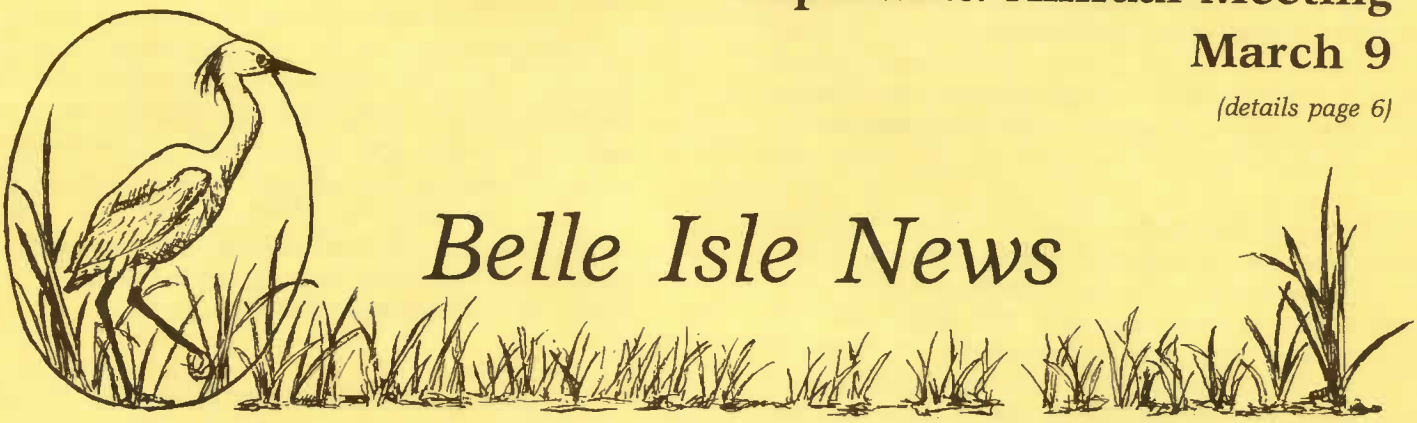
**Important: Annual Meeting March 9**

*(details page 6)*



# *Belle Isle News*

*Newsletter of the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh No. 11* *MARCH 1986*

**ROUND ROBIN**

**Round One**

Anticipating spring after March 21, with the dawn coming before they awake, with the sun rising higher, with the earth becoming warmer and the winds friendlier, people open windows and go out for walks, many looking at life around them for the first time since Indian Summer. Seeing an American Robin and hearing him sing, they make him a sure sign of coming fair weather and renewal of life. He appears with sprays of apple blossoms on their birth announcements, birthday cards, and Easter cards.

My father says, "Phooey: People who think fair weather comes with robins are sentimental and ignorant about nature. They should hear the words of the poet, how he said:

*"Spring has come to Boston,*
*Let us gladly ring the bell.*
*Said the ice-encrusted Robin,*
*As he sadly sodden fell,*
*Like hell, like hell, like hell."*

My birthday comes with the robins early in April. But my father never sent me a card with a robin on it.

**Round Two**

Go to a marsh late in February. The day may be dark, the sun may be low, the ground may be frozen and the winds hostile. But there you may see and hear the true herald of the beginning of our new year: The Red-winged Blackbird, the first of our migrants to return from the south.

Every year, I go looking for Redwings as early as I can. This year, I wrote my friend Nancy in New Orleans saying how much I enjoy first hearing their song. I also said her people could translate it much more prettily into French than I could into English:

*AU jour D'HUI, AU jour D'HUI.*

She wrote back, saying:

"Very pretty, but we treat blackbirds as depredators. We keep open season on them. They're a major agricultural pest. When

they go north to breed they feed on insects. But when they come back south for the winter they eat grain."

She explained what a depredator is: That's some one who lays waste. As in depredation, not predation.

I thought I'd better learn more about Redwings, so I bought a book that said they're probably the commonest of our landbirds, numbering over 200 million; that they often roost in flocks of 1 to 2 million in winter; that a single flock had once been estimated to include 15 million birds.

My book estimated Redwing crop damage at $50 million per year. A single farmer once lost $10,000.

My book said better than gassing, strafing and bombing the birds you should soak them from the air with a liquid detergent that removes the protective oil from their feathers, then soak them again with cold water. They die of hypothermia, up to 4 million at a time.

**Round Three**

I wrote my friend Paul in San Francisco about Redwings. He said Nancy was wrong and so was my book: The problem isn't the birds, said he, it's the farmers. They're irrational. With surpluses rising and prices falling, they grow more grain.

