

SPRING  
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# FRIENDS OF ROYAL LAKE

Newsletter



Twenty turtles and ONE is social distancing

## PANDEMIC IMPACTS FAIRFAX COUNTY PARKS

We are living in unusual and uncertain times during this unprecedented pandemic threat. Schools are closed; public events canceled; many businesses are closed. Folks are observing the best they can the unfamiliar behavior of social distancing. As of this writing, and until further notice, Fairfax County Park closures include parking lots, athletic fields, sport courts, restrooms, picnic areas and outdoor fitness equipment. Please check with the Fairfax County web-site

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/covid19> for details.

Park trails, including the Royal Lake Parks' trails, are currently open for walkers. We are fortunate to have this outdoor space for exercise. We depend on walkers and joggers to observe an etiquette not demanded in ordinary times. Please stay aware of others on the trails: **maintain appropriate distance, walk single file if more than one; give way to the other if at a narrow pass on the trail; avoid blocking the trail with dogs, strollers, bikes.** Let us all stay well together.

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# UPDATE TO ROYAL LAKE PARKS' PROJECTS

By Paul Gross

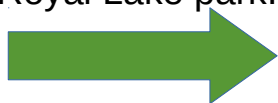
The good news during our current pandemic crisis is that the Royal Lake trails are open to the public and are being extensively used. Unfortunately, during this period of massive shutdowns, a Friends of Royal Lake (FORL) trail maintenance work day, several invasive species work days, and a community meeting have been canceled. We will reschedule when appropriate.

My initial intent in preparing this article was to highlight the future parks improvements that will take place during this year. This information is based upon a meeting FORL leadership had in February with Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) Area 4 maintenance officials. Due to COVID-19 impact, however, the current situation is very fluid. Several projects highlighted below may be delayed by the Coronavirus situation.

★ As most of you are aware FCPA removed the overgrown junipers between the Lakeside Park soccer fields and the trail. The effort is almost complete. The next steps are the removal of the remaining roots, smoothing the ground and planting of grass. Under consideration is the installation of a concrete pad and bleachers or benches near the removed juniper site

★ The trail along the soccer fields will be upgraded with additional gravel from the Lakeside parking lot to the end of the soccer field. This is the most heavily used part of the trail with numerous standing wet spots after a rain and is in need of upgrade, in particular near the playground and ball field.

★ A FORL and Kings Park West Civic Association (KPWCA) project with support of FCPA will be to install several dog waste stations. KPWCA has purchased the waste stations, and FCPA installation is coming soon. Also, KPWCA leased a Porta-John unit for Royal Lake park.



**Thank you** to the Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) for completing a major drainage project between the Lakeside parking lot and Rabbit Branch bridge. This is a huge improvement to an area that remained wet for days after a rain.



# Royal Lake Watershed the Prime Focus of Student Environmentalists

By Tyler Lennon and Bradley Webster

One of the most prominent concerns to young people of this generation is the looming climate crisis, which has experienced a corresponding emergence into the political landscape. While we as a generation still lack the power and solutions to fix the crisis, what is within our power is raising awareness to those with influence to compel them to take action on these existential threats we face.

The message Robinson Secondary School excels at sending is that no matter how you choose to engage with efforts to safeguard the environment, any effort is better than none. This is exemplified by the variety of official programs organized through the school. In addition, cooperation between Kings Park West Community Association (KPWCA) and the college and career center specialist, Eileen Doyle, opens opportunities for students to take part in unofficial efforts through the community at large.

The most important lesson for students to learn at this time is the importance of engagement, and Robinson and its feeder schools do an outstanding job of communicating and facilitating involvement and interest within their student populations. Around the Kings Park West community and Royal Lake, there are a variety of ways to become environmentally engaged with the community. A few of the most popular ones are closely linked with public schools within the Robinson feeder pyramid and focus on watershed education.

