

NEWSLETTER

The Sippewissett Association

Phragmites: Battle for Control Continues

by Nancy McDonald

Controlling the spread of *Phragmites australis*, also known as common reed, in the marshes of Sippewissett, as well as other coastal areas of Falmouth, continues to be a concern, but progress is being made. A project to control the invasive species is currently ongoing on the south/southeast edge of the Little Sippewissett Marsh (LSM) on adjoining properties in

Sippewissett Place and on Sippewissett Road.

In December 2007, I contacted Chris Polatin of Polatin Ecological Services in Montague, MA, thanks to a recommendation from Dick Payne, chair of the Falmouth Wetlands Invasives Steering Committee (WISC). Chris is a wetlands biologist who focuses on invasive species management



Controlling phragmites in Little Sippewissett Marsh

From the President

I hope everyone is surviving these snowbound and icy days. This is a quiet time for the Sippewissett Association. Our summer social was a success with a good time had by all. I am happy to announce that we are planning for the Winter Social, which will be Sunday, March 15. See the details on page 5.

I want to extend a heartfelt THANK YOU to Tinker Cavanagh and Peter Waasdorp, who have been producing the Newsletters for the past few years. Not only did they do a terrific job with the details of production, they were always ready to help edit submissions and were understanding if a submission was running late. Thank you both for the many hours of work that the job entailed. I know I am speaking for everyone in saying how much we appreciate all your work and the great finished product.

—Katie Abrams
Association President

The mission of the Sippewissett Association is to: protect and foster the mutual benefit and interests of landowners of the Sippewissett region of the Town of Falmouth, Massachusetts; to promote and encourage cooperation among such landowners in order to ensure that the future development of said region shall be in keeping with its general residential zoning restrictions and to take whatever action or actions may be necessary to this end; and to protect and prevent the misuse of public and common areas in the Sippewissett region.

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and ecological restoration. He has experience treating phragmites using methods that are much less labor intensive and more cost effective than the previously approved method of cut and drip, which involves hauling away the cut material and dripping the herbicide into each cut stalk. His methods include using a low-impact mower to cut and mulch the material and a foliar sprayer to apply the herbicide. Cut and drip methods will be used near native vegetation.

In March 2008, Chris made a site visit, with his colleague Bruce Shearer, a licensed herbicide applicator, and mapped out dense stands of phragmites on three private lots abutting the marsh and on open space belonging to Sippewissett Place Homeowners Corp. (SPHC). Chris submitted a proposal to cut and treat this area for approximately \$5,500 per acre, which is a dramatic reduction from the \$29,000 per acre cost of a 2007 project completed in the Great Sippewissett Marsh. With a more affordable option, the owners of lots adjacent to this area became interested in participating. A total of 10 private lots joined in, for a total of 2.83 acres. This includes one belonging to Salt Pond Areas Bird Sanctuaries (SPABS) and a larger area of SPHC open space.

The proposal outlined five tasks, which will be continuously monitored:

- Task 1: Mow / cut, spring / summer 2008
- Task 2: Treat regrowth with herbicide, September / October 2008
- Task 3: Cut treated phragmites no less than four weeks later
- Task 4: Treat regrowth September 2009
- Task 5: Treat regrowth September 2010

In April 2008, Sippewissett resident Courtney Bird arranged for Chris Polatin and Seth Wilkinson (Wilkinson Ecological Design) to address the Falmouth Conservation Commission

(ConCom), outlining some of their methodology and the equipment used for the projects. Seth is the owner and operator of the mower. He, Chris and Bruce have worked together on several phragmites control projects on Martha's Vineyard.



Cut and drip: Sparing native vegetation.

Because of this new methodology, the Falmouth (ConCom) required the filing of a Notice of Intent (NOI). This was filed with permission from all the participating property owners and representatives of the boards of SPABS and SPHC. For more details about the LSM project, including specifications of the mower and the herbicide, maps, photos, the NOI and the Habitat Management Plan go to www.ecopolatin.com.

In July 2008 the phragmites was cut and mulched, using the mower and hand-held brush cutters. Chris Polatin and Bruce Shearer returned in October to treat the regrowth, as well as patches of the original stalks that were not cut in July due to tidal conditions. They are scheduled to return in late January or February to cut all the treated phragmites.

It is hoped that more Sippewissett residents, as well as residents of other local coastal communities, will observe this project and join together to continue the fight against this spreading invasive species.