Paul said we should hire people who belong in prison, give them proper training and equipment, call them freedom fighters, and send them out to liberate the land from the farmers and the market from price supports. He said he doubted we'd have the courage to do it.

**Round Four**

After getting Paul's letter I went looking for Redwings much earlier than I usually do. I found more than 30, mostly adult males with red epaulets and immature males with yellow epaulets. They were wintering successfully in a marsh, partly by visiting feeders nearby and partly by extracting seeds from the heads of bullrushes.

A Cooper's Hawk flew strongly by, rising slowly from eye level, then landing briefly, high in a bare deciduous tree. You don't usually see her very early in winter before any migrants have returned.

I'm thinking of writing to Paul saying we ought to let Redwings be Redwings: They'll eat up the surplus grain.

Jim Barton

**THE WINNERS**

We thank all of you who entered our Photo Competition. The winners have been picked as follows:

GRAND PRIZE -- $15 Gift Certificate:
Deborah Thorenson and James Bell, Winthrop.

WINNERS -- $10 Gift Certificates:
Deborah Frizzi, East Boston;
J. Marino, Revere;
Arthur Siravo, East Boston.

Photos will be on display at our Annual Meeting on March 9.

Gift Certificates were provided by Hunt Drug Company, 500 Main Street, Malden, "New England's most unusual camera store."

**********

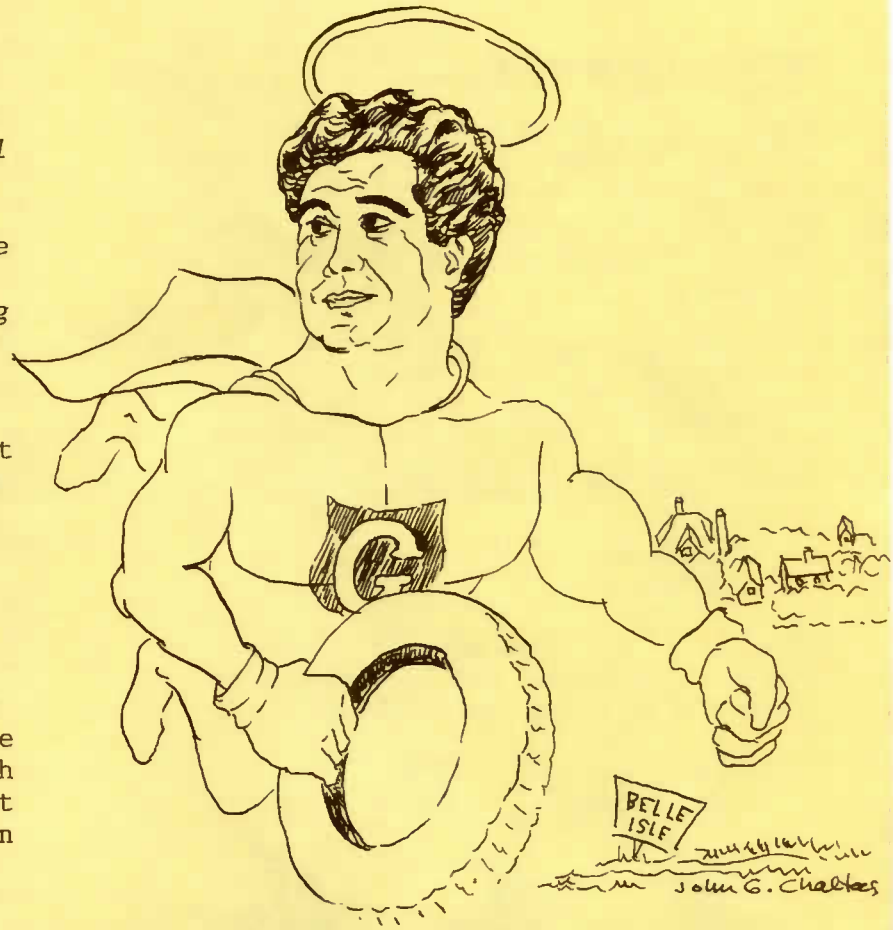
*Friends of Belle Isle Marsh is managed and staffed entirely by volunteers. And we're always short-handed! If you have skills in communications and public relations, writing or graphics, fund-raising, or if you simply want to help out, please call Gail Miller at 567-5072.*

## GUS SERRA: Belle Isle's State House Connection

*[East Boston Representative Gus Serra has played an integral role in state and local battles to preserve Belle Isle Marsh. These battles have left many smaller victories in their wake, making Belle Isle Marsh an unusual place in an urban setting: a protected reservation bordering a horse-track, a subway yard, and a major international airport. --Editor]*

Gus Serra still smiles when he drives past Belle Isle Marsh. In the early 1970's he had only begun to perceive what he calls the "rape of East Boston." Lying on the outskirts of the rapidly expanding city, many parts of East Boston had been and still were abused to benefit the rest of Boston. Serra gives Edith DeAngelis, a long-time community activist, much of the credit for opening his eyes to alternative possibilities for East Boston. Along with other activists, DeAngelis emphasized that an urban community must fight for its open spaces.

