

# LOCAL WATERS

Full Moon 7/3   Last Quarter 7/10   New Moon 7/19   First Quarter 7/26



## St. Simons Island Light

This Georgia lighthouse was built in 1872 and marks the Atlantic inlet to the Intra-coastal Waterway and the Brunswick River. The Coast Guard maintains the third-order Fresnel lens, visible from 18 miles offshore, as an active aid to navigation. The Coastal Georgia Historical Society owns the 104-foot masonry tower. A previous tower on the island was destroyed during the Civil War. The complex also includes a keeper's house, oil building and Victorian gazebo.



## Poplar Island: Success in the Bay

By Stephen Blakely

Chesapeake Bay has many special places, but about 15 miles southeast of Annapolis, Md., is a spot, Poplar Island, that is unique.

In a region where land is shrinking from erosion and sea-level rise, Poplar Island has grown. In a bay beset with pollution, Poplar is by far the biggest environmental triumph. At a time when government programs are often criticized, the complex restoration of Poplar Island is a case study of interagency cooperation, accomplishment and success.

Until 14 years ago, Poplar was one of the Chesapeake's "disappearing" islands, having steadily shriveled from more than 1,000 acres of land to about 3 acres of small marshy islets. It once had several farms, a hundred permanent residents, even an elite hunting club that Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman enjoyed. All of them vanished with the land. The island was considered "effectively gone."

In 1998 the Army Corps of Engineers started rebuilding Poplar Island to its 1847 footprint using clean dredge material from the Bay. The bottom silt comes from approach

channels to Baltimore, one of the nation's most important commercial harbors. It depends on constant dredging to remain open to shipping.

Poplar Island has grown to 1,140 acres. Half (the eastern side) is low-lying marshland habitat painstakingly engineered to attract aquatic wildlife. The other half is a huge spoil site that ultimately will be filled with 40 million cubic yards of Chesapeake Bay bottom. When it is completed around 2029, the higher western side will be planted with trees and brush to create new upland habitat for an even greater range of wildlife.

### A shoal-draft anchorage

For shoal-draft boaters, the new Poplar Island restores one of the most convenient anchorages in the popular route between Annapolis and Oxford, Md., just west of the Knapps Narrows entrance to the Choptank River. But it is *only* an anchorage. Poplar is an active construction site, so the Corps of Engineers does not allow boaters to land on the island or tie up at the small working dock. And with only 5 to 6 feet of depth, this harbor obviously is not for deep-draft boats, especially in heavy weather.

ROBERT L. DRAKE; USACE (FROM LEFT)

Nevertheless, you can visit this fascinating place on a free public tour. You can reserve a spot on a Maryland state boat that leaves from nearby Knapps Narrows, a 15-minute ride.

I first anchored in Poplar Island Harbor more than 30 years ago, when the island was still intact. It provided a calm and protected shelter, the sunsets enhanced by dozens of great blue herons, osprey and other birds that would return to Poplar's trees at night. With amazing speed, however, erosion killed the trees and cut through the island, destroying the shelter for birds and boats. For years, Poplar Island was merely a waypoint to pass and no place to stop.

Last June I returned and, to my relief, discovered it is once again a good harbor of refuge. Arriving at dusk after an extremely hot and humid day, we were soon hit by the most violent and sustained thunderstorm in all my years on the Chesapeake: nearly 50-mph sustained winds and 65-mph gusts that lasted an hour and a half. But the mud bottom at Poplar provides good holding, and with a generous 25-to-1 anchor scope out for safety, Bearboat's anchor held solid.

The spark for this project was the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which was concerned about the accelerating loss of "remote island habitat"



The Army Corps of Engineers is rebuilding Poplar Island using clean dredge material from the Chesapeake.

in the Chesapeake and the slow but deadly effect it was having on birds, waterfowl and other wildlife. Baltimore and the Corps of Engineers needed a new place to put dredge spoils, and the FWS needed new land. The agencies found common ground on Poplar under the banner of "economy and environment," preserving the local economy (120,000 Maryland jobs depend on the port of Baltimore, directly or indirectly) while restoring precious habitat for the Chesapeake's wildlife.

During the "inflow" season (November to March) tugboats arrive at the southern dock of Poplar with barges filled with dredge material, which is mixed with water and pumped onto the island to settle and dry out. This muddy "crust" is carefully shaped by amphibious earth-moving equipment to create habitat cells on the eastern side of the island. Eventually it will fill the massive western sand berms to hills 25 feet high. Volunteers stabilize the habi-

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tat cells by planting thousands of plugs of marsh grass propagated by the Providence Center of Arnold, Md., which employs developmentally disabled adults.

