. Turf grass is a stressor of suburban trees that homeowners can control. Trees produce 5 times more root mass under mulch than under turf. By replacing turf with native flowers and shrubs, and mulching with whole leaves and wood chips, homeowners can provide food and habitat for birds, pollinators, and beneficial insects. And sequester more carbon than turf grass does while reducing the carbon footprint of their yards. The leaves and wood chips will also feed the soil fungi that help support our oaks. Replacing turf with living or green mulch, native shrubs and wildflowers, or brown mulch, leaves and wood chips, may not prevent tree mortality, but it is a winning strategy that homeowners can implement. In fact it is a win-win-win-win-win-win strategy – less stress for trees; more carbon sequestration; more habitat for birds, butterflies and bees; and more time for you to enjoy them.

Plant Trees in Your Neighborhood! Update on the Wessynton Tree Project

by Denise Freeland, Robin Herron, and members of The Tree Team (Wessynton)

[Plant NOVA Natives](#) recently launched a five-year campaign to reverse the unprecedented decline of trees in our region due to disease, land development, and storm damage. The goal, suggested by the Department of Environmental Quality, is to plant 600,000 trees by 2025. Since most available land in our region is private property, the tree goal is impossible without planting thousands of new trees in our neighborhoods and on our own private properties.



Trees sequester carbon, making them crucial partners in reducing greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. Trees absorb solar radiation and put it to work thru photosynthesis, converting carbon dioxide to cellulose and other organic compounds, and releasing oxygen. In contrast, concrete, steel and other building materials absorb the light, store the energy as heat, and re-radiate it. The cooling effect of trees will become even more important with warming climate. And the tree canopy provides habitat for wildlife, like the owl at left.

Because they know the value of large mature trees, Wessynton residents have embarked on the Wessynton Tree Project to be responsible stewards of Wessynton's trees, not just in the common areas but also on private property, and to keep Wessynton "green and livable" for those who come after us.

Wessynton's Tree Project builds on earlier efforts of a resident who for several years worked to maintain the community's tree canopy in common areas by replacing dead and dying trees with beneficial native trees and shrubs. Since adopting the Wessynton Forest in 2019, Mark Moran has planted more than 100 native trees and shrubs. He did extensive research on the flora native to the Mount Vernon area to ensure the plantings would be suitable for the climate and soil of the forest. That ensures a better survival rate for the plants, and better supports local wildlife, the ultimate goal. To help seedlings along, he encircles them with a wire cage to prevent animal browsing until the plants are big enough to survive an occasional nibble. He also removed invasive, non-native plants and replaced them with natives. Annual inventories show that over three years, less than a handful of his plantings failed to survive.

The new Tree Project is supported by the Wessynton Homes Association Board of Directors. Participation is voluntary. The goal is to serve as a resource to Wessynton homeowners by providing advice on where and how to plant trees, suggested tree species, and where to purchase them. Homeowners who must take down a tree are encouraged to replace it by planting at least two new ones.



*Never too young to start planting trees...
(Photo: Betsy Martin)*

Tree information, such as the Plant NOVA Trees [native tree species list](#), will be provided in the neighborhood newsletter. We are considering a guest speaker from Audubon, a tree identification walk in the Wessynton Forest, a workshop on becoming a tree rescuer, and sharing stories about remarkable trees living in Wessynton's private and common areas.

We hope to get all Wessyntonians excited about replanting or replacing trees in their own yards and contributing not only to restoration of Wessynton's tree canopy but also to the Northern Virginia tree canopy goal. We know we will most likely not be alive when the trees planted here today grow up. But knowing we contributed to the long-term tree goal is the enduring legacy we leave to our community.

The Friends Install Wood Duck Nesting Boxes in Little Hunting Creek Preserve

by Randy Myers and Paul Siegel (Friends of Little Hunting Creek)



Paul Siegel, Alyssa Hemler, and Randy Myers. Photo: TJ Myers.

