

The Marsh Wren

SINCE 1976

THE FRIENDS OF DYKE MARSH

FALL 2012



The Friends of Dyke Marsh

FODM Quarterly Meeting

Wednesday, November 14, at 7:30 p.m., Huntley Meadows Park, 3701 Lockheed Blvd., Alexandria, VA 22306. Phone 703-768-2525. Free to all.

Calendar of Events

2013 Membership Meetings
Winter - March 3, Sunday, 2 p.m. (new time). All others
Wednesdays, 7:30 p.m. Spring
- May 15; Summer - September
11; Fall - November 13.

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Dyke Marsh's Varied Human History

Interesting and Colorful Past to be Subject of Presentation

Save the date for a special FODM quarterly meeting on Nov 14 when Matthew Virta, Cultural Resources Program Manager for the U.S. National Park Service (NPS), will examine Dyke Marsh's colorful history, from Native American Indian times to the present. At 7:30 p.m., free to all, at the Huntley Meadows Park Visitor's Center, the presentation is co-sponsored by the Fairfax County History Commission.

Described in various terms over the years as Hell Hole Swamp, Impassable Swamp and "one of the most extensive and valuable . . . pocosins in this country," Dyke Marsh has witnessed quite an interesting parade of human interaction in this wetland hideaway. Goings-on have included hunting, fishing, boating, railroad development, underground vice, sand and gravel extraction, parkway development, preservation and restoration. The marsh is acknowledged today as a significant natural resource in being the largest freshwater, tidal, narrow-leaf-cattail marsh in National Park Service jurisdiction. Everyone is sure to learn something new about Dyke Marsh.



Marshland looking towards the capitol early last century. Photo courtesy NPS.

Matthew Virta is the Cultural Resources Program Manager for the George Washington Memorial Parkway, where he has been since 1999, helping with the identification, documentation, and preservation of the park's archeological sites, historic structures, and cultural landscapes. He has worked in this field for NPS for nearly 25 years, as archeologist and laboratory collections manager in several locations. He has a B.A. and M.A.A. in Anthropology from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Restoration Public Comments Posted Online

As we have reported in many recent issues of this newsletter, the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) is preparing a plan to restore the wetlands of the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. A U.S. Geological Survey study found that Dyke Marsh is "eroding rapidly," as much as 1.5 to two acres a year and that the rate of erosion is accelerating. The marsh's unstable condition is due to both natural and human causes, largely the extensive dredging between 1940 and 1972 that removed around half of the marsh and undermined what was left.

After a May 8 public meeting at which NPS presented four restoration options, the agency received many public comments. The summary of comments is now posted online and available to the public at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/gwmp>. Click on the Dyke Marsh Wetland Restoration project, click on Document List, and then click on Alternative Concepts Public Comment Summary. NPS officials are now preparing the final restoration plan in the form of an environmental impact statement and have not announced when it might be available to the public.

An Interview with Dr. L. K. Thomas, Ph.D.

BY GLENDA BOOTH

Dr. L. K. Thomas – Studying Dyke Marsh for 53 Years

Dr. L.K. Thomas, Research Biologist, visited Vice President Ned Stone and me on July 26 to share some comments and written materials on Dyke Marsh and its restoration. He has studied Dyke Marsh since 1959, 45 of those years as an employee of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). He has published many scientific papers on various aspects of the wetland and has visited Dyke Marsh multiple times, including forays in hip boots and chest waders.

Dr. Thomas began his career with NPS as a ranger naturalist in 1953 and retired in 1998 as a resource management specialist. He has extensive background in ecosystem ecology, hydrology, resource management, wetland ecology and management of exotic species.

Here are some highlights from our conversation:

- “Dyke Marsh is the only temperate Pleistocene, freshwater, tidal, climax, narrow-leaved cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) marsh, not only in the National Park system, but in the world,” Dr. Thomas wrote to NPS in June.
- “It should be recognized as the Temperate Pleistocene Marsh National Monument.” A national monument can be designated by the President or by the Congress. According to NPS’s website, a national monument is “intended to preserve at least one nationally significant resource. It is usu-

ally smaller than a national park and lacks its diversity of attractions.”

