

STONY KILL ALMANAC

BY AND ABOUT

Stony Kill Environmental Education Center

[Calendar of Events Inside](#)email: skfarm@gw.dec.state.ny.uswww.dec.ny.gov

Beaver Tales

by Julie Preston-Fulton, SCA AmeriCorps Member and Sue Kmiotek, Office Manager

Over the last year, walking Stony Kill's popular "Sierra Trail" has gotten a bit more challenging (i.e. *wet*), and may be more interesting than ever. In the summer of 2005, Stony Kill staff first noticed some flooding on the trail. Investigation revealed the culprit: a beaver! The recently-gnawed-down cottonwood trees (a favorite food source for beaver) were an unmistakable sign that the latest addition to Stony Kill's wildlife community had been quite busy. We are still trying to figure out the best way to reroute the Sierra trail to allow its use by humans as well as by beavers.



Beaver gnaw

Photo by Sue Kmiotek

Beavers build a dam to form a pond where they can build a lodge.

Water in the pond must be deep enough to allow the beavers to use the lodge's underwater entrance in the winter. Dams can be handed down from generation to generation and are constantly maintained, so they can reach sizes of up to 100 feet long and 6 feet high! No other creature on the planet, other than *Homo sapiens*, is capable of such engineering feats. Beavers fell trees close to the shore, and the weight of their branches over the water usually causes them to fall into the pond. The branches can then be cut into smaller pieces and floated to an underwater feeding pile near the lodge, available for winter provisions--beaver don't hibernate. Branches used to make the dam itself are strategically placed to catch mud and debris, so that a beaver dam is a marvel of efficient design and engineering.

**STONY KILL
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION
CENTER**
Main Telephone Number: 845-831-8780

Office Hours

Monday - Friday, 8:45 AM to 4:30 PM
Saturday, 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM
Sunday, (April, May, June, September, October)
1:00 PM to 4:30 PM
CLOSED ON ALL MAJOR HOLIDAYS
Grounds - Open seven days a week from
sunrise to sunset

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Rich Parisio, Environmental Educator, ext 302
Christopher O'Sullivan, Environmental Educator, ext 304
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Stony Kill Almanac is a quarterly publication and program listing of Stony Kill Farm EEC events.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

by Reba W. Laks, Director

The Colors of Spring

If you ask people what color they think about most when they think about spring, most of them will probably answer "green." Yet, spring has a variety of colors. In early spring, one of the most prominent colors in the deciduous woodlands of eastern New York is the color red --yes, red. Before the woods really green up, the blossoms of the red maple tree add a definite rouge tinge to the landscape. In swamps and other wetlands, the male red-winged blackbird stakes out his territory and tries to attract a female by singing "konk-a-ree" and flashing his red epaulets. In ponds and lakes, the red-spotted newt (a type of salamander) also seeks a mate; and in upland areas, the male wild turkey fans out his tail, puffs up his body and struts his stuff while sporting bright red and blue mating colors on his head. (These colors were the reason that Ben Franklin wanted to have the turkey declared the national bird. It is also why it is not a good idea to wear red into the woods during spring turkey hunting season.) Red-breasted robins hop about on people's lawns, and red peony shoots pop up out of the ground in cultivated flower beds. Back in the woods the shiny, new red-tinted leaves of poison ivy sprout from their vines. (They will turn green as the season progresses.) Wake robin trillium nods its rusty red head downwards, while the red and white of its cousin, painted trillium, is much more flamboyant.

Soon the red in the landscape is overtaken by the bursting explosion of varying shades of green. The broad leaves of skunk cabbage poke up from moist woodland floors, the grass "greens up," onion grass sprouts upward and bushes and trees begin to open their buds and unfurl their leaves.

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(Colors of Spring continued from page 2)

Spring woodland wildflowers rush to bloom before the canopy of trees and their emerging leaves block out the sun's rays overhead. Accents of various colors fill the wood, the yellow of trout lily, the white of bloodroot and Dutchman's breeches, the purple of hepatica and violets, and the delicate candy stripes of the spring beauties. A mourning cloak butterfly glides through the open woods, the edging of its wings a pale yellow. The dark winter coat of the deer is replaced by a warm brown. On the first warm, wet night, spotted salamanders make their way to the breeding ponds. Their yellow-spotted black bodies thrash about in a mating frenzy. By dawn they are gone with only the clear or smoky jellied egg masses left behind to show that they were there. In the streams, native brook trout flash pink. In the treetops, migrant warbler songbirds are easier to catch sight of before the leaves are fully out. Like bright jewels flitting about from tree limb to tree limb, warblers such as a yellow-rumped, a black-throated blue, or an orange blackburnian warbler or an American redstart add their colors to the palette of the woods. The white petals of shadbush and dogwood stand out among the dark trunks. All are interwoven into the multicolored fabric of the spring eastern woodlands.