Sippewissett Birds at Work

by Jennifer Gaines

One of the delights of walking in the Sippewissett winter woods is seeing the resident birds in their native habitat. Of course, seeing them up close on our bird feeders while we sit observing anonymously inside our warm houses is informative, too. But seeing them in the woods “at work” is a different experience.

The best observations are on days without wind, when we are alerted by the birds’ sounds even before we see them. A repeated thwacking in the treetops makes us look up to see which woodpeckers are on the rotten tree limbs, pecking into the wood in search of boring insects. If the bird is one of our black and white woodpeckers, there is always that moment of confusion of scale: Is it the little downy woodpecker? Or his big cousin the hairy woodpecker? That question, of course, is immediately followed by: Is it a male or a female? Bright red markings on the back of the head or not?

One of the “newer kids on the block” is the ill-named red bellied woodpecker, which seems like a sleek giant by contrast. Sometimes we see the flicker, positively identified as he flies away, showing off his yellow underwings and white rump.



White-breasted nuthatch

If we are in the right place at the right time, we hear a band of chickadees calling to each other with their “dee, dee” and “chick, chick a dee dee dee.” They come nearer as they investigate each branch, looking and poking their beaks into crevices for insects, hanging upside down from the end of branches as they search for food. Often titmice mingle with the chickadees, calling to each other with their distinctive voice. If you hold still, the band will fly all around you, working its way through the woods, always searching for the precious morsels of food that sustain them through the cold days and nights. It is an honor and delight to have these little birds come so close, not worried about one’s large presence in their midst.

As the chatty band moves on, I always pause a moment, listening for a higher buzzing call. I have often been rewarded by the even tinier and more charming golden-crowned

kinglet landing on a branch next to me. These little cuties, half the body size of a chickadee, nest in the boreal forest of northern New England and come here only in the winter. Their bright yellow and red head stripe clinches their identity. At night they huddle together to conserve and share body heat.

Always there is the quiet “nerk, nerk” of the nuthatches, the little gray and white birds pointed at both ends, looking a bit like a double ended boat as they walk down and around the tree trunks headfirst. This population has been joined the last few years by the smaller red-breasted nuthatch. I always do a doubletake when I see them because they look just a bit different from the white-breasted ones I expect to see.

By contrast, the big brassy blue jays scold humans as they walk by. They fly to the treetops screeching their alarm of “Jay! Jay! Jay!” Often we hear the big voices of the crows, talking to each other as they fly their daily routes in search of food, always in constant communication with each other. You can easily learn to recognize their call that indicates “Food! Here! Come!” On a still day you can hear them calling from a half mile away.

But the bird that wins the award for the largest-voice-per-body-weight is the Carolina wren. The sudden loud, “Percy! Percy! Percy!” can surprise and delight us with its vigor and joy.

SippOwissett: Residents Continue 28-Year Fight

by Dr. Arthur Gaines
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Lot owners in the Sippowisset Development, a subdivision within Sippewissett, are fighting to protect their 111-year-old subdivision, threatened by activities of Joseph F. Sweeney of Milton, Massachusetts. The 135-acre private subdivision, in a plan filed in 1897, provides for 193 numbered building lots, an internal road network, resident access to the waterfront, and the 6.8-acre Gunning Point Pond Reservation.

Mr. Sweeney proposes to use the open space for a luxury house, and he asserts his exclusive ownership of waterfront lands. The Committee of SippOwissett Homeowners is opposing these activities.

Originally owned by one developer, John Haynes, 83 years of successive generations of Sippowisset subdivision owners respected the original plan. Generations of individual lot owners have used and valued their deeded beach rights and the passive recreation offered by the Pond Reservation.

In 1980, however, a portion of interest in the waterfront lands was conveyed to a businessman along with six numbered building lots. Stemming from that transaction, Mr. Sweeney now asserts the right to use the waterfront lands as he wishes and to treat them as his personal private property.

The Pond Reservation is characterized as a “reservation” and as “undevelopable” in records of the Falmouth Tax Assessor’s Office, which has long assessed and taxed the land at about 5 percent of adjacent, buildable lots. The land is under water during severe storms.

Mr. Sweeney hopes to convert his 1990 investment of \$35,000 in the Pond Reservation into a multimillion dollar, 3.4-acre waterfront building site. Earlier renditions of Mr. Sweeney’s

plan were rejected by the Falmouth Conservation Commission (ConCom) and by the Barnstable County Superior Court.

