




EVENTS

Programs are free and open to the public.

 **Take a Second Look (TASL) Harbor censuses.** Sundays, January 22, February 5 (weather date), February 19. A half day census of Boston Harbor birds. *Call leader for details: Soheil Zende 781-863-2392.*

 **Games on ice.** Tuesdays, January 10, February 14, March 20, 11:30 AM -1:30 PM. Try out an ice sled at no cost.

Conventional skates available for rent, or bring your wheelchair on the ice. *More information 617-626-1294. Meet at Cronin Rink, 850 Revere Beach Parkway, Revere.*

 **Animal tracking.** Saturday, February 11, 9 - 10:30 AM. *Wear warm clothes and sturdy footwear. Meet at Belle Isle Park main parking lot, Bennington Street, East Boston.*

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Belle Isle News

Published by Friends of Belle Isle Marsh
Number 88 ❖ December 2011

East Boston Greenway Dedication

On Wednesday, November 10, Mayor Menino and a crowd of elected and appointed officials stood in front of the cameras at a podium set up in the Bremen Street Park in East Boston to dedicate our Greenway project. As we close the primary design phase of the portion of the path over airport property, residents can take a moment to reflect on the progress we've made.

We should be proud of the way we have worked for this, but we should not be surprised. Throughout our history, East Bostonians have fought to serve, support and sustain ourselves and this city.

Right from the start, in 1630, East Boston marshes at Belle Isle and Wood Island provided hay to feed settlers' cattle and our forests provided wood to build their homes. Early

prospectors might never have settled on the Shawmut Peninsula if not for these resources.

In 1775, just weeks after the first shots were fired in Lexington, locals here helped capture and destroy the armed British schooner *Diana*, protecting our livestock and appropriating their weaponry. We won the first naval battle of the Revolution and inspired other colonists.

Later on, our clipper ships made Boston "the Hub of the Universe". Now we host a world class airport and, like East Boston's longtime activist Lucy Ferullo did throughout much of her life, we work to make Logan Airport a leader in environmental justice.

Of our farmers, patriots and sailors, many put down roots and stayed, creating an amazing community of

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More Harvest Festival photos page 8

Greenway (continued)

principled, resourceful people. Waves of immigrants landed here and also stayed, adding their energy, strength and determination to our community. So we all can be proud of who we are and of what we do, but not surprised by it. East Bostonians are Boston at its best.

Frederick Law Olmsted called public parks “a democratic development of the highest significance.” “They furnish healthful recreation,” he said, “inexpensively” giving regular people access to the benefits of nature enjoyed by those in “easier circumstances.” So this soon-to-be-developed Greenway path is a good thing for our families—it makes a nice walk to the beach an option for all of us and it connects neighborhoods and residents to services, parks, marshes and business centers.

This half mile path will ultimately connect us to a healthier future and by doing it at the site of Wood Island Park, it will connect us to a piece of our past.

Mayor Menino’s leadership has been pivotal in this project and so have our entire political delegation all the way up to the Governor, his Transportation



Photo by Barbara Bishop

At the dedication ceremony on November 10 (left to right): State Rep. Carlo Basile, Sec. of Transportation Richard Davey, Sen. Anthony Petrucci, Boston City Councilor Salvatore LaMattina, AIR Inc. Vice President Chris Marchi, Mayor Thomas Menino (at podium), Massport Interim CEO David Mackey, Boston Chief of Environment and Energy Jim Hunt

Secretaries and the Massachusetts Port Authority Board. And while there are many people to thank, we also need to thank ourselves. Our residents and civic groups demonstrated their resourcefulness and passion for their

principles once again. But that’s no surprise.

Chris Marchi

Chris Marchi is Vice President of AIR Inc., an East Boston grass roots organization.

THE CHILDREN'S CORNER

The sight of a great whale breaking the surface of the water is one of the most exhilarating moments in nature.

