



# Friends of Sligo Creek

Newsletter

September 2025



*Photo by Xavier Courouble*

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## WATER QUALITY

# UMD Environmental Science Students Test Sligo Water Quality

FOSC's September round of water quality testing was assisted on September 12 by 18 students, two teaching assistants, and lecturer Jennifer Gunnulfsen from the University of

Maryland's School of Environmental Science and Technology. FOSC and Sligo Creek were selected to be the first of many field trips the environmental science class will take during this Fall Semester.

The students assisted our testing at our 13th Ave. test site at Hillwood Manor Park and at our Central Ave. site at Long Branch's Becca Lilly Park by acting as recorders, timers, and testers of a number water quality parameters using test strips for phosphates, nitrates, nitrites, and copper. At each site, the students also conducted tests of their own using UMD equipment and supplies.



Dean Tousley rating the turbidity (cloudiness) of the water sample at the 13th Ave/Hillwood Manor Neighborhood Park. Jennifer Gunnulfsen (at left) looks on.



Into the creek in the name of science. Note the extremely muddy creek water due to a water main break more than a mile upstream.



Students try their hand at various tests and interpret the readings at Becca Lilly Park.

FOSC folks described the major water quality issues that plague our stream, namely bacteria (E. coli), winter salt runoff, and silt/turbidity from storms, construction activities with

insufficient run-off controls, and water main breaks. As it happened, a major water main break was occurring near Takoma Park Middle School that severely affected Brashears Run, near Maple Ave. and Sligo from there downstream. The turbidity at 13th Ave., a mile downstream from Maple Ave., was measured at 108 FAU\*, a record high reading, and the creek looked like chocolate milk. Typical turbidity readings are less than 15 FAU.

Students also learned about Nature Forward's benthic macroinvertebrate monitoring that FOSC volunteers participate in during spring, summer and fall in Sligo Creek just south of the MoCo-PG County line.

Gunnulfsen indicated she would like to repeat the field testing with the environmental science class each semester. FOSC welcomes the opportunity to help educate future environmental stewards.

**-- Dean Tousley, head of the FOSC water quality monthly testing team, and Water Quality Committee co-chair**

*\*An FAU is a Formazin Attenuation Unit, a measure of the decrease in transmitted light through the water sample at an angle of 180 degrees to the incident light.*

*Photos by Dean Tousley, Christine Dunathan, and Jennifer Gunnulfsen*

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## NATURAL HISTORY

# Making a Home at Wheaton Stormwater Ponds

**Susan DeFord, coordinator of the nestbox initiative and Board member of Friends of Sligo Creek provided this report on the season's nestbox monitoring:**

When new residents arrived in early spring at the Wheaton Branch stormwater ponds, it was not a welcome occasion. That's because they were avian invaders, claiming nestboxes meant for native birds.

It was a busy start to the second year of nestbox monitoring at stormwater ponds that are owned by the county Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), located on Wheaton Branch, a tributary that drains into Sligo Creek. The initiative was launched in 2024 through the efforts of Friends of Sligo Creek members and neighborhood volunteers. They help maintain and monitor four nestboxes arrayed around the ponds, which border the south side of Dennis Avenue.

Starting in March, non-native house sparrows intruded early and often, repeatedly building messy nests and laying eggs in nestboxes. The house sparrow is common in US cities and suburbs since its introduction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from England. It is aggressive and will harass and kill native birds and their young to take over a nest cavity.

Persistent discouragement of house sparrows is a tactic promoted by the North American Bluebird Society. “Act against House Sparrows the first moment they appear to avoid finding destroyed nests and dead bluebirds,” the society urges on its nestbox Factsheet. The society adds, “Be aware that any **native** bird species that use your nestbox (e.g., chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, tree or violet-green swallows) should be welcomed – these small cavity nesters need help, too.



**House sparrow nest in late March as nesting season got underway. The nest was removed and discarded.**

For nearly a month, volunteers worked to thwart house sparrows at the ponds with frequent nestbox visits to remove sparrow nests and discard their eggs.