Mr. Sweeney’s most recent rendition, filed in 2005, was also denied by the ConCom. But to the astonishment and chagrin of the Homeowners and ConCom, that decision was thrown out by the Superior Court on a procedural technicality: The ConCom denial order had been filed one day late.

This Superior Court decision moved the venue for Mr. Sweeney’s application to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), where evaluation of the application is based solely and narrowly on state law. Even more frustrating, the DEP appears to accept numerous flawed environmental assertions and shortcomings in Mr. Sweeney’s application. In an ongoing appeal, the Committee of SippOwissett Homeowners and the Town of Falmouth are challenging DEP’s support for Mr. Sweeney’s application.

In related legal action in the Land Court, the SippOwissett Homeowners have challenged Mr. Sweeney’s right to deny or impede residents’ access to the waterfront. The 1897 subdivision plan (and the Falmouth Tax Assessor’s map) also clearly delineate back lot lines to waterfront properties, leaving the shoreline open to pedestrian access. Elsewhere, in contrast, riparian ownership extends to the low water line.

For more than two decades, this fight to defend the Sippowisset subdivision plan, the neighborhood environmental quality, and lot owners’ rights, property values, and lifestyle, has consumed countless volunteer hours and tens of thousands of dollars. Nearly 100 Sippowisset Development lot owners have contributed to the legal defense fund. Mr. Sweeney has not responded to multiple offers to buy his interest in the waterfront lands. Nevertheless, this fight will probably continue for at least a year. The SippOwissett Homeowners continue to seek the financial and volunteer support needed to continue this vital effort.

Association Updates

The SA Board Decides to Step Up

The Coalition for Buzzards Bay water testing program funds were one of the items abruptly removed from the current state budget during the recent round of budget cuts. Although the Coalition had made arrangements for alternative funding for next year, the cuts were unexpected and put a strain on the Coalition's ability to provide this valuable service in 2008.

After the Coalition for Buzzards Bay presented these facts at the SA board meeting in November, the Board agreed to fill the gap caused by the current state financial crisis and cover the total costs of water quality testing for the three Sippewissett test sites in 2009. In the past, the Association has paid half this amount.

—Michael Eder

Membership: 151 Strong

The Association currently has 151 members. Because each household is considered one member, we actually have almost double that number.

Currently, only 11 members have not renewed for the 2008 membership year. All unrenewed members received a second notice on October 1, and we received 15 renewals from that mailing. If you are among those who did not respond, here is another reminder to do so. We need you!

This summer we did an outreach mailing to about 20 people listed as

new Sippewissett residents in the past year. From that we received eight new members.

Our best referral source for finding new residents is always word of mouth from you, their neighbors—and our members.

Please contact me (I am listed in the phone book). I am always happy to send out the most current issue of our newsletter and a membership form to potential members!

—Barbara Eck
Membership Chair

Save the Date!

Don't miss the Association's 2009 Winter Social. The date selected is March 15th (in the afternoon) and the location will be the West Falmouth library.

As always, there will be lots of good finger food and beverages. In addition, a program will be offered covering several topics of interest to Sippewissett residents.

The social is a chance for members and their friends to come together to talk and to learn about the issues our Association is involved with. And it's also a fun party at a dreary time of year!

Please circle the date now on your calendar! You will receive a follow-up postcard in the mail several weeks before the Social as a reminder.

Thank You and Welcome

With this issue, we welcome our new newsletter editor, Mary Fran Buckley, a new member of the Association. She and her fiancé Bob Haskell, a freelance writer, plus their dog Max, live at 4 Kinghorn Drive.

When she filled out her membership form she checked off volunteering to assist with the

newsletter. Little did she know she would soon inherit the whole thing!

Mary Fran comes to us with an extensive background in editing and formatting. We are very grateful to her for her help!

At the same time, we extend our most grateful thanks to Tinker Cavanagh for doing the

newsletter pro bono for many years, taking time from her busy home graphics business. Her husband, Peter Waasdorp, should get much credit as well for his time collecting articles, copying and distributing the newsletter. We never could have done it without them!

—Barbara Eck

We Need Your Input!

Our newsletter comes out twice a year and we are always looking for articles covering issues of interest to our membership. Please let us know: What issues haven't we covered? What articles have you particularly enjoyed (or not enjoyed) in our previous issues? What topics would interest you for the future?

Contact any of the Board members or officers with your ideas. We welcome the input of all members.

Save the Date

What: The Sippewissett Association Winter Social

When: Sunday afternoon, March 15

Where: West Falmouth Library

The Sippewissett Association
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