When Serra was in college he remembers waking one morning to find the trees of Wood Island Park lying in the midst of bull-dozer tracks. This was the first step in Massport's runway expansion at Logan Airport. That memory has not faded for him as his political career has developed. Serra has long desired the construction of a protected park on the marsh to take the place of Wood Island Park. Serra's fight for Belle Isle Park is but one example of a greater desire of his -- the need to preserve natural areas among the commercial interests of the city -- that has influenced his politics on Beacon Hill. He wants to "let the pendulum swing back and address the natural issues, for the future. The alternative is a concrete society."




**Gus Serra watches over Belle Isle**

### Legislative Fights

Ed King, Executive Director of Massport during the late 1960's, had a master plan for Logan Airport expansion and other industrial activities which would have flattened roughly two-thirds of East Boston. Part of this plan was to build an oil refinery in Belle Isle Marsh. Early in his legislative career, Gus Serra avenged the destruction of Wood Island Park by introducing and passing a bill in the legislature which stopped Ed King from dredging the entire marsh for the purpose of the refinery.

In 1974, Mike Dukakis became governor, setting the wheels in motion to remove King from Massport. David Davis replaced King, introducing a friendly neighbor policy to East Boston. With the aid of Dukakis staffers such as Ann Hirschberg and Fred Salvucci, Serra moved to deed the entire Belle Isle Marsh property to MDC for redevelopment as a natural preserve. During the first Dukakis years (1974-78) Serra's longest legislative fight culminated with the appropriation of monies for park development at the marsh. Unfortunately, before the monies could be spent, in 1978 Dukakis lost the State House to none other than Ed King.

State funds are appropriated by the legislature but are spent by the governor.

Governor King did not include the already legislated Belle Isle Park funds in his budget. Serra's fight for a natural urban area in East Boston began again at the bottom of the hill in 1978; he spent the next four years fighting for the construction of Belle Isle Park.

King was defeated in his reelection bid, and the new Dukakis administration included the Belle Isle funds in a new budget. King had effectively delayed construction of the park for six years. Now, thirteen years after the original legislation, Belle Isle Park is nearly a reality. Serra's dream of a green space within and for the East Boston community has been fulfilled.

The Future

For Gus Serra the battle is far from complete. He says the fight for maintenance of this natural treasure is still and will always be a challenge. As long as the marsh exists, it will be threatened by urban, political, and industrial interests.

Belle Isle Park remains a child to Serra, who, like a father, watches out for the park as he would his teen-aged children. During these, the formative years of the park, Serra is watching to shape that growth for the benefit of the community.

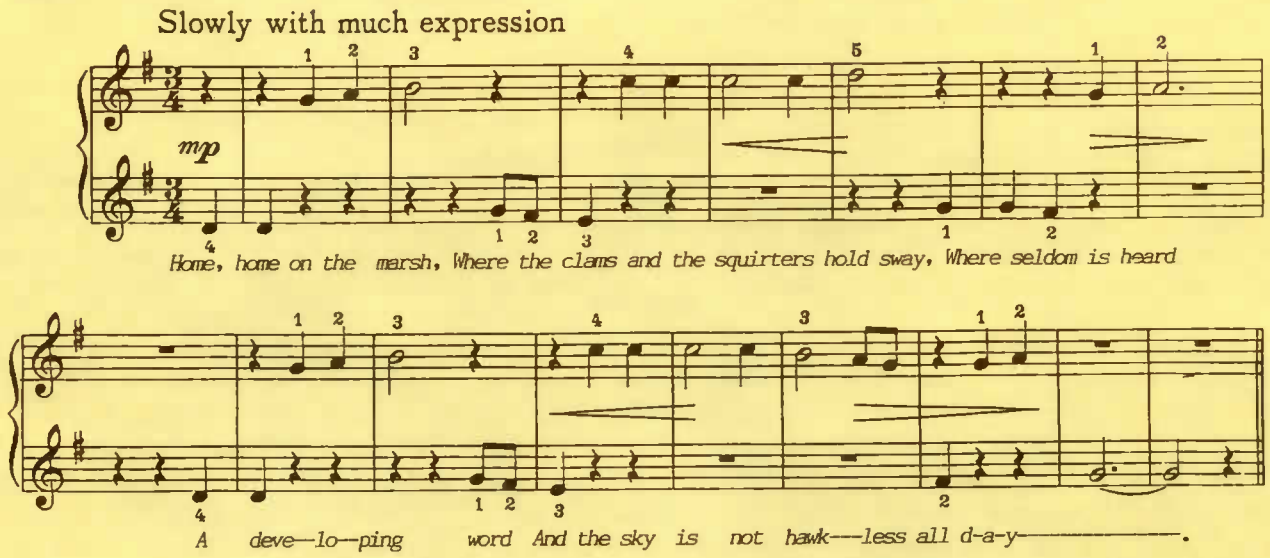
Community participation and education, strongly advocated by Friends of Belle Isle Marsh, has been a leading factor in the rebirth of the marsh, and Serra stresses that such participation will be necessary for the future of the marsh. "If Friends of Belle Isle disappears, the trash will reappear." Serra feels that the general public should be kept aware of all the direct and indirect threats to the marsh. He says the future will bring either growth or waste: the outcome will depend on whether activists and environmentalists effectively expose the community to the treasure that is Belle Isle Marsh.