**A male house sparrow perched near a nestbox in early April. The invasive sparrows quickly rebuilt nests cleared from nestboxes.**



**A speckled house sparrow egg removed along with a nest in early April.**

By late April, native species started moving in. Two nestboxes housed tree swallows, iridescent acrobats which consume insects in flight and divebomb unwanted visitors. Two

more nest boxes hosted native wrens, tiny, plain and noisily vigilant in protecting their nests.



Eventually the House sparrows gave up, and in May wrens moved into one nestbox, creating a barricade of twigs with a cup near the top.



A watchful wren stayed near its nestbox to scold a visitor.



Elsewhere at the ponds, tree swallows moved into the northernmost nestbox in mid-May.



Within days of moving in, a female tree swallow, whose dark tail feathers (on the right) are the only visible part of her, incubated eggs in a nest created with grasses and a cover of collected feathers.



**In early June, adult swallows coaxed fledglings out of this nestbox to take flight.**



**Later in June, tree swallows moved into another nestbox at the south end of the pond property.**



**Four newly hatched tree swallows on July 4th.**



**The nestlings grew quickly and had full feathers by July 13. By late July, they had apparently fledged, and the nest was empty. Report and photo by volunteer monitor Laura Donnelly-Smith.**



Meanwhile, a fourth nestbox hosted wrens for two rounds of nesting through spring and summer, volunteer monitor Craig Wilsey reported. He documented the presence of a nestling in late May. Then in late July, he photographed this adult wren sitting on a nest.

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LITTER

## Fall 2025 Sweep the Creek Litter Be Gone!



Fall Sweep the Creek events will be on Sat, Sept. 27 & Sun, Sept. 28.

**The FOSC Stewards will be leading the Sweep at 8 different sites over the weekend** in Sligo Creek, Long Branch and Wheaton Branch according to the schedule below and on the FOSC website [Sweep the Creek page](#). They'll have trash/recycling bags, and gloves and grabbers to lend volunteers.

**The creek supports a surprising array of wildlife. Please help give them a cleaner habitat!**

**Whether it's for a few minutes or two hours, your effort keeps pollutants, especially plastic bottles and hard plastics, out of the water and parklands. Ask a friend or neighbor to come out with you to chat as you sweep.**

Remember to send a photo of you and your find(s) to [editor@fosc.org](mailto:editor@fosc.org). Find the oddest item and we'll publish your photo in the FOSC newsletter and on the website.

**Please feel free to share this announcement and schedule with your neighborhood listserv. Let's make this the best Sweep yet!**

Note changes in blue



## Sweep the Creek Fall 2025

Sat, Sept. 27 and Sun, Sept. 28

### Park Cleanup Times and Locations

Please join us to help protect the creeks from litter. Whether it's for a few minutes or a couple of hours, your participation keeps pollutants, especially plastic bags, bottles, and hard plastics, out of the water and parks.

Some sections were recently cleaned or are scheduled to be cleaned by big groups. These sections will not host a cleanup on Sept. 27/28.

#### **By Creek Section, south to north:**

- Section 1** **Saturday, Sept. 27, 9am-11:00am** at Green Meadows Park, 6301 Sligo Parkway, Hyattsville, 20782
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- Section 10-Middle Long Branch** **Sunday, Sept. 28, 1-3:00pm** at Rolling Terrace Elementary School.

**Please check the FOSC website for updates to this schedule: [www.friendsofsligocreek.org](http://www.friendsofsligocreek.org)**

*Click on the schedule to see a larger version of it.*

- No registration is needed, just sign in when you arrive.
- Site leaders will provide trash and recycling bags, and will have gloves and trash grabbers to lend.
- Sweep in your part of the park, on your neighborhood streets (where litter gets washed into the stormwater drains along the street straight into the creek), or in a part of the watershed you've never been before!
- Students who volunteer may present their SSL form to be signed by the FOSC volunteer staff, or emailed to [litter@fosc.org](mailto:litter@fosc.org) for electronic signature.