Road Raiders meets once a month and consistently produces a strong turnout. Road Raiders ([KPWRoadraiders@gmail.com](mailto:KPWRoadraiders@gmail.com)) is an extension of the KPW Civic Association that holds cleanups for half an hour each month, focusing on a specific section of the community that needs attention. Friends of Royal Lake also sponsors community clean-up activities twice a year at Royal Lake and its associated parks. These cleanups are frequented by elementary, middle, and high school students working alongside adult members of the community. This crossover of young and old helps build a good sense of community, while also making measurable improvements to the health of the local environment.

In addition to these community efforts, Robinson Secondary School also has organized efforts that facilitate student engagement, most of which are run through Mr. Webster's Environmental Sciences program. As a part of their coursework, junior and senior students in IB Environmental Systems go to a local stream to learn how to monitor stream health and the health of the surrounding area, investigating both living and nonliving components of the ecosystem.

## WATERSHED, Cont'd

Led by guest experts from the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District, Fairfax County Stormwater Division, and Fairfax County Wastewater Management, the students learn methods of identifying and qualifying indicators of the health of the local ecosystem which they use in lab work throughout the year.

Another way students at Robinson are engaged is through citizen science opportunities. Two of the bigger opportunities are Grasses for the Masses and native plant seed starting. Grasses for the Masses is a citizen science program of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation in which students build and maintain aquatic habitats.

Students raise celery grass from seeds, take care of the plants for 3 months, and then get to plant their seedlings in the Potomac River. This program allows students to broaden their understanding of the watershed structure, helping them create awareness of the larger Chesapeake watershed and the effects of local actions on greater natural habitats. The native seed starting project is in partnership with Earth Sangha, a local, non-Profit native seedling nursery.



Students sow several varieties of Fairfax County native species seed and maintain them in the classroom until they are ready to be planted. The plants are used to develop and enhance native gardens on the Robinson campus and in the learning



gardens at Laurel Ridge ES. This program engages high school students in the process of growing plants and learning how native plants benefit their environment. The program is also a bridge between high school students and younger students to involve them in watershed activities.

At the middle school level, 7<sup>th</sup> grade students participate in a Meaningful Watershed Experience field trip as part of their curriculum. In addition, the after school Environment Club involves the greater school community in several projects. The largest project is collecting, weighing, and auditing film

plastic for a recycling challenge made by TREX, a commercial materials manufacturer. The Club also collects used markers and sends them to the Crayola company for recycling. These projects give the students a guided voice in making small, yet positive contributions to the environment.

# From a Photographer's Point of View: Three thousand ninety four photographs

By John Gratz



Up on the dam you can see the shape of Royal Lake. Take a minute with your camera. Orient your compass. You can survey everything from up here. Feel the wind. Today, I'm headed counter-clockwise.

**NOVEMBER 1, 2018:** The first photo. 11:13 a.m. Thursday. I've walked around this lake with a camera more than 136 times since.

**DROP DOWN:** A big magnolia. Downhill to the left. Around the railing where the creek crosses under the road. Thirty feet of rocky dirt slope to the narrow path. Drop down to the creek. Another world now. When the water is deeper, fishes come and go. Re-tracing the late days of September; it's dryer than fishbones. Even poison ivy is sunburnt dry.

**THE ROCK:** For a year now I have followed the plight of a medium-sized quartz rock. Pulled down into the hard ground by a mesh of tough tree roots like a fish in a net. I check with my boot. Someday that rock will be free.

**SAFARIS:** In search of bright green moss and grey-green lichen. Yesterday was about yellow. Forsythia. A yellow feather. Yellow trail markers. Invasive Lesser Celandine and the yellow flier on a bulletin board.

**THE CONFOUNDED BRIDGE:** An extra-terrestrial teleport disguised as a meadow. The decrepit yet noble carcass of a Virginia Sasquatch. Now a jumbled mess of heavy bones, leaves,

Cont'd

half-submerged in the creek. It's an indignity when pieces of plastic get caught up in that. Have you seen my photos of the Ichthyosaurus skull I found in the woods back there? I am keeping that location a secret for now. Further on, there's a sign, "In honor of...selfless devotion...community...environment." A shovel. A wheelbarrow that has been patched up more than a few times. The ghost of a pile of gravel. And then the bridge. The confounded bridge. The stream passing under tells stories about the Cooper's Hawk that listens from this railing. Upstream, there's a stump covered in bright moss. Picture. Downstream, a tree has fallen across the creek. A toppled Greek column. A heron fishes like a ballerina in the shallows of the far bank. A slow turtle turns in deepening waters. Step off the bridge. Passing by the massive Ent trust-falling into the limbs of another. The upturned roots form a saucer seven feet tall. Picture.