Tim Driscoll

**WINTHROP'S OPEN SPACES**

Many people who are interested in the preservation of open spaces in Winthrop have noticed tremendous activity at Mr. Bonacorso's Belle Isle parcel at Morton Street. We urge neighbors to call the Attorney General's office to inquire just what the large truckloads of material and rocks are for.

**DAVID'S BALLAD**




*lyrics by Dave Desmond*

*WINDHOVER*

*A hawk is seen above the marsh*
*in soaring flight on wings widespread*
*when suddenly it slows midair*
*in braking swerve, then bends its head*
*and stops to scan the grass below*
*while motionless against the sky --*
*and time itself seems held at bay*
*until again it turns to fly.*

*Esther Fich*

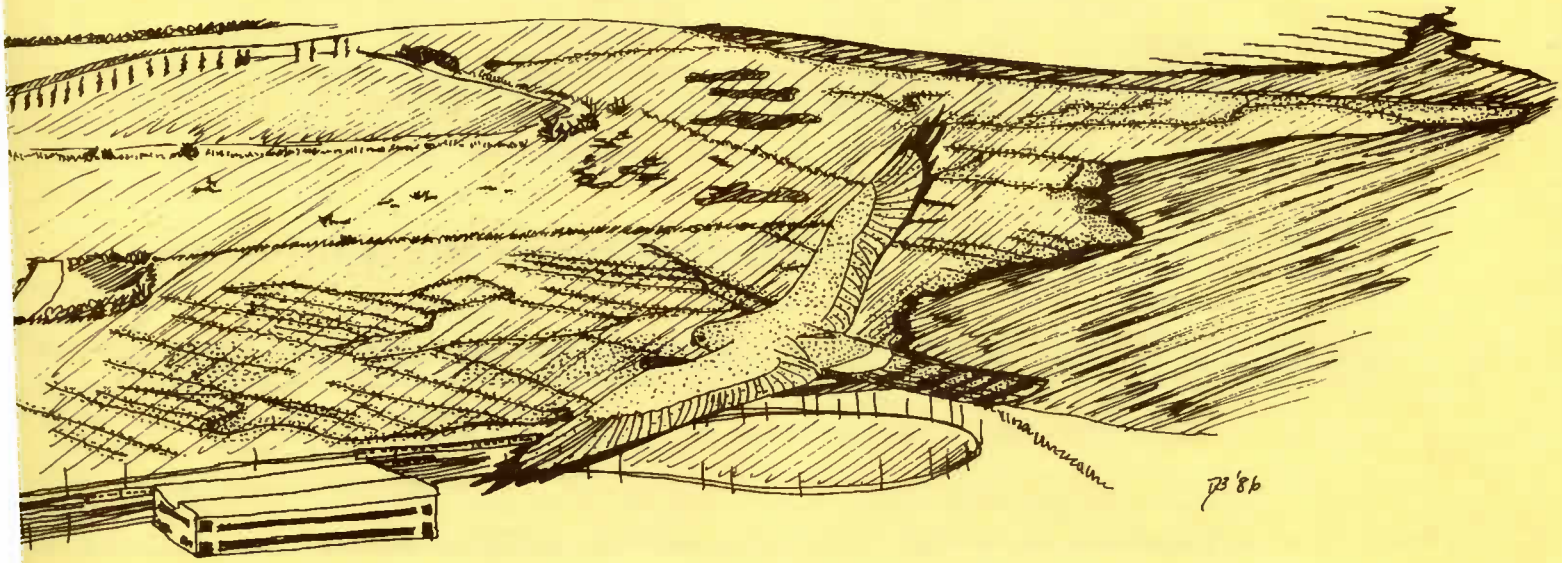
**SPRING HAWK FLIGHTS AT BELLE ISLE**

The full flowering of bird migration doesn't appear until the hawks begin flying over -- then the change of season is really upon us. Who can resist the excitement of seeing the first Osprey of April appear in the blue distance? It could be just a gull, right? No-no! It's an Osprey. Or that fluttery little bird up there: not a jay, nor a robin, it's a Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Those are the bread-and-butter hawks for Belle Isle hawk watchers. Kestrels and Marsh Hawks, of course; occasionally a Cooper's Hawk, a Merlin, or even a Peregrine. But above all the passing of the Sharpie and the Osprey mark the seasons.

Don't come here looking for a balmy afternoon in spring. The morning may be warm, but by 11 o'clock the breeze off the ocean plunges temperatures into the fifties. It is right at that wind-shift that I have observed my best hawk flights here. The first time, about four years ago, with a south wind blowing over, I saw three Sharpies soar directly over-head at the park and disappear to the north. I lay down on the south-facing hill to watch the sky. In a half hour 20 more hawks flew by. Starting with the fourth one, they were flying from east to west and low. When I got up at the end of the half-hour, I realized the wind had shifted to the east in the interval, and it had gotten much colder; the birds were getting away from the coast as fast as they could. Last year I had a similar experience, except that the concentrated flight lasted almost an hour and a half and, in addition to Sharp-shinned Hawks, included some Ospreys, a Merlin and a Marsh Hawk.