In fields, bluebirds have returned to nest boxes. Patches of yellow coltsfoot stick up their heads along roadsides and field edges. Additional yellow touches the countryside as daffodils, forsythia and dandelion flowers grace gardens and lawns. Soon pink cherry blossoms as well as pink and white magnolia blossoms will be seen in the yards and villages. In orchards, the apple trees, their blossoms white with a touch of pink, will begin to flower. Spring, in all its colors, is well on its way.

Note: Thanks to Snapper Peta and his article in *Pathways* winter 2006 on why red is the first true color of spring.



A few good men and women.

- ☺Manor House Hosts
- ☺Special Events Assistants
- ☺Trailkeepers
- ☺ Gardeners--to help maintain the Verplanck Memorial Perennial Garden at Stony Kill--join the "Wacky Weeders" on Tuesday mornings. Experience not necessary.

The Center will provide orientation and procedures training. For more information and how you can become an active volunteer contact the volunteer coordinator at 845-831-8780, ext 306.

A NEW LOOK

DEC's website will soon be getting a whole new look. The redesign will make it easier to find information, regulations, and programs about New York State's natural resources and environment. When the new site launches, the URL (website address) will change to www.dec.ny.gov and the old URL will automatically send visitors there. We hope you will take some time to look at the new format and let us know what you think.

SLATE OF PUBLIC PROGRAMS

We welcome those who have any type of physical challenge to all of our programs.
If you call ahead to let us know your needs, we will be happy to learn how we can best serve you.

MARCH

Saturday, March 3 2:00 PM

Bears in the Neighborhood

Do you know what to do if you meet a bear in the woods, or in your kitchen? Matt Merchant, DEC Senior Wildlife Biologist, will help us to understand black bears and how to live in harmony with them.

Saturday, March 10 2:00 PM

Close Encounters of the Bird Kind

Sit with the birds and enjoy a moment of real surprise, for you and for them! We'll learn about bird behavior as we take turns dressing up as "Friendly Scarecrow" to see just how close birds will come to us.

Saturday, March 17 2:00 PM

Leaping (and Crawling) Leprechauns

Newts, frogs and salamanders, oh my! Learn about the emergence of our spring amphibians and their incredible life cycles, then help us search for some animals in the wild.

Saturday, March 24 10:30 AM and 2:00 PM
Sugar Maple Celebration

Join us at Sharpe Reservation in Fishkill to learn how to identify and tap sugar maple trees. Ongoing demonstration of sugarmaking from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm in the Sharpe sugar shack. Call Sharpe Reservation at 845-897-4320 or visit their website at www.sharpe.freshair.org for directions and a full schedule of events.

Saturday, March 24 2:00 PM

Trail Walk

Explore with us as we look for signs of spring.

Saturday, March 31 2:00 PM

Attack of the Invasives!

Almost half of New York's plant species came from another country or continent, often displacing native species. Find out how this has happened, what problems it causes, and what we can do about it, while learning some basic plant ID and forest management techniques.

APRIL

Saturday, April 7 2:00 PM

Busy Beavers

Here at Stony Kill the beavers have been truly busy! Come see their "renovations" to our Sierra Trail pond and learn about their role in the history and ecology of New York.

Saturday, April 14 2:00 PM

Temperatures Rising!

A hands-on introduction to climate change for children and adults. Come participate in activities to learn more about the earth's warming climate and some of the causes and effects. Be prepared for movement, art, and maybe even a little music.

Sunday, April 22 12:00 PM - 4:30 PM
Earth Day at Stony Kill

Join us as we renew our connection to our earth, and open our new *green* annex to the visitor center at the same time! Local nature artists will be on hand to show and discuss their work in the new geothermally heated building, and children and adults can join forces with our staff to plant trees at the site. Food from local farms, nature activities for the whole family, and more!

(Continued next page)

(APRIL continued from page 4)

MAY

Saturday, April 28 9:00 AM
Winged Migration

Get reacquainted with migratory songbirds like the rose-breasted grosbeak, scarlet tanager and yellow warbler, while enjoying a walk in the spring woods. Bring binoculars, if you have them.

Sunday, April 29 10:00 AM - 3:00 PM
Farming with Draft Horses-Spring Plowing and More

Come watch members of the Hudson Valley Draft Horse Association show how farming was done at Stony Kill before the twentieth century: plowing, harrowing, planting, log skidding and more. Take a ride on a horse-drawn wagon, and maybe even try to guide a horse-drawn plow yourself! Heavy rain cancels this event--call 845-831-8780 to check.

Saturday, May 5 9:00 AM
Winged Migration

Get reacquainted with migratory songbirds like the rose-breasted grosbeak, scarlet tanager and yellow warbler, while enjoying a walk in the spring woods. Bring binoculars, if you have them.