- “Freshwater tidal marshes are rare. . . this unique marsh is in grave jeopardy.”
- “Scour is an essential part of this ecosystem and is responsible for *T. angustifolia* being uniquely climax in this marsh. . . the scouring processes need to be restored.” The Haul Road and the marina prevent scouring needed by the marsh. An elevated boardwalk would allow scouring, “normal water flow” and provide pedestrian access. Scouring can remove some invasive species.
- “Pleistocene sediment was deposited in what is now Dyke Marsh.”
- The narrow-leaf cattail “is never allowed to succeed to another vegetation type because of periodic scour by the



Home of Dr. Thomas for 45 years of service. Photo by G. Booth.

ally smaller than a national park and lacks its diversity of attractions.”

THOMAS, (Continued on page 7)

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for more information about us, our programs and how you can join the FODM.

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The Marsh Wren is a quarterly publication of the Friends of Dyke Marsh, Inc., a nonprofit 501(c) (3) organization. Letters and submissions to *The Marsh Wren* are welcome. Send them to the editorial address above. Board members too, can receive mail at this address. Special thanks to Duncan Hobart for managing our website (www.fodm.org), and to Paula Sullivan and Ed Eder for their photography contributions to *The Marsh Wren* and website.



President's Message

Glenda C. Booth, President, Friends of Dyke Marsh

Poplar Island Restoration: A Model for Dyke Marsh?

The restoration of Poplar Island in the Chesapeake Bay may offer some insights into the restoration of Dyke Marsh. Poplar Island is near St. Michaels, Maryland, 12 miles south of the Bay Bridge. Dorothy McManus and I visited on September 14 and learned that this boomerang-shaped island was around 1,140 acres in 1847 and home to over 100 people and a diversity of wildlife. Erosion from wind and waves reduced the island to five acres by the 1990s.

Several agencies, including the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and the Maryland Port Administration, started the restoration in 1994, largely because the Port of Baltimore needed a convenient place to put dredge material. Backers say that Poplar Island is “an international model for the beneficial use of dredged material.” The Corps first stabilized the island with riprap or armored stone around the border, designed to ultimately hold in place 68 cubic yards of dredge spoil which is tested for heavy metals. Contaminated spoil is not used, they say.

Engineers are rebuilding the island in cells separated by sand dikes or berms, like a gigantic ice cube tray. Four cells are completed and all the work is done between November and March. Here's the process, simplified: barge fill to the island; pump in Bay water to make a slurry (they call it “chocolate milk”); pump the fill into the cells; drain excess water through a spillway; dry out the fill; create channels for tidal flow; and plant plants. When completed, Poplar will have 1,715 acres of wetland, upland and open water habitat.

Prisoners on work release and volunteers put in all plants by hand. One cell has 540,000 plants, for example, such as smooth cordgrass and saltmarsh hay. Some native plants are naturally returning. Managers are testing 50 species of trees.

Poplar Island provides shelter and quiet water habitat for diamondback terrapins, crabs, rockfish and killifish. Around 12,000 diamondback terrapins hatchlings are born each year. The island already serves as a wintering site, transient stop and nesting location for local and migratory wildfowl. Among the 89 bird species observed are Ospreys, American Avocets, Yellowlegs, Killdeer, egrets, Great Blue Herons and Tricolored Herons. Least Terns are a focal species because they are threatened in Maryland.

The project will cost \$1.2 billion by its completion in

2039. The COE is paying 75 percent; the Port of Baltimore, 25 percent. Former Maryland U.S. Senator Paul Sarbanes was instrumental in getting this project through the Congress.

Tours are suspended until March 2013. For more information, visit <http://www.mpasafepassage.org/poplartour.html>.

Dyke Marsh Highlights

Monarch butterflies migrated through this fall en route to Mexico, along with some species of dragonflies. In late August, birders spotted a Marbled Godwit on the river side mudflats near the parkway's stone bridge. One observer said that this bird was last seen in northern Virginia 17 years ago!

There's much activity in the river too. Ed Jones caught an 84-pound blue catfish in August near Fort Washington, certified as a Maryland state record. Maryland Fisheries Director Tom O'Connell was quoted in the Washington Post as saying, “We don't want to encourage the development and spread of this species. . . they are a serious threat to our native species.”

