

**ON THE
WILD SIDE**

By J. Gordon Douglas

Artist's canoe trip '04

The water level in the Great Swamp was almost too low to permit canoeing on July 10, when Friends of the Great Swamp (FrOGS) took a number of artists in six canoes on an outing in the Great Swamp.

The artists had all been exhibitors in last autumn's Great Swamp Art Exhibit at Christ Church in Pawling.

The spring flood had definitely come to an end and we had only inches to spare under our canoes as we paddled upriver from Green Chimneys, gliding over fallen trees, unfinished beaver dams, and dangerous rocks just under the surface.

The winter's high water rings on the trees along the river's edge told us that the water's level had fallen five feet from the flood stage of early spring.

Although the water was low, the Great Swamp was just as fresh and beautiful as it had been earlier in the year.

Sunken logs, weirdly shaped roots, and rocks I had never seen before now came into view.

Along the shore there were masses of brilliant green lizard's tail, buttonball bushes, and lush pickerel weed with its bright purple flowers. Painted turtles lazed on logs along the shoreline, grudgingly slipping into the water if we got too close.

For the artists on the trip there was a never-ending, changing scene of beauty around every meander.

Scientist (etymologist) and artist Charlie Cutietta-Olsen pointed out that the more a stream meanders the greater the biological diversity it has.

Using his scientific equipment to look for insects, Charlie found mostly side-swimmers and baetid mayflies.

The mayflies are important food for goldfinches, phoebes and other insect-feeding birds.



Illustration by Jean Hannon Douglas

Meanders increase the shoreline where Charlie found the mayflies. More shoreline means more mayflies and ultimately more birds.

Charlie's wife, Roseanna, enjoyed spotting basking painted turtles, while he looked for insects.

Daughter Gianna Olsen, 12, enjoyed seeing the many fish nests in the shallow water.

She was thrilled when a full-grown but still immature great blue heron allowed us to approach very near.

Best of all, said Gianna, was the chance to be in a totally natural place where she did not hear any cars.

It was interesting to see how differently the individual artists responded to the unfolding scenery.

Marylyn Young of Heritage

Hills was fascinated by the strange forms the roots of fallen trees produced. She was the bow paddler in my canoe.

As we rounded a bend I was startled when Marylyn cried out "Look at the rhinoceros." And there it was, a strange combination of tree roots and tree trunks that looked exactly like this marvelous beast.

Marylyn teaches creative arts with a unique program called "Seeing with fingers and creating with eyes." On the Wild Side will devote a column to her fascinating program later in the summer.

Another artist and teacher, Pallas Nives, uses natural material in her artwork. She took advantage of being out on the river to pluck interesting material from the water.

You will be able to see the

results of her imagination at the Great Swamp Art Exhibit in Pawling in October.

Everyone is born an artist although art is often pushed to the "back burner" as we get older. A canoe trip in the Great Swamp quickly restores one's pristine youthful vision and sense of joy.

For the artists on our trip visiting the Great Swamp was a joyous experience. We all renewed our commitment to preserve and protect this vital resource.

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