### Alive with wildlife

From the very beginning, wildlife literally flocked to Poplar Island as its shores re-emerged from the waves. Osprey even nested in the construction equipment, and many rare and endangered species — plovers, sandpipers, terns, oystercatchers — quickly made Poplar their home. Before the restoration only three bird species still nested on the island. That's up to 25 species, and more than 170 species visit. FWS says the count is growing.

A big surprise has been the island's success with diamondback terrapins, a rare brackish water turtle — and Maryland's "official state reptile." Almost as soon as construction workers started building the sand berms and beaches, they noticed ter-

rapins crawling out of the water to lay their eggs in it. Biologists were called, and the island now hosts the nation's largest terrapin research and propagation project. With no fox or raccoon — their major predators — terrapins here enjoy a nearly 90 percent survival rate, compared with 10 percent or less elsewhere.

This led to the popular Terrapin Headstart Program, in which 250 hatchlings a year are farmed out to Maryland elementary schools for students to adopt and raise during the winter in science classes. In the late spring, children, parents and teachers come out to Poplar to release the turtles into the wild. Poplar now has a big educational and volunteer program and is visited by more than 3,000 people a year, even though its free island tours are not advertised.

The Corps of Engineers and the Port of Baltimore are the lead agencies on Poplar, with the FWS handling wildlife management, but an alphabet soup of federal,

state and local agencies are also involved. Remarkably, they cooperate with great effectiveness. The project also has been a surprising bureaucratic and political achievement, in addition to an environmental one. "Initially it was hard to build trust, but we just work together and negotiate. It's kind of unusual," says Mark Mendelsohn, a biologist with the Corps of Engineers. "Now we all speak the same language."

Adds Chris Guy, a FWS biologist: "We feel very strongly we're making a big difference here. It's been a big success."

Free Poplar Island tours can be arranged — well in advance — through Laura Baldwin of the Maryland Environmental Service, [lbald@menv.com](mailto:lbald@menv.com), (410) 770-6503. More about the island can be found by searching "Poplar Island" at [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov) and [www.nab.usace.army.mil](http://www.nab.usace.army.mil).

*Freelance writer Stephen Blakely sails an Island Packet 26 out of Galesville, Md., on Chesapeake Bay.*

## Mystic Seaport appoints captain for schooner

*Mystic, Conn.*

Mystic Seaport Museum named Nicholas Alley captain of the 61-foot schooner Brilliant. Alley has been a licensed captain for more than 25 years, including billets on the sailing vessels Westward, Harvey Gammage, Spirit of Massachusetts, Lettie G. Howard and Pride of Baltimore II.

For nearly 60 years, Brilliant has served as Mystic Seaport's primary sail-training vessel. Launched in 1932, she was designed by the legendary Olin Stephens and has been with the seaport since 1953. The schooner sails on multiday cruises up and down the Eastern Seaboard as part of the museum's mission of creating an enduring link to America's maritime heritage.

"Being captain of the Brilliant requires someone who is not just an outstanding mariner, but someone who understands the special role the schooner plays in the history of Mystic Seaport," seaport president Steve White says. [www.mysticseaport.org](http://www.mysticseaport.org)

## Newport Maritime Center caters to cruisers

*Newport, R.I.*

Newport's new Maritime Center — located in the historic Armory building — is a resource for transient boaters. The city-owned \$1.46 million facility includes storage lockers, restrooms, showers, laundry, vending machines, a lounge with charts and Internet



## Shark exhibit showcases Meltzoff paintings

Two iconic paintings of sharks doing battle with undersea foes will be the touchstones of "SHARK!" an exhibition at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art. The works are by Stanley Meltzoff (1917-2006), considered by many the first and foremost painter of game fish in their natural settings. Neither of the paintings has been on public display since the artist's death six years ago. As an early and enthusiastic scuba diver, Meltzoff secured a commission from Sports Illustrated in 1960 to do a series of game fish paintings. His detailed depictions of striped bass, bluefish, sailfish and other species won him accolades. "SHARK!" opened May 13 and runs through Nov. 4. Elsewhere, a one-man Meltzoff show opens June 7 at the American Museum of Illustration in New York. [www.silverfishpress.com](http://www.silverfishpress.com)