Don E. Wilson

Smithsonian Institution

This past September I accompanied my husband, Joe, on a business trip to the Palos Verdes Peninsula, south of Los Angeles, California. We stayed at a wonderful hotel at the water’s edge. And to our surprise, Blue Whales could be seen right off shore. We had a daily show of whales breaching in plain view. Apparently, they usually summer farther north, but this year the water temperature was cooler than normal and the krill (small shrimp-like animals, the Blue Whale’s favorite food source) were plentiful in this area between the shore and Catalina Island. It was truly amazing and apparently quite an unusual event. Blue

Whales are the world’s largest mammal and they are endangered, with only ten thousand left in the world. So I feel privileged to have had this experience.



Book Reviews

Whales by Seymour Simon, Harper Collins Children’s Books, 1350 Avenue

of the Americas, New York, NY, 1989, Smithsonian introduction, 2006.

Here is a wonderful introduction to the world of these incredible mammals. It weaves many facts and explanations into an easily read text that is accompanied by beautiful photographs. Did you know that a whale breathes through a blow hole at the top of its head? It takes in air and closes the blow hole, diving for up to an hour holding its breath. Did you know that with a flick of its fluke a whale can propel itself forward at speeds of up to thirty miles an hour? Read this book and learn many more facts about whales.

The Secret World of Whales by Charles Siebert, Chronicle Books LLC, 680 Second Street, San Francisco, CA 94107, 2011.

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The Juncos Are Coming!

Talking about the weather is usually a safe conversational gambit. No chance that you'll offend anyone except for the odd stray descendant of a Norse god. However for some of us, we actually like to talk about the weather. I know I do. There's so much to say. Around here our climate is so changeable that even a soap opera has less turns and surprises. Yesterday in the middle of November, I found a neighbor's rose bush in full bloom. True, it's against a wall in a south-facing protected location, but still... Next to my front stairs, in a huge pot, I have a large blooming African daisy. No big deal? Well, it is November and we

The Children's Corner (cont.)

This is another great resource book about whales that also incorporates historic and fictional stories.

Amos and Boris by William Steig, Puffin Books, 40 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010, 1979.

This was one of our son's favorite bedtime stories. Amos, the mouse, dreams of going to sea. He finds and renovates an old shipwreck and sets out for a grand adventure. As one might imagine, the adventure does not go as expected. And Boris, the whale, saves the day! Many years later they meet up again, but under very different circumstances... This is a story about a special friendship that can teach us all to appreciate the uniqueness and cleverness of each of our friends. A great book for young and old.

Mary Mitchell

have had one snow storm and several hard frosts. It's all kind of confusing. November usually means real cold weather as a preview of January, not roses in full bloom.

This must mean that it's fall, but that is becoming harder to define. I know all about the autumnal equinox and the earth's orbit. Different constellations show up in the sky in the morning when I'm out walking Ruby, our dog. We have swung around to another part of our annual orbit around the sun. Now Orion with his sword stands upon his head in the sky. That's fine but what about the sumac? The sumacs have been showing bright red leaves since August, a month that is still blistering hot. Then there's the local trees. While busy changing leaf colors and strewing their brand of bright advertising everywhere, next year's leaf buds are now growing. April and May are starting at the end of every branch. So right now, I have November, January, April and May all dancing around in my head. I am a little confused.

MassBird (massbird.org/), our local birding email exchange, is full of news. The warblers are all moving south. The great flocks of cormorants have passed. Snowy owls are seen here and there. There has been notice on MassBird of a small gray bird. The juncos are coming! The juncos are coming! The juncos show up and that means snow is coming. Of course at Belle Isle that means the chickadees will soon arrive as well. Our official state bird, the chickadee has the unusual talent of being able to turn its internal heat down during cold winter nights. It is a true winter bird. Besides, they are fun to watch flitting around from branch to



Photo by Soheil Zende

Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*)

branch and they are unafraid of people. Geese are suddenly everywhere. It is strange to realize that Massachusetts is like the Bahamas to these big birds. We are a warm place to spend the winter.

On Bio-Mass (tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/Bio-Mass/), another local email exchange, the talk has all been about mushrooms and squirrels. It turns out that squirrels also migrate south, especially if the local population has boomed. The population gets squeezed and so they move south as the seasons change. The squirrels get furrer and build their nests, called dreys, even bigger. Then there are our local rabbits. Nightly there's a rabbit convention by our T station next to the marsh. Every evening, Ruby and I scatter rabbits from the grass into the thickets of brush. It will be curious to see what happens when the snow cover is thick. I'm looking forward to learning what rabbit tracks look like.