**MY ADVICE:** It can be muddy near the water. Wear waterproof hiking boots. Parts of the trails are curbed with square timbers. Balance practice for acrobats. Backyard fences. A trampoline. Stacked kayaks. Darting cardinals. Fearless chipmunks. Squirrels. Towering trees. Sunlight splattering everywhere. Watch your feet but keep looking up. Eagles. You have to be ready.

**UP:** The highest stretch of trail. Closest to the center of our solar system. Put your hands on the trees. Feel their life force. At the turn, a nice bench off to one side. But the view of the dam across the lake, obstructed.



**LAKESIDE:** Who doesn't love a lakeside with picnic tables, grills, and a boat launch? Music on the bandstand Friday nights in the summer. Moms and daughters fishing. Many paths lead here--now passing another nice bench--most times occupied, and pieces of exercise equipment that look like torture racks. Two small bridges. Beautiful reflective vistas across the lake. This calm spot mirrors the clouds in (picture) perfect stillness. There's a beaver lodge. You may have noticed along the way that beavers are quite capable loggers.

If you're looking for ducks or turtles in the lake, or eagles above, always be looking well ahead. Like hundreds of feet ahead. Spot them before they spot you. The Green Herons are so shy and skittish. The geese are unfazed by the paparazzi.

## PHOTOS, Cont'd



**TURTLES:** Just three encounters in a year with beloved box turtles. Probably my favorite creature. Fierce yellow-orange eyes. Picture. *Portrait.* Turtle time passes the way tree trunks form rings. Slowly but very surely. If the day is warm enough, they climb onto a log in the lake; sunning single-file until plop and they're gone under the ripples.

**TOAD ORGY:** All around the shoreline, there are places where people find places to stand and gaze. One April afternoon, across the way, a small group of folks gathered at the edge of the shallows. They were so whispering quiet. Humbled and hushed by a miracle of Nature. What was it that held their rapture? Toad orgy. Pictures. Maybe some video. More people stop to watch. The poor lady toads are overwhelmed, clearly exasperated, wanting desperately to be elsewhere. No doubt, the splishy-splashy lust-crazed beach party continued well after I tore myself away. The next day, not a toad in sight. But, in two weeks, in the same corner of the lake, wiggly tadpoles squirming like an animated design. Bodies the size of a pea and a long paddle tails. A couple thousand of them at least.

**CROWS:** A shout out to the crows!

**John Gratz took 3094 photos around the lake in a year. He is an artist and musician who grew up in Fairfax County and lives near Kings Park West.**

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## WATERSHED, Cont'd

Students at Laurel Ridge Elementary School are finding opportunities to explore and understand the Royal Lake watershed in a variety of ways including grade-level curriculum objectives, engagement during STEAM class, partnerships with Girl Scout Troops, and community clean-up events. The PTA Garden committee has worked with the school to develop an educational garden space to support and expand watershed and habitat education. The first stage of this plan was a rain garden installed by 5th grade students in partnership with Fairfax County Stormwater Planning Division. The rain garden provides storm water controls and, with its native plants, attracts pollinators. Located at the headwaters of a tributary that leads to Lake Royal, the rain garden thus has a direct impact on the watershed, a contribution that students can be proud to have participated in.

Homeowners can improve the watershed by not putting anything down storm drains, reduce littering, convert any area of lawn into a garden, plant Virginia native plants, properly dispose of pet waste, reduce usage of lawn care chemicals, and engage in one of the various civic associations. Join the students to make Lake Royal Parks and the surrounding watershed as wonderful as can be!

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Photo by John Gratz...on a "yellow day"

Editor: Suzanne Doherty

Comments? Suggestions? Ideas?

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