Saturday, May 12 9:00 AM
Spring in Bloom

Join a Stony Kill naturalist for a closer look at the profusion of wildflowers that grace our trails in May. Learn how to identify them, and why they are important to wildlife and to humans. Afterwards, at the farmstead, visit the Verplanck Garden Club's annual plant sale and get your own spring flower garden going!

Saturday, May 12 9:00 AM - Noon
Pre-Mother's Day Plant Sale

Looking for a beautiful plant for mom? Join the Verplanck Garden Club down at the farmstead for their annual plant sale at Stony Kill. Perennials, annuals, flowering plants, house plants, gardening advice!

Saturday, May 19 7:00 PM
Gather around the Campfire

Learn about matchless fire-making using sticks, then make some noise participating in family-fun skits and songs. Help us to light up the night as we laugh, sing and learn about the natural world.

Saturday, May 26 2:00 PM
Fire in the Woods!

Join us out on the trail to explore how fires, like the one here at Stony Kill last spring, help shape our woodlands, both destroying and creating habitat for wildlife.

A GLANCE AT JUNE

Saturday the 2nd

Family Fishing and SPLASH the River Otter's Birthday Party

Saturday the 9th

Land Stewardship at Stony Kill, a Three-Hundred-Year-Old Tradition!

Saturday the 16th

Life in the Hudson

Saturday the 23rd

Wilderness Skills and Native People

Saturday the 30th

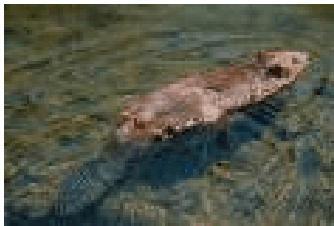
Dirty Rotten Log

(Beavers continued from page 1)

Beaver lodges are made of huge piles of branches covered with mud, debris and aquatic plants collected from the pond bottom. Beavers gather up these muddy materials and pack them into a ball, which they can easily bring to the building site. This mixture freezes solid in the winter making the beaver lodge impenetrable to most predators. The lodge usually has two underwater entrances, and a large underwater bi-level chamber with the feeding and drying area separate from the bedding area.



Beavers eat the *cambium* or moist layer of growing cells just beneath the outer bark of trees such as poplars, alders, aspens, willows and cottonwoods. They also eat the buds and leaves of those trees. Beavers use their sharp front teeth (incisors) to gnaw through trees. A beaver's incisors never stop growing, but constant gnawing helps grind them down, and keeps them sharp at the same time.



The beaver's tail is up to 15 inches long, 7 inches wide, flat as a shovel and scaly. This tail is a multi-purpose tool: it stores fat through the winter, regulates the beaver's body temperature and serves as a rudder, a prop when cutting down trees, and a rear-end balance when the beaver is carrying building materials. Beaver also slap their tails hard on the pond surface to give the signal to dive when danger approaches.

Beavers are affectionate with one another, often seen swimming circles together, rubbing noses or communally munching on the same twig. They live in family groups or *colonies* that consist of a breeding pair and 4--5 offspring ranging from newborn to two-year-old kits. Kits leave the parental lodge and establish new colonies of their own. Beaver survival depends on family cooperation, learned throughout their early development. This is perhaps another way in which beavers resemble humans.

Some Beaver Facts to Gnaw On:

- New York's official state mammal.
- weigh between 28 and 75 pounds.
- can grow up to 45 inches long from head to tail.
- has five toes on its front and hind feet.
- has webbed hind feet.
- has a *nictitating membrane* (transparent eyelid) that enables it to see underwater while also protecting its eyes.
- uses scent mounds as territorial markers.
- leaves scat in the form of two-inch sawdust balls, almost always in the water.
- can stay underwater for up to 15 minutes.
- North America's largest rodent.
- exerts more influence on its environment than any other creature except humans.





SPLASH'S PAGE

The Official Page of Stony Kill's Mascot,
Splash the River Otter

Splash would like to share some interesting details about life as an otter. Splash's official name is *Lutra canadensis* and this means otters belong to the weasel family. In fact, otters are the largest member of the weasel family. In the wild otters grow to be 38-47 inches long, including the 12-17 inch tail, and will weigh on average 12 pounds. River otter live primarily in streams.



Otter slide.

When not in search of food, an otter's time is spent "playing" on mud or snow slides. Like most predators, the otter is opportunistic, feeding on abundant and easily caught prey such as: fish, crayfish, clams,



snakes, tadpoles, frogs, salamanders, and a variety of water insects. An otter may range over a 50 square mile territory

searching for food. At times of food scarcity, otter prey on muskrats and small birds and eat blueberries and corn. You may see signs of otter in your area, including tracks.



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YES, start a one-year subscription to *Conservationist* for just \$10. I understand \$5 from each subscription goes directly to support educational programs at Stony Kill Farm EEC. **Make checks payable to: Stony Kill Foundation.** Mail to: Stony Kill Foundation, 79 Farmstead Lane, Wappingers Falls, NY 12590.

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