In the midst of all this seasonal change and chaos are two wonderful sights. The foxtail reeds are in all their silver-white glory, swaying in the wind. A glittering sea of feathers. Across the marsh flats, the *Spartina* grasses have turned gold. All that green is now a lustrous gold. Belle Isle is full of silver and gold and the Juncos are coming!

George Cumming

George Cumming's blog **OrientSee** is at <http://www.georgemacumming.com/>.

Jack Markley **“one person did make a difference...”**

Jack Markley, who died in August, networked for us all by attending meetings of the East Boston and Chelsea Creek Action Groups, the Mystic River Watershed Association, Friends of Belle Isle Marsh and a myriad others we don't even know. From these meetings he brought back information that was helpful to each of our groups. Jack refused to be a board member of any of these groups so that he could be free to be an independent environmental ambassador.

Jack took control of the daily cleanup of Belle Isle, thoroughly enjoying the challenge of removing some of the most offensive or difficult-to-remove discarded articles with enthusiasm, including about 500 tires.

Jack was also right-hand man to Geoff Wood, Belle Isle Marsh Reservation site supervisor. If anything became nonfunctional, Jack with his engineer's background was there to fix it. He had that perfect combination of humility, kindness, wonderment and naïveté all rolled into one gentle soul. His famous retort when learning about something new was, "Thank you," and he genuinely meant it.

Below are tributes from members of other organizations who knew and loved Jack.

A Celebration of Life

I met Jack in 2002 when I made a presentation about the Chelsea Creek Action Group (CCAG) at a Friends of Belle Isle Marsh Annual Meeting. Little did I know what a turning point that would be!

Jack came up and asked when the next CCAG meeting was, and from then on Jack was a fixture in CCAG. In fact, it's hard for me to picture CCAG without Jack. Jack did so much—though he was always quick to say, "What *you* people are doing is amazing." So humble, it drove me crazy. He never used the *we*, yet Jack was always on hand to help out. He wrote letters to politicians in protest

when needed, and loved giving Belle Isle tours to anyone who would take him up on it, particularly E3C (CCAG's youth organizing program)! The youth loved him and could feel his pride for them.

Jack was also someone who took charge. I'll never forget the day he walked into my office at Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH) with a wooden sign he had made for the Urban Wild. We had been waiting for over a year for the sign promised by the city. Jack finally said "To hell with it: I'm making it." It's still

there today.

I'll miss my chats with Jack, the gifts he slipped to my daughter, his surprise
Continued on page 5