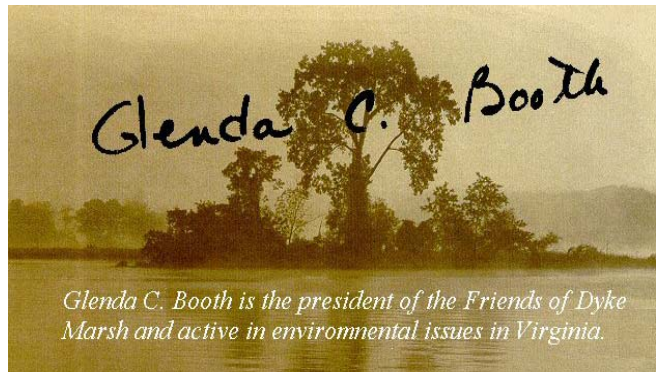
Speaking of invasives, check the Potomac shoreline for the two-inch, black shells of the “mystery snail,” a species native

to East Asia and apparently in the Potomac since the 1960s. They are *Bellamya (Cipangopaludina) japonica*, also called the “Japanese mystery snail.” A George Mason University student is studying them in Belmont Bay. She's learned that when the river temperature gets above 59 degrees, females can produce 100 young at a time. They'll hibernate in the river mud for the winter.

Some “elements” of Dyke Marsh are now becoming dormant, but life continues and a different kind of beauty emerges. Enjoy Dyke Marsh in all its aspects and seasons.



Poplar Island in the Chesapeake Bay is currently undergoing restoration. Photo by Glenda Booth.



Glenda C. Booth is the president of the Friends of Dyke Marsh and active in environmental issues in Virginia.

Meet the Plants of Dyke Marsh: Narrowleaf Cattail

This is one in a series highlighting individual plants of the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve.

BY PAT SALAMONE

According to the National Park Service, more than 360 species of plants have been recorded in Dyke Marsh. Of these, the dominant species in the marsh itself is the narrowleaf cattail (*Typha angustifolia*).

The narrowleaf cattail is an aquatic freshwater perennial that typically grows to be 3 to 6 feet tall. Its leaves, which emerge in spring, are 2 to 5 feet long and—as you’d expect from the name—narrow, typically less than half an inch across.

The flowers, which mature in mid-summer, are the well-known velvety brown hot-dog shaped spikes 2 to 6 inches long. Cattails are monoecious; male and female flowers appear on the same plant. The male flowers are at the top of the plant with the female flowers below, separated by a gap of up to 3 inches. This gap—along with narrower leaves and narrower flower spike—helps to distinguish this plant from its close relative, the broadleaf cattail (*Typha latifolia*).

In fall the cattail’s female flower spike turns to a cottony-looking puffball of as many as 250,000 tiny downy seeds that are dispersed on the wind. (The plant also spreads by rhizomes.) The leaves turn straw color and persist into the winter.

The cattail has a long history of human use. Euell Gibbons called cattails “the supermarket of the swamps.” (We won’t quibble about “swamp” instead of “marsh,” but cattails generally like sun.) All parts of the plant are edible when gathered at the appropriate stage of growth and properly prepared. (Of course, don’t try this with cattails from Dyke Marsh.) For example, the pollen can be substituted for up to half of the flour in baked goods, turning them bright yellow. Native Americans also used cattails to make baskets, mats, and rope, and the “fluff” has been used as padding and insulation.

Cattails also have value for wildlife. The small fuzzy seeds are not attractive to most birds, though they are eaten



The dominant species in the marsh itself is the narrowleaf cattail (*Typha angustifolia*). Photo by Glenda Booth.

by some ducks, but the rhizomes are eaten by waterfowl and muskrats. Cattails also provide shelter and nesting cover for marsh birds, including marsh wrens and redwing blackbirds.

The narrowleaf cattail is widely used for wetland restoration and in constructed wetlands. However, in areas where they are introduced, cattails can invade disturbed habitats, out-competing native species and forming dense monocultures, which reduce biodiversity. (In fact, in June 2006 the US Forest Service once named the narrowleaf cattail its “weed of the week”!) Natural controls include high water levels and flooding, since water levels of 4 feet or deeper will prevent spreading, and grazing by wildlife.

For more information:

- Euell Gibbons, *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*.
- USDA plant fact sheet: http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/cs_tyan.pdf.
- “Weed of the week”: http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/invasive_plants/weeds/narrow-leaved-cattail.pdf.
- Gene M. Silberhorn, *Tidal Wetland Plants of Virginia*, Educational Series Number 19 of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, April 1976. Available in electronic form at <http://web.vims.edu/GreyLit/VIMS/EdSeries19.pdf>.