Randy Myers and Paul Siegel, with the help of Alyssa Hemler (NVCT), installed three Wood Duck nesting boxes in the two-acre Little Hunting Creek Preserve (at 8610 Stockton Parkway), owned by the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust. The Trust paid for the nesting boxes, mounting poles and predator guards. We greatly appreciate the support of the Trust and of the Trust's Alyssa Hemler. Our Wood Duck nesting boxes are partially hidden among the foliage but you may be able to view them from the preserve's pathways. Please do not disturb or open the nesting box. To prevent occupation by non-native species, two of our nesting boxes' openings have been sealed until the beginning of the Wood Duck nesting season. At that time, we will open and then periodically monitor the boxes, and people are welcome to join us to observe (email Randy Myers at randolphjmyers@gmail.com).

Wood Ducks are among the most beautiful of waterfowl. Males are iridescent chestnut and green, with ornate patterns on nearly every feather, while females have a distinctive profile and delicate white pattern around the eye. These birds live in wooded wetlands, where they nest in holes in trees or in man-made nesting boxes placed near water. They usually nest beginning in March through May. The hen

lays an egg a day up to 16 eggs, spending little time in the nest in any given day. After the clutch is complete, the hen lines the nest with her down feathers and turns to full-time incubation, while the drake disappears into the wetland for his annual molt. After about a month of incubation, the entire clutch hatches in about 24 hours. A day or so later the hen initiates “jump day”: on her signal, all the chicks jump, one-by-one, out of the nesting box to join her on the ground.

Little Hunting Creek offers a rich habitat for a wide variety of birds. A printable list of the 137 bird species observed by our neighbors along Stockton Parkway can be found [here](#). For those new to birding, the Audubon Society offers a useful [guide](#). More information about Wood Ducks may be found [here](#), while Cornell Lab Nest Watch offers a “[Nest Monitoring Manual](#)” .



Photo: Jeff at JSJ Photography

Join the Friends at the grand opening of NVCT's Little Hunting Creek Preserve! (8610 Stockton Parkway) at 3:30 pm on Saturday, November 5.

By then the new signage should be installed. Two benches and three wood duck boxes are already installed. For years, volunteers have worked hard, removing trash and invasives, creating and maintaining a mulch trail, and planting native trees. We'll be serving something cold and bubbly (champagne or fizzy apple cider) or (if the weather warrants) something hot, to toast the volunteers' work and celebrate improved access to this lovely wetland spot in the Stratford Landing neighborhood. If you are one of the volunteers, come take a bow and see the fruits of your labors.

Bring kids, and wear long pants. The preserve does contain poison ivy if you wander off the trail.

The work and amenities have been a joint project of the Friends of Little Hunting Creek, Stratford Landing Citizens' Association, and Northern Virginia Conservation Trust.

Do you have an idea for a newsletter article or topic, or a photo you'd like to share? Contact the Editor at info@folhc.org.

Friends of Little Hunting Creek, a 501(c)(3) organization
2023 APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

The Friends of Little Hunting Creek is formed exclusively for charitable, scientific and educational purposes. “More specifically, the purpose...is to encourage the preservation of open space, restoration of riparian habitat, improvement in water quality in the Little Hunting Creek watershed, and to promote stewardship and opportunities for recreational enjoyment of Little Hunting Creek by nearby neighbors and the public. The Friends of Little Hunting Creek seeks to improve nearby neighborhoods by organizing and conducting community cleanups of trash and litter on the creek, by educating citizens about stewardship and litter prevention, and by promoting community access to the creek for recreation and respite.”—*Articles of Incorporation.*

Name: _____

Class of membership:

Junior (age between 12 and 18) ____ -- non-voting member, annual dues \$1.00

Class I (age 18 or over) ____ -- voting member, annual dues \$5.00

Address: _____

Occupation: _____

Phone number: _____

Send email to: _____

Are you are interested in volunteering for any of the following activities? Please check if “yes”:

____ Helping out with FOLHC website updates (www.folhc.org)

____ Organizing annual cleanups in my neighborhood

____ Participating in annual cleanups in my neighborhood

____ Removing invasive plants in natural areas

____ Planting native trees and shrubs

____ Other—Please describe: _____

What neighborhood do you live in? _____

“I agree to abide by the By-Laws of the Friends of Little Hunting Creek, Inc.”

(Bylaws are found at <http://www.friendsoflittlehuntingcreek.org/images2022/bylaws-rev2022.pdf>)

(Signed) _____

Date: _____

Mail with your check to: Treasurer, Friends of Little Hunting Creek, 8707 Stockton Pkwy, Alexandria, 22308.