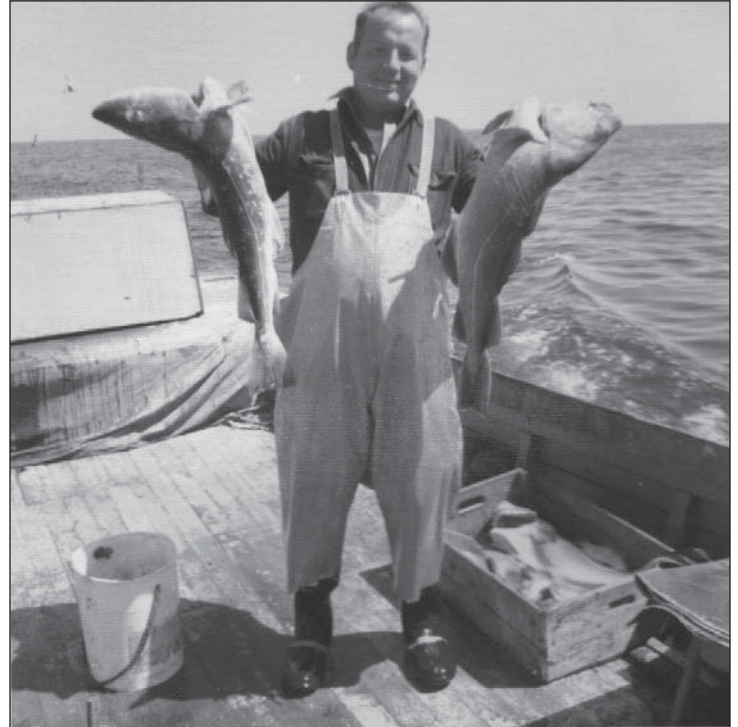


Photo courtesy of John Gallagher

Jack the outdoorsman with catch of the day



Photo by David Fichter

Jack the thinker

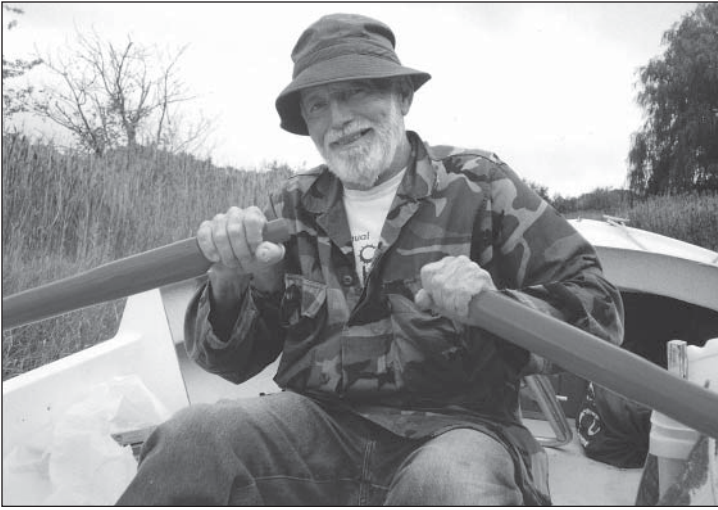


Photo courtesy of John Gallagher

Did you ever ride in Jack's boat?

A Celebration *(cont.)*

letters or articles he sent. Jack was the salt of the earth, and I mean that as the best of compliments!

Stacey Chacker

Stacey Chacker is former Director of the Community Building and Environment Department at NOAA, an East Boston community development corporation.

A Thousand Trips

If you think about how long Jack Markley lived along the edge of Belle Isle Marsh and how frequently he paddled his rowboat out into the marsh and collected debris or checked on a bird box, it gets you thinking about stewardship. About taking care of what you love. About putting your time and sweat where you put your voice. A conservative estimate is that Jack paddled out into the marsh a thousand times to do his part. If you are reading this, you've probably had a ride in his rowboat or at least been invited.

Among all of the people we met at Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA), Jack stood out for his commitment to the environment and his influence on others. At the MyRWA Annual Meeting in October we had the honor of presenting Jack Markley, *in memoriam*, the 2011 *Ripple Award* in recognition of his dedication to improving the local environment,

particularly Belle Isle Marsh. The *Ripple Award* highlights the work of an individual that while small in scale or localized, sends ripples out impacting the larger community, watershed and even region. When Jack learned that MyRWA was interested in conducting water quality sampling in Belle Isle Marsh he quickly offered his private dock for the volunteers to sample. Even more, Jack was up and welcoming these monitors, sometimes in the dead of winter, at 6 AM. Jack also collaborated with MyRWA to identify a number of pipes that were leaking sewage into the Marsh. After we sampled the sites, found a problem and the city fixed them, Jack wrote a great note to MyRWA congratulating us on our success, as if he had forgotten that *he* was the one who had figured it all out and led us to correcting the problem.

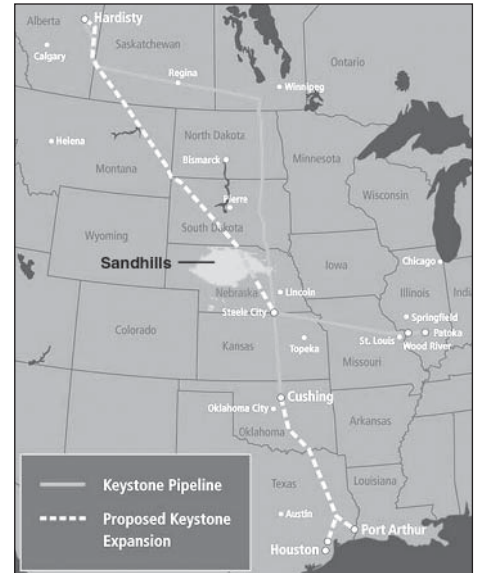
Jack also assisted with educational events at the marsh, which seemed to be a source of joy for him. Jack played a valuable role in describing the history of the marsh and all that it has to offer. His dedication and love of the area always shone through and inspired the youth to feel that they too could care for their local environment and make a difference.