- This updated [Parks Dept. Waiver Form](#) is required for minors ages 14-17 participating without a parent or guardian present. **The form must be completed and signed in hard copy by a parent or guardian and brought to the Sweep.**

Do you know of a "trash cache" aka litter hotspot? [Please let us know about it!](#) You, our readers, are a great source of knowledge about the problem areas in your part of the watershed.

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## NATURAL HISTORY

# What to See in Sligo Now: Bald Cypress Bog

If you're in the mood to gaze upon cypress knees nearby, you can find a small but delightful display in Spring Park, in Takoma Park. The spring there is the largest that feeds Sligo Creek, by way of Takoma Branch. It was used for drinking water by early residents of Takoma Park, and likely by native peoples as well.

About 25 years ago the city arborist, Todd Bolton, created a native plant bog below the outlet as part of an effort to daylight the little stream flowing from the spring. Naturally, he included Bald Cypress in the plantings. They've done well and are showing their knees, woody conical structures that are outgrowths of the shallow, horizontal roots of the tree, *Taxodium distichum* var. *distichum*.



Bald cypress knees at Spring Park

Hypotheses about the knees' function abound: stem, vegetative reproduction, mechanical support, nutrient accumulation, and carbohydrate storage, but no one knows for sure.

In addition to the Cypress, there are some 30 species of native woody plants, plus other wetland flowers including cattails, cardinal flower, and Joe-pye weed. Examples of the 30 species of woody plants are identified by labels maintained by Friends of Sligo Creek. The paw paw patch is quite healthy and has been producing fruit for several years. *(cont'd below)*



Paw paws are in the Soursop family; their closest relatives are tropical and sub tropical. The downward-facing flowers contain both a stamen (male pollen-bearing part) and a carpel (female ovule part) and emit a carrion-like smell. The paw paw trees native to Maryland are one of 2 northern species, all 11 others are southern.

A paw paw (*Asimina triloba*) branch and fruit in the paw paw patch at Spring Park. Paw paw fruits are known as anachronistic, having co-evolved with mastodons and mammoths who could swallow the large seeds and spread them widely. Most animals alive today with a taste for paw paw fruits lack a gullet large enough to accommodate the seeds, though bears may be an exception.

Source: Wikipedia, UMD Extension, Arnold Arboretum

They're the host plant for larvae of the zebra swallowtail butterfly (*Protographium marcellus*), and its blooms (March-May) support insect pollinators, primarily beetles and flies.

Beyond its natural attractions, the park has a picnic shelter, a playground, and ball field. The spring of Spring Park is commemorated by a sculpture of legendary Chief Powhatan drinking from a gourd of spring water. He was leader of the tribes in the area back around 1608 when he met John Smith.



The sculpture was done by local resident Norman Greene, known also for the statue of “Roscoe” the revered bantam rooster found in the Old Town shopping area.

—Bruce Sidwell, longtime FOOSC member and former FOOSC president

***See the Spring Park Walk event on Oct 19 in the Upcoming Events section toward the end of this newsletter.***

*(All photos by Bruce Sidwell except paw paw blossom by A. Friedman)*

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**Please be sure to view the entire newsletter! Click on "View entire message" or similar text at the bottom of your browser.**

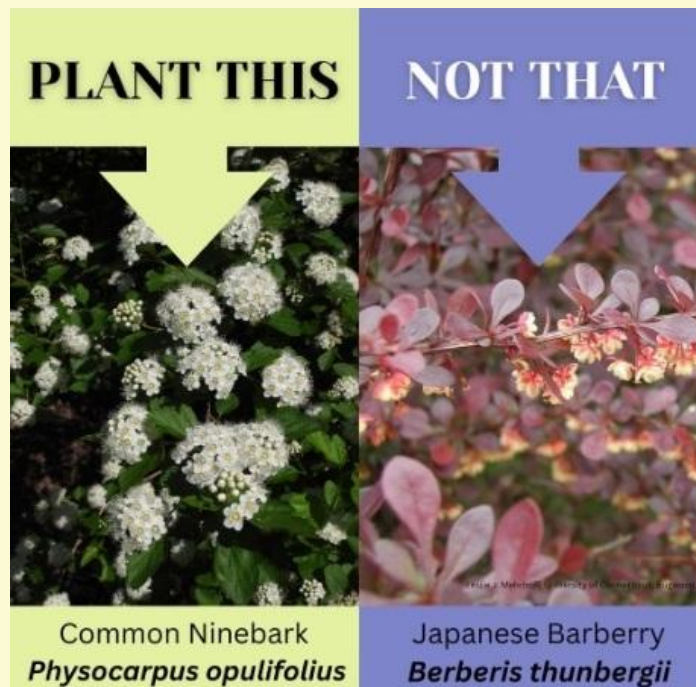
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PLANTS

