

# The South River Current



*Promoting interest and collaboration for watershed stewardship*



## Take a Walk Back : Endangered No More

There are few things as majestic as a Bald Eagle soaring across the sky. These powerful predators weigh less than 15 pounds and can have wingspans up to 7 ½ feet. Native to the Shenandoah Valley, their dark brown and white bodies make them easy to identify and observe in the South River Watershed today. But that wasn't always the case. From 1936 to 1974, the total number of known Bald Eagle nesting pairs in the Valley decreased from about 150-200 to zero. Two actions in the early 1970s changed that trajectory. In 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency banned almost all use of DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane). DDT was an insecticide that weakened the

eggshells of Bald Eagles, making them more likely to break and resulting in fewer hatchlings. In 1973, President Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act. The act allowed the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources to protect Bald Eagle nesting and roosting sites, which helped the population recover. Fast forward 50 years and known Bald Eagle pairs in Virginia number over 1,000. The species is no longer endangered—it is thriving. In the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, there are 3,000 new breeding pairs. Want to get a peek at these powerful, high-flying fowl? Look for them high above the trees along the South River or near any bodies of water in Augusta County or open fields. There are records of several nesting pairs in Augusta County.



## RIVERFEST 2025: The Year of the Eastern Box Turtle

Spring is nearly here! Do you see the buds on tree branches and spring flowers peeking out of the ground? Nature is waking up from its winter slumber. As your calendar begins to fill up with outdoor activities, be sure to mark May 3 for Riverfest 2025! This FREE annual event takes place riverside at Constitution Park in Waynesboro beginning at 10 a.m. Activities include Reptile World shows, presentations by the Wildlife Center of Virginia, the Stream Safari exploration, the Fish and Fun Rodeo, canoe rides, kids' arts and crafts, and the ever-popular South River Duck Race!! Come learn about environmental conservation and watershed stewardship while enjoying the great outdoors. Stop by the SRWC booth to explore the macro invertebrate tank, take part in a

family friendly scavenger hunt, and smile for the camera in our photo booth. Want more information? Go to <https://riverfestwaynesboro.org/>. Please be aware that Riverfest is a rain or shine event and, although pets are loved by all, Riverfest organizers request you leave them at home.



## Watershed Preservation: Where Nature Sets the Stage

Cowbane (*Oxypolis rigidior*) is a sparsely branched plant with umbrella-shaped white flowers that thrives in marshlands and wet prairies. The flower name is derived not from the flower's form or stature but from its detrimental impact on its unwitting consumer. Yes, cowbane is poisonous to cattle—the bane of their existence in a cowbane-infested prairie, but the plant is part of an important habitat for smaller indigenous wildlife. In Augusta County, the South River runs through a variety of natural prairies that have been preserved, protected and expanded over recent years as the Cowbane Prairie Natural Area Preserve under Virginia's Natural Heritage program that is run by the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

Although once common, these wet prairies are increasingly rare because of agricultural, industrial, and residential development. The deep, fibrous roots of the prairie grasses help filtrate rainwater before it enters the river and also reduce riverbank erosion. Eleven rare plants, including Queen-of-the-prairie, blue flag Iris, and marsh-speedwell live on this natural area preserve protected

by the state of Virginia. According to the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), a portion of the South River within the preserve also provides habitat for two freshwater mussel species that are at risk of extinction. Mussels are filter feeders that help purify water for humans and wildlife, so robust mussel populations in a river indicate a healthy and resilient water system. Birders will enjoy a visit to the preserve any time of the year. Recently the wetlands have been host for several weeks to some rare visitors – Sandhill Cranes.

The reserve is open to visitors but is periodically closed for resource protection or prescribed burning activities. If you want to bask in the beauty of the undisturbed prairie on your own, park at the small pull-off along Johnson Drive (on the right side as you head toward Cowbane) in front of an iron pole at the Alcoa plant. Parking is limited. Do not park at the gate on the road to the preserve itself. If you'd like to visit with a group, call Tyler Urgo (the Natural Heritage Steward for the Valley's Natural Area Preserves) at 540-487-9939 before you venture out. If you want to enjoy the Preserve virtually, click [here](#) and scroll down for the short video, "Cowbane Prairie Natural Area Preserve."

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## Did You Know?

- The U.S. Endangered Species Act is our nation's most effective law to protect at-risk species from extinction—99% of species listed on it have avoided extinction.
  - Eleven rare plants, including Queen-of-the-prairie (*Filipendula rubra*) (pictured to the left), Blue Flag Iris (*Iris versicolor*), and Marsh-Speedwell (*Veronica scutellata*) are found at the Cowbane Prairie Natural Area Preserve.
  - Augusta Bird Club members have removed invasive plant species and performed surveys to help monitor bird populations and assess the success of restoration efforts throughout our watershed.
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## Connections: What's Flying Around?

The South River Watershed is home to a variety of swimming, slithering, walking, and winged creatures. If the winged variety piques your interest, check out the Augusta Bird Club (ABC). ABC has been offering members the opportunity to participate in a variety of ornithological activities since 1966—that's the study of birds in case you hadn't guessed! On the club's website, you can explore photos of local birds; discover the birds that have been spotted in Augusta County and how common they are; discover local birding hot spots (with directions), including locations right in the South River Watershed; learn about conservation and club membership. If you decide to give bird watching a try, read through the birding ethics and download an Augusta County bird checklist to bring along. Upcoming outings include trips to McCormick Farm on April 16 and Natural Chimneys Park on April 19. Visit [the website](#) to explore what the August Bird Club has to offer, and next time you venture outside, don't forget to look up!

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## What Can I Do? Sit Still a Little Longer

Are you itching to get out in your yard to clean up and start planting? DON'T! There are good reasons to let the winter leaves lie just a little longer. Leaving plant debris in place acts as a natural mulch and helps retain moisture, suppress weeds, and improve soil health as it decomposes. Also, many pollinators like butterflies, bees, and moths spend their winter in garden debris like dead leaves, hollow stems, and other plant matter. Leaf litter and plant stems provide a home and food source for ladybugs and lacewings, which help control garden pests. Removing the debris too early can disrupt their life cycles and leave them without an appropriate habitat. By delaying spring cleanup outside, you provide a safe haven for these pollinators to emerge naturally when the weather is suitable.

So, when should you go ahead and break out the rakes? Experts recommend waiting until there is a week of consistent temperatures of 50°F or above before starting your garden cleanup. If you must clean up before then, consider loosely piling debris or leaving some stems in place. The bees and ladybugs will thank you!

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## Now Available

The South River Watershed Coalition office is available to be reserved for community group meetings. The space is outfitted with projection capability and Wi-Fi plus tables and chairs for 15 to 20 people. The office is located at 510-D West Broad Street in Waynesboro. Reservations are free; donations are appreciated.

Email [info@southernriverwatershed.org](mailto:info@southernriverwatershed.org)

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For upcoming events, check the [South River Watershed Coalition Events Page](#).  
Like us on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)!

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