

**ON
THE
WILD
SIDE**



By J. Gordon Douglas

**The pleasures of canoeing
in the Great Swamp**

The annual FrOGS canoe trip in the Great Swamp took place on the Sunday of the Memorial Day weekend with close to 200 paddlers enjoying the two-hour trips.

Sunday was the "rain date" after the gloomy weather predictions for Saturday had forced the day's postponement.

Fortunately, most people who had signed up for Saturday were able to come the following day, and people from the long waiting list quickly filled all the remaining available canoes.

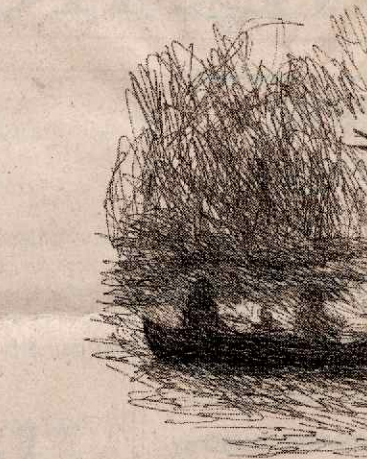
These springtime canoe trips,

run by Friends of the Great Swamp and its sister organization, the Putnam County Land Trust, have fast become a "mandatory" excursion for all who live in the 100 square mile Great Swamp Watershed – and for many living far beyond.

I personally look forward to the canoe trip each year, as every time it is different. The experience seems renewed every year. The light is different, the water level varies, and the flowers, birds and fauna change - and the new canoeists bring an infectious enthusiasm with them.

Altogether the day's outing is a celebration of spring, of nature, and of camaraderie. Perhaps I should not tempt the fates, but I've yet to find anyone who did not enjoy the experience.

And that includes the one or two over the years who tipped over – something canoes are known to do occasionally. Since



everyone wears a lifejacket and expert assistance is always at hand, these rare events do not mar the day.

Beginners are cautious and seldom get in serious trouble. I know from personal experience that one is most likely to tip over in a canoe or kayak only after you think you are an accomplished canoeist.

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Every trip was preceded by a short talk by Friends of the Great Swamp chairman, professor Jim Utter, whose enthusiasm for nature, wetlands, and the Great Swamp in particular, set an upbeat tone at the start of these canoe trips.

When Jim finishes, the launch site (at Green Chimney's) becomes a beehive of excitement

and activity. Everyone is looking for the right sized lifejacket, the right length paddle, and an empty canoe.

Being of aluminum, the canoes clang, adding to the din as the prior trips land and the new canoeists get launched.

The first trip I led got off at 11. After leaving the landing area, the river narrows and we were quickly 10 canoes in single file wending our way through the river's meanders.

Despite the heavy snows of the winter and the recent gray skies, the river was low because there had been little rainfall.

With the sky gray but bright, the water's surface was a perfect mirror reflecting the overhanging trees.

Although this mirror effect made the scene look almost miraculous, it had a negative effect also in that it was very difficult to see rocks and logs hiding just under the surface.

All the canoes encountered the occasional scrape or bump, but all survived intact.

One of the first birds we saw was a solitary sandpiper, a darting flier that feeds on the swamp's mud flats, which are covered with dramatically shaped arrowhead plants.

These small birds have migrated from their winter residence in Brazil. They will feed for a short while in the Great Swamp before flying north to boreal forests in Upper Canada. They spend a third of their lives migrating.

One of the risks these sandpipers must face is the increasing deadly pesticide poisoning that is washed into the Great Swamp from lawns in the watershed.

When we use pesticides on our lawns, they poison insects, which the birds then eat. The birds may get poisoned this way and die.

Pesticides are the number one non-natural killer of birds, Jim Utter told us.

Another unusual bird we saw, near the end of the day, was the nighthawk. This bird is slightly bigger than a jay.

Seen from a distance it looks like a hawk, but when feeding on insects above the river it looks more like a giant swallow as it darts this way and that.

The wings are long, narrow, pointed and curved like scimitars. The tail is partially split like a swallow's. It's easy to get distracted and run one's canoe into the reeds along the riverbank when watching the nighthawks hunt.

Every time I canoe in the Great Swamp, I encounter new wildlife and scenes of beauty.

If you respond to nature in a similar way, you will want to canoe the Great Swamp. Now is not too early to reserve for 2004. Contact Friends of the Great Swamp or the Putnam County Land Trust.

And remember: keep your weight low in the canoe for good stability.