

A close look at the glory of autumn

# Mashpee River Canoe Trip

by Ann Lloyd



Aerial view shows the mouth of the Mashpee River on Popponeset Bay.

(Photo by Mark Cote)

The tupelos were turning along the Mashpee River in mid-September, a sure sign that fall was on the way.

The wine-red leaves of the tupelo tree, not the red maple that many people look for, are really this area's harbinger of autumn colors, according to naturalist Stu Parsons of the Green Briar Nature Center.

Last month, Parsons and fellow naturalist Emily Preston, led a canoe trip down the Mashpee River, one of the Cape's last relatively undisturbed estuary systems. They pointed out seasonal changes as well as ecological changes as the river moves from its fresh water source at Mashpee Pond to salt water marsh and on into Popponeset Bay.

Parsons said the Mashpee is a special, sensitive area that's threatened by development. While the upper part of the river runs through a patchwork of state and town-owned conservation land, the lower part, south of Route 28, is mostly privately owned.

Rumblings of development and some recent high coliform counts have raised the antennae of conservation groups hoping to set aside the river system. Parsons said sportsmen and preservationists alike have targeted the area as one of prime importance.

"When you look at the whole area, Popponeset Bay, a typical rich estuary, and the Mashpee River, full of rich nutrients, running into it, it's really a special area," he explained. He would like to see the area designated as one of critical environmental concern by the state Department of Environmental Management.

So designated, the river would be better protected by more stringent monitoring of potential development, according to Lester Perry of the Shawme Crowell State Forest D.E.M. in Sandwich. "It is truly a beautiful river and it should be protected," Perry said. He suggested the Mashpee Conservation Commission could start proceedings to place the whole river under state or local protection.

Beginning in the deep hole springs of Mashpee Pond, the Mashpee River is a rushing brook at its source. Clear, swift and sandy-bottomed, the twisting, shallow stream can be waded most of the way to the Route 28 overpass, though Parsons said it is a long trek.

The shallowness of the stream has been its salvation, Parsons said, because it limits boat action to canoes or kayaks. It only begins to be navigable by canoe a short distance above Route 28, near an unpaved turnoff just east of the Mashpee Rotary that leads to a parking and canoe launching area.

A canopy of vegetation covers the narrow stream north of



the Route 28 overpass, and canoe paddlers can feel like "pinballs bouncing from side to side," as Parsons put it. The short distance upstream is worth the effort just for the experience of pushing canoes through two dark concrete tunnels under Quinaquisset Avenue and Route 28.

Parsons' spontaneous enthusiasm for the great outdoors would reach the childlike curiosity buried in most adults. The tiniest creature was examined and discussed, from the little achille fish that can adapt to fresh or salt water, to a small blob floating in brackish water that defied identification. It remained a small "jelly what-not" in this trip's log.

Moving downstream, Parsons pointed out the fresh water plants, like sweet-pepper bush, or clethra, and the sweet gale, a cousin of bayberry. "It has its roots right in the water, a real fresh water species," he said. "Look for it to disappear as we go downstream."

Other plants growing in the water added summer colors to the beginning tawny of autumn. Delicate blue forget-me-nots, pale orange jewel weed, and yellow coreopsis grew in profusion along the upper, fresh water stretch.

Downstream, as the river widened, and the water turned brackish, cattails and sedges dominated the salt marshes. "The changes in terms of salinity and vegetation make this a really interesting river in a short span," Parsons said.

A purple, comb-like flower with a horrible name, the salt marsh flea-bane, and a relatively rare cardinal flower caught Parsons' attention. He said the cardinal flower was endangered because its brilliant color made it irresistible for wild-flower gatherers.

As the river turned salty, bird life became more evident. Their calls were more audible as the canoes floated away from traffic noise and civilization.

The scolding rattle of the kingfisher warned of the approaching canoes, but a snowy egret stood silently on one leg, and watched as the paddlers came within yards before

## ... Mashpee River

Continued from page 3

walking calmly away. Several blue herons were sighted and their loud "gronk," a prehistoric holdover according to Parsons, rang in the air. Black ducks, blue wing ducks, teal, mallards and Canadian geese were numerous.

Late in the day, as the tour turned upstream, two osprey flew overhead, sounding their repetitive hawk-like whistle. Though seen regularly on the river this summer, the osprey began migrating by mid-September, Parsons said, as did many of the song-birds, like the marsh wrens.

Parsons said the Burgess Society had conducted a census of marsh wrens on the Mashpee River, looking both for the tiny birds and their nests hidden among the cattails and marsh grass. "They're a very secretive little beast, even when they're singing they tend to stay down low," he said.

The canoe trip may have been a day late for seeing a lot of song-birds, as the night preceding the trip had suddenly turned clear and cool. "These guys are all night migrants. The wind turned around, it cleared up and BAM . . . they're off," Parsons said.

"This has been a pretty successful trip, actually," he added, recounting the many plant and animal species sighted.

The nature center plans a canoe trip in the spring, and probably more during the summer, Parsons said. They are growing in popularity. "We're thinking about doing a winter walk along the river for the really crazy people," he added.



Stu Parsons discusses the trip down the Mashpee River prior to boarding canoes. (Photo by Ann Lloyd)