

Opinion

Notes on the Rivers:

Taking a skiff up Watts Creek to find wild rice

BY TIM JUNKIN

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Just last week I rode with Drew Koslow, our Choptank Riverkeeper, and Nick Carter, one of our board members, in a small skiff up Watts Creek, a tributary of the upper Choptank, located just south of Denton, looking to harvest some wild rice.

Watts Creek is a tidal, freshwater stream bordered along its channel banks by hundred-year-old forests and on its lower edges by marsh dotted with yellow spatterdock lily, arrow-arum, purple pickerel weed, cardinal flower, and orange jewel weed, a favorite of hummingbirds and an antidote for poison ivy.

Kingfisher and wood duck outraced us, and flocks of blackbirds wheeled over the wetlands settling down to feast on the tall, willowy rice stalks shimmering like green lace in the morning light.

The rice stalks grow to eight feet or more, and once the grains ripen there is only a short window of time in which to harvest them before birds and weather combine to strip the stalks clean. As Nick would pole us into openings in the marsh, we beat the rice horns into our boat, filling our ponchos with the husks, feeling a sense of ancestral kinship, and appreciating the simple pleasure of being in such a quiet and beautiful place while accumulating from nature an edible measure of rice.

Nick, a retired biologist and aquatic scientist, is a walking encyclopedia on the upper tributaries of the Choptank. He seems to know the name and genus of every marsh weed, flower and bird. If as the writer John Hawkes once wrote, "Love is a long close scrutiny," then Nick is a man who loves our rivers. He has spent most of his adult life working on them and trying to find ways to protect and preserve them.

Back at the dock, we were discussing his views on the pressures facing our waterways when Drew took a call from someone who lives on the Tuckahoe, concerned that this year there seemed to be fewer fish and birds on his river, and asking us if we could sample the green slime that was covering the water in front of his home. He was afraid to let his kids swim in it. He called us, he said, because he was looking for someone who cared.

Later that same day, someone else asked us to sample the water in Newcomb Harbor, just off the Miles, as he had several hundred spot in a fish holding net that had died overnight, and the water had turned red and opaque.

August is a time of the year when many of our sub-watersheds show the effects of the excess pollution that increasingly threatens our rivers. Too many nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous are causing too much algal growth. Excess algae turns our water dark and opaque, chokes out sunlight, takes up the oxygen in the water, kills our fish, and can threaten our health.

Our rivers are living resources. They are resilient, and if we give them a chance, they will heal themselves. But all of us need to help by changing our habits. On our Web site www.crebconservancy.org we encourage such change. If you have a septic system, for example, consider participating in your respective county's de-nitrification upgrade program. It is free.

Talbot County will handle the installation, pay for everything, and restore your lawn. By reducing the nitrogen that your system discharges, you will help heal our rivers. And reduce or eliminate your use of fertilizer. Advocate natural grass lawns. Let the emerald-green lawn become a badge of dishonor on the Shore. Small changes, undertaken communally, can turn the tide.

Tim Junkin is a lawyer and writer, and currently the Executive Director of the Choptank River Eastern Bay Conservancy, a non-profit organization headquartered in St. Michaels.