The Potomac: Our Most Endangered River

The Potomac River is the nation’s “most endangered river,” announced the conservation organization American Rivers in May: “The Potomac is the ‘nation’s river,’ rich in culture and history and the lifeblood of our nation’s capital. The river provides drinking water to more than five million people and offers abundant opportunities for recreation. However, the Potomac is threatened by



The nation’s most endangered river, near Hunting Creek. Photo by T.D. Hobart.

agricultural and urban pollution that will only get worse if Congress rolls back national clean water protections. “read the report here: <http://www.americanrivers.org/newsroom/blog/jthomasblate-051512-announcing-americas-most-endangered-rivers-2012.html>.

This report follows a string of others examining the river’s ailments.

“The Marsh in Bloom” - Native Plant Walk in Dyke Marsh

On August 18, about forty people took advantage of a lovely late summer day to learn about Dyke Marsh’s native plants on a walk led by botanist Dr. Elizabeth Wells. We walked along the Mount Vernon trail near Tulane Drive, concentrating on the wooden boardwalk that spans part of the marsh; this area is rich in interesting and beautiful marsh plants, which can be readily observed there close up—without getting your feet wet!

Colorful flowers pointed out by Dr. Wells included red cardinal flower, lavender pickerelweed, deep purple New York ironweed, orange jewelweed, and lacy white water hemlock. Another beautiful sight was the groundnut vine in



Some colorful flowers observed included this groundnut vine. Photo by Ed Eder.

bloom, with its racemes of maroon-and-cream sweet pea-like flowers and its dangling “pea pods.” Also interesting were the wild rice in flower (many people had not realized that



Dr. Elizabeth Wells (right) leads a group of forty people on a plant walk in Dyke Marsh. Photo by Dorothy McManus.

wild rice grows in this area) and the developing fruit on the arrow arum plants.

We returned along the parkway, stopping along the way to observe swamp milkweed (a host plant for monarch butterfly caterpillars as well as a nectar plant for many butterflies) and trumpet vine, with its tubular red flowers that attract hummingbirds. On arriving back at our starting point, the group enthusiastically thanked Dr. Wells for a very interesting and informative walk.

National Park Service Documents Plants Along the GW Parkway

Brent Steury has authored a new National Park Service plant survey of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and documented 298 new vascular plants in Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., bringing the known plants of the parkway to 1,313 taxa, representing 1,284 species. Seventeen may be the first records for Virginia and fifteen of the newly-documented taxa are listed by Virginia as rare in the state. Twenty-one are the first records for Fairfax County.

Steury is the National Park Service Natural Resources Program Manager and published the survey in *Banisteria*, the journal of the Virginia Natural History Society.

The survey covers trees, shrubs, vines, herbaceous plants, grasses, sedges, rushes and others. The project’s purpose was to inventory sites on the entire parkway. Before this, only plants in Great Falls Park had been published.

Vascular plants transport water and food internally through tissues, like the “strings” of celery or the veins of leaves. “Plants are important because they produce oxygen, sequester carbon and are the base food for most biodiversity,” Steury said.

Steury found that a disturbing twenty-nine percent of all plants along the parkway are not native. These non-natives or invasives were mostly introduced by people, deliberately and accidentally. “A big part of this study was to

determine which species planted in the landscape are escaping into the environment,” Steury explained. Examples are porcelainberry, English ivy and Japanese honeysuckle that have spread into natural areas. In the new survey, the most invasive non-native species not previously reported in order of invasiveness starting with the most invasive are *Phragmites australis*, *Akebia quinata*, *Najas minor*, *Sophora japonica*, *Ilex crenata*, all the bamboos *Phyllostachys* and *Pseudosasa* species, *Pachysanda terminalis*, *Malus floribunda*, *Viburnum sieboldii* and *Iris pseudacorus*.

The Friends’ “weed warriors,” other local volunteers and the National Park Service have been trying to control some of these in Dyke Marsh for several years. Invasive plants have few controls or lack natural controls such as insects and disease to keep them in balance. Many invasives can out-compete native plants, form a monoculture, reduce biodiversity and destroy native habitats. Unlike invasives, native plants evolve over thousands of years with other species and provide habitat and food for wildlife species with which they have co-evolved.