Jack's hard work visibly improved Belle Isle and is a testament that one person did make a difference. Indeed, Jack's efforts created ripples that positively affected us all.

*Beth MacBlane
Patrick Herron*

*Mystic River Watershed Association
(MyRWA) staff*

*Thanks to John Gallaghers (Sr and Jr) of
Beachmont Yacht Club for providing some
of the photos of Jack.*



Nebraska's Sandhills: Spared

There's no such thing as a final victory in the fight for conservation, but the Obama administration's decision to reevaluate the route of TransCanada's proposed Keystone XL Pipeline spares one of North America's most fragile wildernesses.

Keystone XL would carry more than a million barrels of crude oil and diluted bitumen a day from the Athabasca Tar Sands of Alberta across Nebraska's Sandhills and Rainwater Basin to the Gulf of Mexico. Twice the size of Massachusetts, the 20,000 square miles of the Sandhills are home to breeding Trumpeter Swans, Long-billed Curlews and Wilson's Phalaropes, and the only place in the world where the endangered Hayden Penstemon still grows. The rich life of these vegetated dunes is supported by the ancient waters of the Ogallala Aquifer. The Rainwater Basin, designated a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) Landscape of Hemispheric Importance, is an extremely important migration stopover for more than 40 shorebird species, including virtually the entire world population of Buff-breasted Sandpipers.

A leak or spill would be devastating to the wild plants and animals of these fragile areas—and to the people in eight Great Plains states who depend

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Nebraska (cont.)

on the shallow Ogallala Aquifer for their drinking water. Seen in a larger perspective, approval of the Keystone XL Pipeline, whatever its route, would be a significant step backwards in our so very slow movement away from fossil fuels.

Concern about our continuing dependence on oil and the threat of pollution in sensitive areas has brought ranchers, environmentalists and energy activists together to demand that the project be reevaluated. More than 1,000 protesters were arrested in Washington this past summer, and in early November, 12,000 surrounded the White House to draw attention to the dangers of tar sands exploitation and the transport of crude oil across the Great Plains. Soon thereafter, the State Department announced that there would be further review of the environmental impacts of Keystone XL, a process unlikely to be completed before 2013.

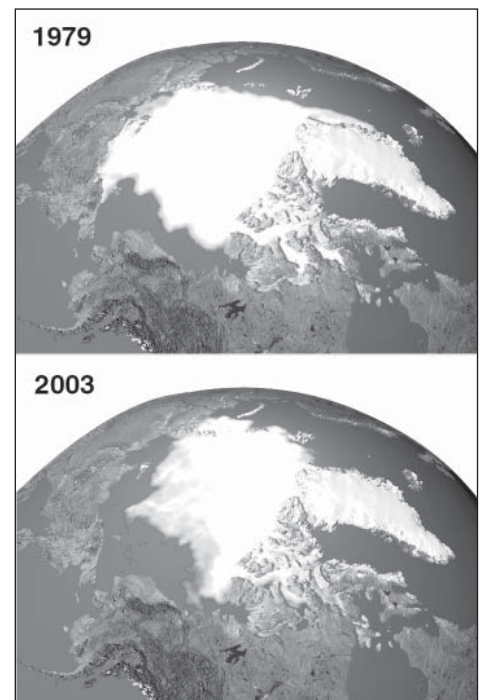
TransCanada immediately agreed to

explore other routes for the pipeline. But if the pipeline is ultimately approved, it will still have to pass through somewhere, and there can be no guarantee that *that* next somewhere will not be just as vulnerable as the Sandhills and its aquifer. Ultimately, no place is safe until we resolve to honor our commitment to find and use alternatives to oil.