**Plant This, Not That!**

Fall is a great time to replace non-native invasive shrubs and flowering plants with native ones. Non-native plants outcompete native plants because they have few predators who eat them. And they don't act as host plants that provide food for larvae of local pollinators. The result is disrupted local ecology, with fewer plants that sustain wildlife.

Here are 7 alternates to invasive plants that will restore and bring more life to your yard.



## #1.

### **PLANT: Common Ninebark** (*Physocarpus opulifolius*)

This is a beautiful native alternative to Japanese Barberry, with interesting shaggy bark in wintertime and flowers that attract butterflies in summer.

### **REMOVE: Japanese Barberry** (*Berberis thunbergii*)

This is an invasive, spiny deciduous shrub that is known to harbor deer ticks and the mice that host them. It often spreads into thickets in the understory of woods where it displaces native understory plants.

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**PLANT THIS**

**NOT THAT**



Buttonbush  
*Cephalanthus occidentalis*



Glossy Buckthorn  
*Frangula alnus*

## #2.

### **PLANT: Buttonbush** (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)

This shrub displays fragrant flowers that smell sweet like honey and nectar that bees and butterflies find irresistible! Buttonbush is a prized plant for wetland habitat restoration but it will tolerate a variety of soil conditions.

While Buttonbush is native to swampy areas, it is adaptable to most landscape soils except dry ones. Can be planted in sun to part shade. Buttonbush is a plant of special value, according to the [Xerces Society](#), and is host plant to several species of sphinx moths.

### **REMOVE: Glossy Buckthorn** (*Frangula alnus*)

Glossy Buckthorn is a small deciduous tree or large shrub that produces many fruits, forming dense colonies, particularly in wetlands and moist woods, choking out native plants and shrubs necessary for ecological balance.

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**PLANT THIS**

**NOT THAT**



Virginia Sweetspire  
*Itea virginica*



Autumn and Russian Olives  
(*Elaeagnus spp.*)

### #3.

**PLANT: Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*)**

The fragrant white flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators and the foliage provides cover for birds and other wildlife. In fall, vibrant leaf color gives way to maroon stems that stand out in winter landscapes.

**REMOVE: Autumn and Russian Olives (*Elaeagnus spp.*)**

Autumn-olive and Russian-olive aggressively outcompete native plants and shrubs. They grow rapidly and re-sprout quickly after cutting or burning. Both species are fruit producers and are widely pollinated by birds. The berries are low in protein and high in fat and carbs, however, providing birds with little more than empty calories.

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**PLANT THIS**

**NOT THAT**



Black Chokeberry  
*Aronia melanocarpa*

Burning Bush  
*Euonymus alatus*

**#4.**

**PLANT: Black Chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*)**

This beautiful shrub not only provides nutritious berries for birds and other wildlife, but is also a host plant for many pollinators. In the fall, Black Chokeberry leaves turn a orange-red color, creating vibrant fall foliage.

**REMOVE: Burning Bush (*Euonymus alatus*)**

Introduced to the U.S. in the 19th century as an ornamental plant for use in landscaping, burning bush threatens a variety of habitats including forests and prairies where it forms dense thickets, displacing many native woody and herbaceous plant species including ephemeral spring wildflowers.