The plant survey titled “Additions to the Vascular Flora of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia” can be found at <http://www.cmiweb.org/VNHS/banisteria/banisteria.asp#number37>.

The Bats of Dyke Marsh and Westgrove Park

BY DEBORAH HAMMER

When you visit Dyke Marsh on a warm evening, have you ever looked up and wondered about the bats darting by overhead? We are fortunate to have about 10 species of these amazing animals living in Fairfax County, and the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve is a great place to see them.

Our local bats are all insect eaters. They consume billions of mosquitoes, stinkbugs, and other insects that can be problematic for humans and crops. Bats find their prey by using vision, smell, hearing, and another sense – echolocation. This sense allows them to emit sound waves that bounce off objects and pinpoint an insect’s location in the dark. Bats fly with their hands (their scientific name, chiroptera, means “hand wing”), which allows them to be extremely flexible flyers. They can quickly change directions as they hunt for insects and avoid predators.

Unfortunately, bat populations both locally and throughout the world are declining rapidly. Local threats to their survival include loss of habitat, poisoning from pesticides and other pollutants and an invasive fungal disease called “White Nose Syndrome,” which has killed many of our local bats who migrate and hibernate in caves during the winter.

An ideal habitat for our local bats includes live trees, some dead trees, meadows, a place safe from potential predators (such as cats and dogs), and access to clean water. Trees in this type of habitat also provide safe winter hibernation sites for two local species, hoary bats and red bats.

Westgrove Park, just to the west of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and Dyke Marsh, is one of the few habitats in our area that can provide all of these necessary attributes.



Big Brown Bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*).
Photo by Deborah Hammer.

Along the GW parkway and surrounding neighborhoods, there are few meadows or dead trees (they are usually removed by the National Park Service, the Fairfax County Park Authority, or home owners,) and there are many potentially predatory pets that would scare away roosting maternal bats.

Most of the bats that feed in Dyke Marsh at night appear to be roosting in Westgrove Park during the day. At dusk, people can see them emerge from the trees in West-

grove Park and fly east over Dyke Marsh and the Potomac River in search of water and an insect buffet.

If you have a “bat detector,” an electronic device that converts echolocation into an audible range, you can also hear the bats feeding throughout the night. Since bats can be hard to see in the dark, this is a wonderful way to experience them in the wild. Bats are less likely to come out on nights that are rainy, cool, or have a full moon, so for best viewing, pick a summer night that is hot, dry, and cloudy or when the moon has not yet risen.

The bats that you are most likely to see and hear in Dyke Marsh and Westgrove Park include big brown bats, eastern pipistrelles, and red bats. Little brown bats used to be our most common species, but White Nose Syndrome has decimated their numbers and they may be facing extinction.

Bats seldom transmit rabies or bite humans. However, if you find a sick or injured wild animal of any kind, please use caution, don’t touch it with bare hands, and call animal control or a wildlife rehabilitator.

What can you do to help bats? First, go out in the evening and appreciate them! Also, let other people know about their contributions to our planet (in addition to helping with control of insects that can be problematic, such as mosquitoes, fruit bats are solely responsible for the pollination and propagation of 80 percent of the fruit trees in the world). These highly intelligent mammals are critical to our ecosystem. In addition, you can help on a local level by urging local officials to restore and preserve Westgrove Park as a natural habitat and supporting organizations that provide bat education and rehabilitation, such as the *Save Lucy Campaign*.

Resources for additional information:

Bat Conservation International <http://www.batcon.org/>
Save Lucy Campaign <http://savelucythebat.org/>

Deborah Hammer is a member of FODM, a Fairfax Master Naturalist, a volunteer with Bat Conservation International and a bat rehabilitator and educator with the Save Lucy Campaign. She is a resident of River Towers and has been studying the bats of Westgrove Park and Dyke Marsh for over 13 years.



Eastern Pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus subflavus*). Photo by Deborah Hammer.

FODMer Elected to House of Delegates

Dyke Marsh has a new Delegate. On September 4, Rob Krupicka was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates to represent District 45. He replaces Delegate David Englin who resigned. Krupicka served on the Alexandria City Council from 2003 to 2012, is a member of the Friends of Dyke Marsh and a strong supporter. The northern part of the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve and Belle Haven picnic area are in his district. Congratulations to Delegate Krupicka.