Rick Wright

Rick, a Nebraskan, was one of the earliest and most enthusiastic of Belle Isle birders—in the 1980s.

Although Nebraska may seem to be a long way from East Boston, the environmental issues that the Keystone XL pipeline project raises are major and very relevant to many of us. The most broadly relevant issue is that of increasing use of fossil fuels and the role of fossil fuel use in changing the global climate. A snapshot of that change is illustrated in the two images (composite photos) of Earth's north polar regions. Note the reduction in spread of summer sea ice by more than 30% in that span.



Change in extent of summer sea ice over 24 years. Data collected by Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) Special Sensor Microwave Imager (SSM/I). Images courtesy of NASA.

BOOK REVIEW

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,

Rebecca Skloot, Crown Publishers, NYC

Chances are you have heard of either Rebecca Skloot or her book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* or both. To say that Ms. Skloot has become a media darling is an understatement. Her book is #1 on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction best seller list. She has appeared on Oprah and The Colbert Report and there is talk of a movie down the road.

I was introduced to her writing by accident, when a science blog I frequent, **Not Exactly Rocket Science**, mentioned one of her articles. I believe it was about a pack of wild urban dogs terrorizing Manhattan. Another of her stories juxtaposed two restaurants in West Virginia (ironically the very locale where she holed up to write her book), one a chain and the other a kind of mom-and-pop joint. Ms. Skloot reported the good and the bad associated with both,

the risk versus reward, so to speak, and it was hard not to see her comparisons as ones that mimic the wider rift of conservatives and liberals in today's society. Good reads both; look them up. My 7th grade students read them, and they all reacted positively. Actually, after showing the Colbert episode with Ms. Skloot and reading a chapter or two of *Lacks* in class, I believe there were a handful of students who purchased the book, committed to see it through to the end.

Henrietta Lacks had what could easily be described as the most virulent cervical cancer on record. It took her life in several months' time. But her biopsied cells never died. Most cells divide by mitosis around 40 to 60 times. This is called the Hayflick Limit. HeLa cells, as Ms. Lacks cells are referred to, are still dividing. They just will not stop.

The book covers so many bases it is hard to categorize. Yes, it is an excellent example of popular science writing, clearly explaining cancer,

cellular biology and mitosis to the reader. But it is more than just a science book. It's a book about America and its unseemly history of slavery and poverty. It's a book about the needs of a patient transposed with the needs of a physician. It's a book about trust or lack of it, and about feeling used by the system. This book is also about family. It is about identity. It is about ethics. It is about capitalism. It is about pseudo-science and superstitions and scientific literacy. It's a book about scientific journalism, as Ms. Skloot's journey from inception to publication is a major part of the story. It is, in point of fact, a force of nature. Ignore it at your own risk.

Chris Farnsworth.

Chris Farnsworth, science teacher at Winthrop Middle School, is the creator of Traits happen, an educational blog dedicated to "sharing the coolness of science with the known Universe. We serve nutritious vittles to the science-hungry public."

Three-decker, Marsh View

I was thinking the other day how much a part of my life Belle Isle Marsh has been for 57 years, and how for the first 15 years, our private but decidedly non-luxurious back porch in East Boston was my “observation tower”. It helped open to me a whole world of nature study, as well as the local happenings of human daily lives. Our house is there still, and of course, the marsh, always the marsh.

First in a line of similar houses next to an ESSO gas station (I’m looking back into the 1950s and 1960s; those of you who recall that name ESSO are “boomers” just like me), and a solid brick building where caskets were made and sold, some of my earliest memories are of watching the Constellation airplanes, the ones with a triple tail, that my parents pointed out to me, flying alarmingly low over the house and the marsh just below our second-floor porch. We almost lost that porch in 1954, when a 100+ mph gust from Hurricane Carol blew part of our neighbor’s roof onto it; back in those days, folks had very little warning about such events, and stores did not carry bottled water anyway, even if you did get panicky.