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**PLANT THIS**

**NOT THAT**



Downy Serviceberry  
*Amelanchier arborea*

Callery/Bradford Pear  
*Pyrus calleryana*

## #5.

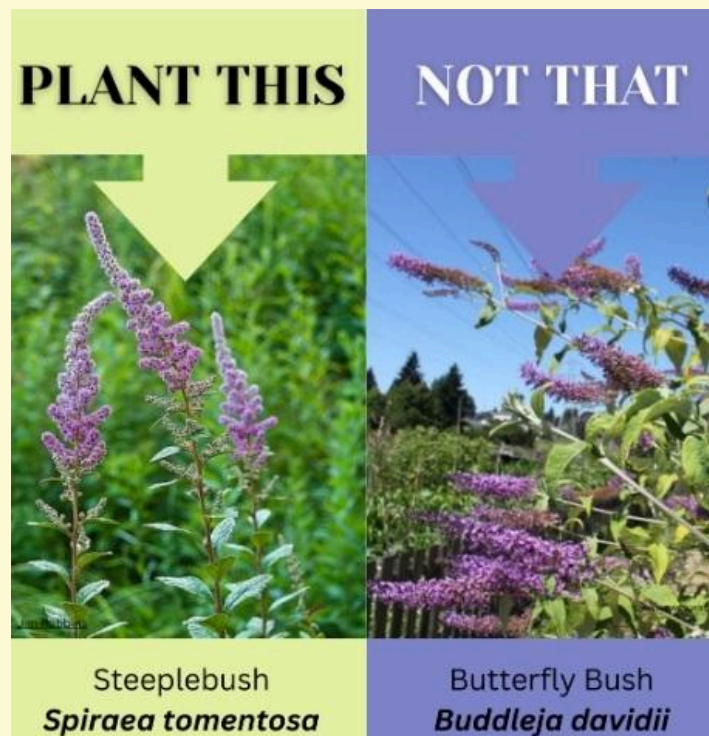
**PLANT: Serviceberry** (*Amelanchier species*, also known as Canadian serviceberry, downy serviceberry, thicket serviceberry, shad-blow serviceberry, shad-blow, shadbush serviceberry, shadbush, bilberry, juneberry, chuckle-berry, sugarplum, and currant-tree.)

This is a multi-stemmed shrub/small tree with a white flower that appears in early spring, about the same time as the Callery (Bradford) Pear. Blue-green summer foliage transforms to gold-red-orange in autumn, making it a standout.

The early flowers provide pollen and nectar to a variety of native bees and other beneficial insects such as syrphid flies and tachinid flies (which are good predators of pests). The berries provide food for many birds including American Robins, Baltimore Orioles, Cedar Waxwings, and Gray Catbirds. Serviceberries are a host to a variety of moths, which, in their caterpillar form, provide essential food for young birds.

**REMOVE: Callery/Bradford Pear** (*Pyrus calleryana*)

Callery pear is a highly invasive tree. It displaces beneficial native tree species along roadsides, old fields, forest edges and even deep within forests. In MD, it is expected to be classified as a watchlist plant or a prohibited plant once The Biodiversity and Agriculture Protection Act is implemented. Removal by a professional arborist experienced in Callery Pear removal is recommended.



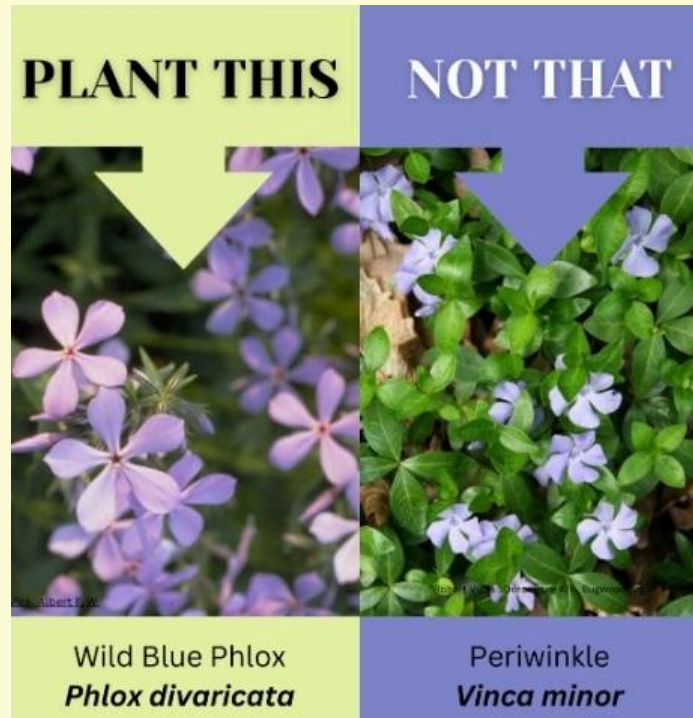
## #6.