If this kind of talk whets your appetite, come join us for spring hawk watching. Bring warm clothes and a lawn-chair and meet us on the hill in the middle of Belle Isle Park. The coordinated hawk watch weekends will be scheduled for late April and into May. But hawks don't necessarily fly when we're officially scheduled to watch for them. If the wind is strong out of the southwest on any spring day, it's a good bet you'll see some hawks if you watch the south sky. Call Soheil Zendeh (628-8990) to check when someone will be there. Or better yet, call and volunteer to cover the site for some specific time and date. We need help.



## FIELD TRIP SCHEDULE

The following field trips have been scheduled to start at 1 PM. Please meet at the entrance to Belle Isle Marsh Reservation on Bennington Street, East Boston. Dress warmly and wear waterproof footwear.

Saturday, March 15
Sunday, April 6
Saturday, April 26

These field trips start at 2 PM:

Saturday, May 10
Sunday, May 25

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

| | |
|---|---|
| David Desmond | 324-7527 |
| Soheil Zendeh | 628-8990 |

## COME TO OUR ANNUAL MEETING

TIME: Sunday, March 9, 2PM.
PLACE: Our Lady of Lourdes Church Hall, 2 Endicott Avenue, Beachmont (Revere).

Our invited speaker is Robert Finch, environmental activist and author of two books on natural history. Special interest corners, refreshments, and socializing will top it all off.

This gathering is free and open to the public.

## ANNUAL ELECTIONS

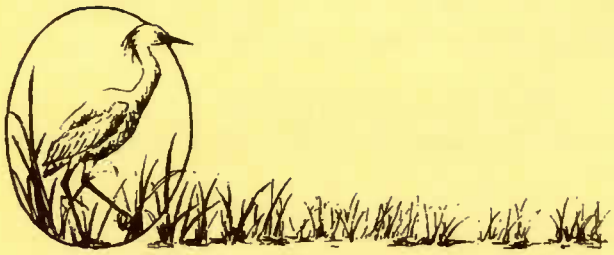
The Nominating Committee recommends the following nominations for the Board of Directors:

| | |
|---|---|
| President: | Gail Miller |
| Secretary: | Soheil Zendeh |
| Treasurer: | Ann Lindsey |

The election will be held at the Annual Meeting, and other nominations will be accepted from the floor.

*Friends of Belle Isle Marsh*
*P. O. Box 575*
*East Boston, MA 02128*

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
P A I D
Boston, Mass.
Permit No. 3225



## *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 is produced by Tim Driscoll and Soheil Zendeh, with assistance from Esther Fich and Craig Jackson. Graphics by Denise Braunhardt and John Chaltas. Special thanks to Mr. Joe Aiello for helping in the preparation of Mr. Serra's biographical sketch.*