Most kids in East Boston lived in houses pushed back from the adjacent marsh; perhaps even a mile or two away from it, in a more urban setting. I just knew I was lucky to see a few trees and the broad expanse of marsh grass beyond our dirt road. Even with the neighboring ESSO station, we had fresh sea air, not car exhaust. Every spring and summer, I would bump my fat-tire Schwinn bike over the rocky, unpaved back road and look over the greening sight and tangy scent of creeks and *Phragmites*. By the time school started,

I noticed how the green became tawny and even golden in the low autumn light, and then by December, frost, ice and snow would crust the grass and cover the pond (Rosie’s Puddle). As I grew, and read about other states and even other lands, I used the marsh as my imaginary backdrop for pleasant daydreams and also disturbing nightmares: In summer, I’d see a flat Kansas plain there with a twister ripping through; in winter, I’d conjure up a Russian sleigh pulled by three horses bouncing over what looked like frozen tundra... Whatever my young mind could form, the marsh did its part to bring those dreams alive. I felt sad for other kids who lived nearby but not near enough to see these wonders as easily as I did!

I see the shadows of my small family—my parents and my cat—when I think of that porch. I see my mom hanging laundry on the lines there, even in winter, when the sheets would freeze and stiffen like the salt cod from Italian markets. I can remember the smell of my dad’s pipe, always clenched in his teeth as he yelled (and sometimes cheered) back at the transistor radio playing hundreds of Sox games. I see them giving me change for the ice cream man on sultry nights.

As I grew into my teens, I became aware of the lively variety of bird life, especially in spring and summer, that my dad would watch for hours. He’d balance his old U. S. Navy World War II telescope, the thing as heavy as a lead pipe, on the porch railing, and tell me to look at the “cranes”. Whether herons, rails, egrets, to him they were always “the cranes”; not being one to indulge in scientific names for them, he enjoyed them anyway, as much as any serious birder I’ve seen. The fascination grew for me, even after we moved from

there in 1968. I’m sure that old Navy telescope is still somewhere in my attic in Winthrop.

In that year, we moved across the marsh, to the Winthrop side. I can’t see more than a speck of it from a second-floor window, but I am so near it that when I drive home, I always return on Morton Street to see what’s going on at Belle Isle. The seasons, the colors, the tides—comfortingly the same. Marine mammal and avian life seem more diverse; at least the water is cleaner, and the dumps are no more. The Suffolk Downs drive-in theater whose screen I could see from that old porch, even from the most oblique angle, is now a beautiful urban marsh preserve... so much change, and much of it good. But if I squint, or close my eyes, and lose myself in those thoughts and memories, the decades melt away, and the wading birds still call in the salty breeze, and I’m an East Boston kid again.

Marian Merullo

Belle Isle News on-line

We have been posting scanned back issues of this newsletter to our web site. There are only a few left to be scanned to finish the complete set, which began early in 1983. Check them out at http://friendsofbelleislemarsh.org/Belle_Isle_Newsletters.html.

Can you help?

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh is a completely volunteer organization. If you can lead a field trip, organize a meeting, write, edit, illustrate or help produce a newsletter or otherwise volunteer to help with our events, call 617-567-5072 or write us at friendsofbelleislemarsh@comcast.net.



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>

Also, look for us on Facebook.

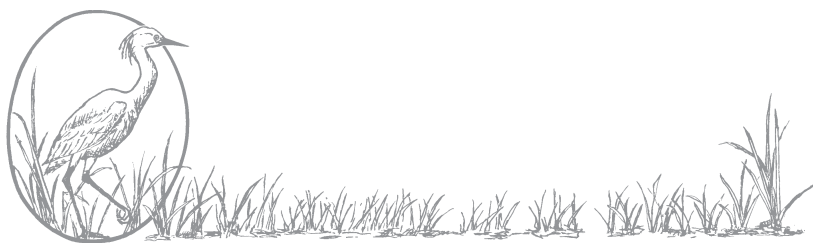
*This issue was produced by Sobeil Zende
with help from Barbara Bishop, Daniela Foley,
Gail Miller and Christine Zende.*

SZ11

*Friends of Belle Isle Marsh
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Harvest Festival, October 2, photos by Barbara Bishop, Sobeil Zende