**PLANT: Steeplebush** (*Spiraea tomentosa*)

Steeplebush is a multi-stemmed upright shrub with spiked, pink flowers. It grows in sun but tolerates part shade, and prefers wet or moist, acidic areas. It blooms in late summer, attracting birds and butterflies.

**REMOVE: Butterfly Bush** (*Buddleja davidii*)

Despite the name and popularity at garden centers, this plant provides nectar to adult butterflies but it does not support butterfly caterpillars, which need specific host plants to survive and grow. This lack of support can lead to declining butterfly populations in areas where butterfly bushes are prevalent. Butterfly bush is host to the brown marmorated stink bug, both originating in Asia.



## #7.

### **PLANT:** Wild Blue Phlox (*Phlox divaricata*)

This beautiful perennial offers a display of blueish-purple flowers which attract a wide array of pollinators, including swallowtails. It prefers shaded or woodland spots.

### **REMOVE:** Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)

Often utilized in landscaping as a groundcover, this invasive plant escapes yards and creeps into natural areas. Periwinkle can be found covering woodland areas including in Sligo, crowding out native plants.

Sources: *Licking Pollinator Pathway*, *Xerxes Society*, *MD Native Plant Society*, *NC State Extension*, *UMD Extension*

NATURAL HISTORY

## FOSC Native Plant Sale

FOSC is again partnering with Seeds of Change Nursery to offer native flowering plants and grasses for sun and shade.

Fall is a great time to add to your outdoor area, making it pollinator-friendly and ecologically healthier, and helping protect Sligo.

And it's a great time to tackle those non-native invasive bushes - looking at you, nandina, privet (hedge), and bush honeysuckle - that our Weed Warriors spent 3,600+ hours removing last year from Sligo parkland.

[Here is the plant list and order form.](#) Anyone can order! Pick up will be in Takoma Park on Sat, Oct. 4 and Sun, Oct. 5.

A portion of sales (20%) will go to FOSC to help fund our programs and initiatives. Thank you for your support!

## NATIVE PLANT SALE

# Friends of Sligo Creek



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### Ordering:

Place your online order on the FOSC form now through Oct. 1 at 11:59pm at:

[pci.jotform.com/form/252476089032156](https://pci.jotform.com/form/252476089032156)



### Delivery

All orders will be delivered. Pick up times & location:



7010 Woodland Ave, Takoma Park



Saturday, 10/4/25, 9am - 5pm

Sunday, 10/5/25, 9am - 5pm

## NATURAL HISTORY

# Sligo Sponges

Jorge Bogantes Montero of AWS gave an excellent talk and walk about freshwater sponges, sharing his knowledge and stories about these newly-found creatures in Sligo, and giving us hands-on experiences with them. We met at Sligo Creek where Bennington Tributary joins it.

Freshwater sponges evolved from their marine (saltwater) ancestors, and possess a similar water-current system of holes and canals for taking in stream water, filtering small organic particles from it to feed, and releasing it back into the stream. The Sligo sponges are in the family Spongilla and can appear in branching, clump-like, or crust-like form. Often algae grow on the sponges lending them a greenish color. In a symbiotic relationship, the algae use the sponge as a support while providing oxygen (and food in the form of dying algae) to the sponge.



Jorge identifies the sponge parts. They are invertebrate animals, not plants.



Setting up the viewing microscope on the sponge.



Close up of the sponge.



Preparing a sample to send to the lab for DNA analysis.