Welcome New FODM Members

Join us in welcoming **Life Member** Sam Longstreet, and our **New Regular Members:** Susan R. Van Bell, Louise and Craig Potter, Pat and Dan Priest, Carolyn Gail Turner, and Thomas and Michelle Tyndall.

U.S. Park Police, Emergency Number: 202-619-7300



THOMAS, (Continued from page 2)

flooded Potomac.”

■ “The muskrat is the keystone species in this marsh. [Its function] “is to weaken the cattail mat by its tunnels, canals and feeding.”

■ Dr. Thomas and several colleagues presented a plan for restoring Dyke Marsh to Congressman John Dingell in 1964. (Cong. Dingell is the author of the 1959 law that added the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve to the national park system.) In his 1964 memo for the record, Dr. Thomas wrote that the congressman was concerned that “the filling of the area was not progressing rapidly.”

■ Restoration should include placing coarse sand and fine gravel at the edge of the Pleistocene sediment.

■ If restoration involves planting, plant as nature would plant, thick enough to get natural thinning.

■ “Hunting Creek is the key,” he said. At one time, “a lot of water was coming down from Great Hunting Creek/Cameron Run” and depositing sediment into Great Hunting Creek Bay to form the floodplain. The culvert under the George Washington Memorial Parkway constricts the stream’s flow.

■ Ships once dropped their ballast in what is now Dyke Marsh, some of which was bricks.

■ “The restoration should free up the ecological processes,” he urged.

Sunday Morning Bird Walks

Bird walks are held every Sunday morning, all year. Meet at 8 a.m. in the south parking lot of the Belle Haven picnic area. Walks are led by experienced birders and all are welcome to join us.

FODM Membership - Dues and Contributions

Support the Friends of Dyke Marsh by becoming a member or renewing your membership. Benefits include the Friends’ quarterly publication, *The Marsh Wren*; quarterly membership meetings with knowledgeable speakers; Sunday morning bird walks and notification of activities in and around the marsh. Most importantly, your membership lends your voice in support of the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. We encourage you to save paper (trees) and mailing costs by becoming a member or renewing your membership online at www.fodm.org. Just click on the “New Member” or “Renewal” button on our membership page to make your tax-deductible contribution by credit card or from your bank account securely through PayPal. If you prefer, you can send a check, payable to FODM, P.O. Box 7183, Alexandria, Virginia 22307. The annual dues are \$15.00 per household; \$250.00 for life membership for an individual. Renewal reminders will no longer be sent with *The Marsh Wren*. You will receive a separate notice by mail or by email when your renewal is due. Thank you for your continuing support of FODM.

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Please address any questions or comments about *The Marsh Wren* to Dorothy McManus and about membership to Bob Veltkamp. You may contact them by mail at FODM, P.O. Box 7183, Alexandria, Virginia 22307-7183, by telephone or by email (see page 2).

A Fascinating Herb Found in Dyke Marsh

BY ED EDER

Poison Water Hemlock (*Cicuta Maculata*) is considered one of the most poisonous plants in North America. Also known as Cowbane (for its fatal effect on browsing bovines), Spotted Parsley (it is in the Apiaceae family) and Suicide Root, this perennial herb grows from Southern Mexico to Canada in predominantly wet areas.

In Dyke Marsh, Poison Water Hemlock is most easily seen at the tip of the Haul Road on the boardwalk where it peaks in bloom in August and early September, then goes to seed. The umbrella-like white floral clusters are white and somewhat resemble Queen Anne's Lace which is also in the Carrot family. This herb grows to one to one and one half meters in height



and has lance shaped leaves. *Cicuta Maculata* is not the same as Poison Hemlock (*Conium Maculatum*) taken by Socrates. Nevertheless both plants are in the Apiaceae family. All parts of the plant are considered poisonous to humans but the roots are considered the most toxic, containing large amounts of cicutoxin, which can provoke seizures and cause death. Individuals that survive acute poisoning can have retrograde amnesia. Despite the toxic nature of the plant it is a host plant for the Black Swallowtail Larva and many insects, including the Viceroy Butterfly which nectars on its flowers. The attached photographs show Viceroy's on the Poison Water Hemlock and a Black Swallowtail larva in its third instar.

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