

Statement on Fairfax City Open Space Parcel  
Known As Stafford West  
by Stanwyn G. Shetler

At the request of Duane Murphy, representing Friends of Accotink Creek, and Elizabeth Gee, a director of the Home Owners' Association of Cambridge Station, a nearby community, I walked the Stafford West tract on May 28, 2007, accompanied by them and several others, to assess the property as natural habitat.

I am a professional botanist retired from the Smithsonian Institution and a director of both the Virginia Native Plant Society and the Audubon Naturalist Society of the Central Atlantic States. I am also a lifelong birder. The following statement represents my own personal views, however, and in no way is to be construed as an official statement of any of the three organizations.

Stafford West is a remarkable remnant of open space in the middle of the city, a tucked-away surprise begging to be explored and investigated. The topographic variety ranges from stream bottom to upland to open basin with seasonally trapped water forming one or more vernal pools. The habitat diversity includes the stream itself, its riparian borders, the slopes with mature forest, and, in the basin to the south, secondary scrubland with thickets of shrubs and small trees interspersed with openings with specialized wetlands.

The second-growth scrubland forms an invaluable transitional edge and buffer to the forest, pushing back the perimeter of human activity, and is in itself a rich habitat for plants and animals. It was alive with bird life and butterfly activity when we visited and undoubtedly is a welcome refuge for many species of birds in migration that seldom if ever are found in a mature forest. Indeed, as would be expected, we encountered much more bird activity in the second-growth than the forest. In our short visit two box turtles were spotted. This is a declining species that needs all the protection it can get and is symbolic of the predicament of many species, especially in the urban setting. The forest and the edge are complementary habitats here as elsewhere, each with its own importance, and they cannot be traded. In the forest we heard the welcome calls of the Acadian flycatcher, a typical denizen of forests.

It is a well known principle of ecology that graduated edges or ecotones greatly increase biological diversity. These all important edges have been disappearing from our landscapes especially in and near urban areas at an alarming rate, and going with them are the plants and animals that inhabit them. Research has shown that one of the greatest enemies of biodiversity is habitat fragmentation—breaking continuous habitat into bits and pieces by various means. For many species, the individual pieces do not provide the critical mass of habitat necessary to survival.

The vernal pools of this habitat need year-round investigation. It is likely that some species of salamanders and frogs depend on at least the most obvious of the vernal pools here to complete their life-cycles in early spring. The wetlands, though small, have an intriguing mix of sedges, bulrushes, rushes, and other wetland species in them and likewise beg investigation. One of the flowering plants there appeared on quick study to be an uncommon golden ragwort species, limited to certain wetlands.

People who look upon scrubland as wasteland don't know the riches of scrublands. It is our duty to learn about them and then teach future generations to cherish them as places of extraordinary biological activity and vital edges and buffers to protect our forests. The Stafford West second-growth probably nurtures and protects as much if not more diversity than the adjacent forest, but in any event each is crucial to the long-term integrity of the other.

So much of the green mantle of our region has been destroyed by the march of development that pocket habitats such as Stafford West are all the habitat that is left in our urban environment where a semblance of the original native flora and fauna can still survive. These little green reservoirs provide the last remaining refuges for the plants and wildlife in the city. Saving a mosaic of these green spaces throughout the urban landscape, especially as nodes of safety along streams or islands of second-growth edges that can form chains of refuge and safe passage, is crucial to the very survival of the plant and animal species. This is true not only for resident animal species but especially for the parade of migrant birds in spring and fall. The people who dwell in the city also need these quiet places of respite, contemplation, and learning.

In the end, one would hope that the decision for land use here will be based on what is best for the environment and not on who can muster the largest forces. The integrity of the habitat including both the mature forest and the secondary scrubland should be the paramount consideration. If the environment wins, in the long run so does everybody.

With proper oversight and maintenance, the Stafford West tract in its entirety along with the Stafford East tract would make a wonderful outdoor laboratory for high school and college students. There is much that can be learned here about the natural world. Just as schools need playing fields they also need outdoor laboratories if our coming generations are to become environmentally and ecologically literate. To be sure, the scrubland portion of the tract is not without its challenges. Typical of habitats everywhere today, it is not pristine but invaded by a number of aggressive nonnative plants, especially woody plants, and some measure of cutback and control is necessary periodically. Also, second-growth is always on the march toward more mature growth, and some effort from time to time will be needed to maintain the second-growth and wetland areas if the open character and biodiversity of the southern portion are to be perpetuated. The students, scouts, and other community groups could help with this and in the process learn important lessons about invasives and ecological succession.

May 31, 2007