All suited up to look for sponges.

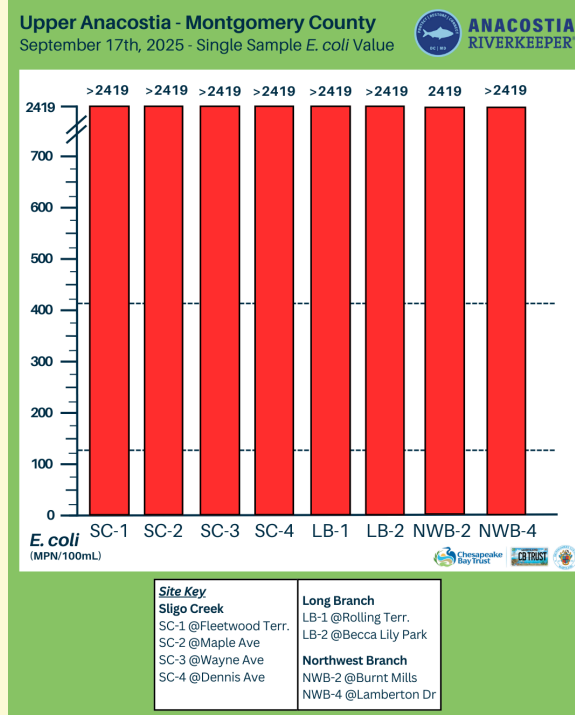
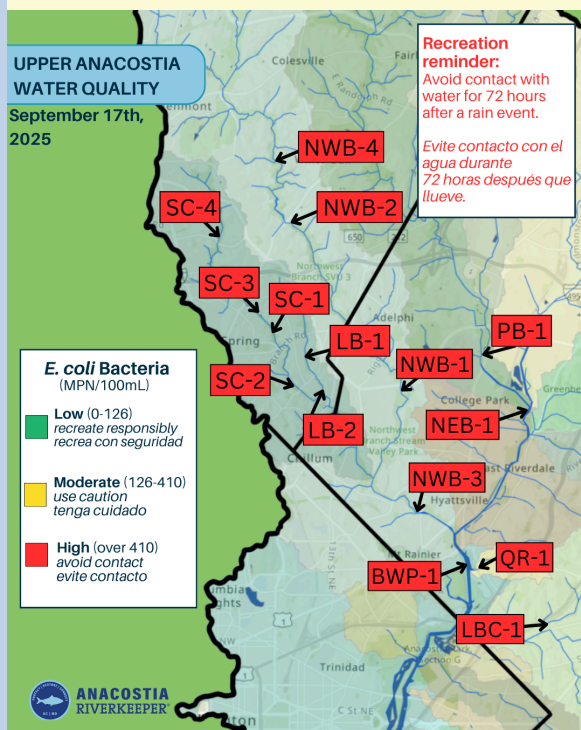


Looking through the aquascopes for sponges. The aquascopes clarify the view of the creek bottom.

Photos above by Wes Geertsema, Kit Gage, Heidi Kaigler, and Christine Dunathan

## WATER QUALITY/STORMWATER

# Summer Water Quality Test Results: Red Everywhere



The last water quality readings for the season show levels of E. coli at least 5 times higher than the 410 MPN/100mL threshold for safe contact with the water for humans and pets at all test sites. The recent drought conditions in August and this month have very likely caused these high E. coli levels.

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## SLIGO WATERSHED

# Always Wondered About...

- Wondering about a mammal, amphibian, reptile, fish, or bird?
- See problems in the creeks or parklands you think FOSC could help with?
- Heard an interesting speaker you think FOSC could host?
- Have an idea you want FOSC to know about?



**It takes just a moment to let us know here.** We'll figure out what we can do and let you know!

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## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

# Upcoming Events & Volunteer Opportunities

Watch the [FOSC Home page](#) and the [FOSC Calendar of Events page](#) for more upcoming FOSC programs and volunteer events.

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 7010 Woodland Ave, Takoma Park  
 Saturday, 10/4/25, 9am - 5pm  
Sunday, 10/5/25, 9am - 5pm

*Click on the flyer to go to the order form*

## Spring Park Walk

**Sunday, Oct 19 at 2:00pm**

**Meet at the spring in Spring Park,  
at Elm and Poplar Streets in Takoma Park.**

Join naturalist Bruce Sidwell for a walk at Spring Park in Takoma Park. We'll get acquainted with a wide assortment of native trees and shrubs including bald cypress and their knees. We'll also explore the fascinating history of this unique park in the Sligo watershed.

The park is at the intersection of Elm Avenue and Poplar. All ages are welcome.



FOSC STORE/LISTSERV

## T-Shirt, Ball Cap, or a Fundana?

**Now in the FOSC Store:** the poetry volume **Decolonizing the Park**, by Dennis Huffman, a FOSC Weed Warrior and Sligo watershed resident.

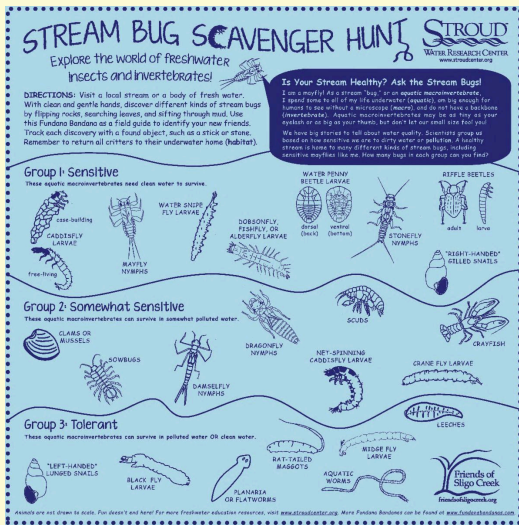
Decolonizing the Park



Dennis Huffman

**For the buggy person in your life...  
a Stream Bug Scavenger Hunt Fundana!**

**¡Y ahora en español!  
Para la persona que gusta  
insectos en tu vida...  
¡Una Fundana para la  
búsqueda del tesoro de  
insectos del arroyo!**



Accurate drawings of stream bugs that morph into flying creatures that feed fish, birds and others. Learn how we know stream health by who is living in the water. Fundanas are 100% cotton, last for years, and have many uses.

Dibujos precisos de insectos de arroyo que se transforman en criaturas voladoras que alimentan a los peces, pájaros y otros. Descubra cómo sabemos la salud de los arroyos según quién vive en el agua. Las fundanas son 100 % algodón, duran años y tienen muchos usos.

Order your fundana, t-shirt, ball cap and mugs from the [FOSC store](#). You can have your order mailed to you or opt to pick it up locally. All sales support FOSC programs. Thank you.



## JOIN FOSC / JOIN THE FOSC LISTSERV

The next drawing for a t-shirt, cap or fundana - your choice- will happen in fall 2025. We're working on a date. To enter the drawing:

- If you are already a FOSC member, join the [main FOSC listserv](#) to be automatically entered in the drawing.
- If you are not yet a FOSC member and are reading this newsletter from your neighbor's copy, please join FOSC [at this link](#)! You will also be entered in the drawing.

## FOSC GIVING

**Donating to FOSC keeps our many projects going.  
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## Need to Reach Us?

President (Elaine Lamirande): [\*\*president@fosc.org\*\*](mailto:president@fosc.org)

Invasive Plants/RIP (Walter Mulbry): [\*\*invasives@fosc.org\*\*](mailto:invasives@fosc.org)

Litter/Sweep the Creek (Ed Murtagh): [\*\*litter@fosc.org\*\*](mailto:litter@fosc.org)

Advocacy (Kit Gage): [\*\*advocacy@fosc.org\*\*](mailto:advocacy@fosc.org)

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Stormwater (Elaine Lamirande): [\*\*stormwater@fosc.org\*\*](mailto:stormwater@fosc.org)

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*Friends of Sligo Creek is a nonprofit community organization dedicated to protecting, improving, and appreciating the ecological health of Sligo Creek Park and its surrounding watershed.*



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