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September 2004



Wertheim

*National Wildlife
Refuge*

Lower Carmans River Guide



Red-winged blackbird
USFWS

A Lifeline for Wertheim NWR

Welcome to the Lower Carmans River, part of the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge! The Carmans River starts as a freshwater stream and ends in the Great South Bay, providing both fresh- and saltwater habitats. Hundreds of species of plants, fish, birds and mammals flourish here, depending on the River and adjacent lands for survival amidst surrounding urbanization.

If you're quiet and patient, you may just catch a glimpse of life along the River.

Enjoy your visit!

Waters Steeped with History

Native Americans

People have been canoeing on the Carmans River for centuries. Long before white settlers arrived on Long Island, the Unkechaug Tribe whaled and fished here in dugout canoes. Some of these canoes held up to 80 people and could be paddled all the way to Boston!

English Settlers

When families from the English colonies across Long Island Sound arrived, they were drawn to the Carmans River for fish and game. The settlers built mills along the

Male wood duck



Carmans River

banks, and eventually a shipyard and a duck farm. A ferry used to run to Smith Point Beach during the summer. Duck hunting served many as sport for game, and at one time much of the lower river was a private hunting preserve.

Wildlife Managers and Conservationists

To protect the land for future generations, owner Maurice Wertheim left it to the federal government to become the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge in 1947. Lucille Wellington donated another area of wetland at the mouth of the River.

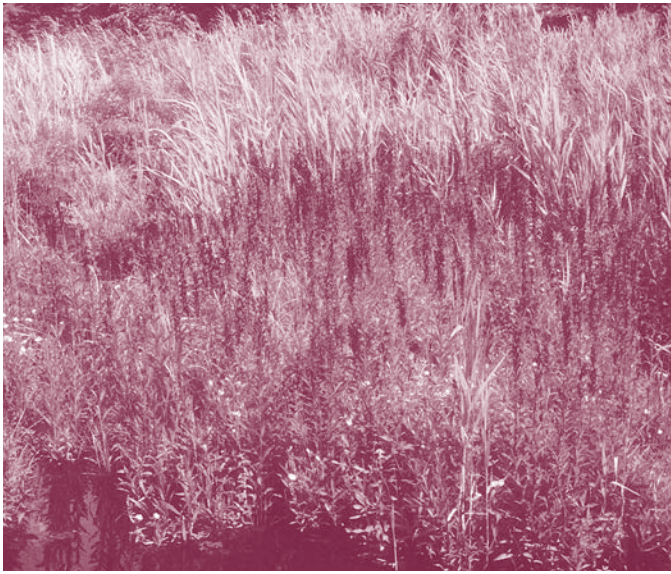
In 1974, thanks to the dedication of members of the community and Students for Environmental Quality—a local high school group—the Carmans River became the first to be protected under New York State's Wild and Scenic River Act.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protects the Carmans for wildlife and for people; please respect the River as an unspoiled part of our local heritage.

A River for All Seasons

Spring breeds new life

Spring is full of activity along the Carmans River. By late March,



Cardinal flower

osprey return to refurbish their large, stick nests. The spikes of the skunk cabbage emerge along the riverbanks and the flowers of the swamp maple bloom red and yellow. The call of breeding spring peepers from nearby ponds can be heard in the late afternoon hours. On sunny days, turtles warm themselves on the river's edge. Among the *Phragmites*, male redwing blackbirds establish their breeding territories and show off their red shoulder patches. Green herons return from the south, while out near the Bay, the bufflehead congregate before moving to breeding grounds farther north.

Summertime nurseries burst with color

By late spring and early summer many birds are raising their families. Be careful not to approach the nest or young of the mute swan; they can be very aggressive when threatened. Beautiful wood ducks nest in June; you will see wood duck nesting boxes on short poles along the river, with a metal collar around the bottom to keep out predators. Red cardinal flower, blue irises, pink marsh mallow and fragrant white swamp azalea are

in bloom. The tops of the *Phragmites* turn purple.

Fall changes send birds south

Shorter days, crisp nights, turning leaves—don't miss a trip down the River in Fall! Many species migrate south at this time of year. In late September, migrating tree swallows dart above the river in undulating flocks before plummeting into the *Phragmites* to roost for the night. While you may see hawks passing overhead, you're sure to observe Canada geese flying south in their distinctive V-shaped patterns. Black and orange monarch butterflies also migrate now, and can often be seen feeding on yellow goldenrod. Along the shore, leaves turn red and yellow—the tupelo and poison ivy first.

Winter waterfowl wait for warmth

Winter is a dynamic time on the river. Some years the bay and parts of the river freeze over. But you may spot bufflehead and coot near the mouth. Great blue heron stalk the water's edge searching for a meal, while black duck and Canada geese gather where the ice gives way to open water. Mergansers, hooded and common, move along the River's brackish and salty waters. Many Belted kingfishers return early, as soon as the ice has melted, while some stay year-round.

Osprey



**Find Your Way —
Navigate by
Landmarks**

*Section I — Montauk Highway to
Squassux Landing*

Paddling south of Montauk Highway, you will see the high arch of the Long Island Rail Road Montauk Branch bridge before you. On the west side of the River you may be able to see remains of the old Robinson Duck Farm, active into the 1970s. Look for tupelo trees and red maple. In the spring, skunk cabbage grows along the bank. You can see kingfishers, swans, geese and ducks.

Depending on the tide, you may need to duck as you pass under the second, lower bridge. In the spring and early summer, look for swallow nests made of mud packed under the bridge, but be careful not to disturb eggs or young. Beyond the second bridge, on the east side of the river, is a large island that can be circumnavigated at high tide.

Across from the island, on the west side, lie the headquarters of the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge Complex (*landing is not permitted*). After the refuge dock, a small creek leads inland; here you can catch a glimpse of the White Oak Nature Trail, accessible from the Wertheim NWR parking lot.

Continuing south around several bends, you will come to Steve Barto's Creek (also called Yaphank Creek)

*View from
Wertheim NWR
Headquarters*



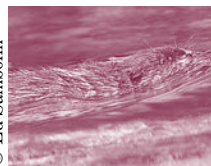
Yaphank Creek

where riparian wildflowers like the fragrant swamp azalea bloom. South of this creek are the remains of Commander Rochester's Dock. Following the bends in the river, you will see the sign for Indian Landing on the east side, beside a large cherry tree. At Indian Landing you can beach your craft and follow a 1-mile trail through oak and pitch pine. To the south of the landing jut the remains of another dock. Farther along you will come to Little Neck Run, once the site of the Leskowitz Duck Farm. Stands of cattails survive here among the invasive *Phragmites*.

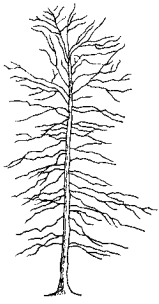
*Section II — From Squassux
Landing to the Great South Bay*

Leaving Indian Landing and following the river south, you will eventually see the bulkheads of Squassux Landing to the west, where people often fish and crab. Directly south of the bulkheading is a canoe ramp, the last putout along the river. Along the west bank are docks, filled with boats in the summer. At the southern end of the docks is the entrance to Newey's Canal, also called Tooker's Creek, which leads to a boatyard.

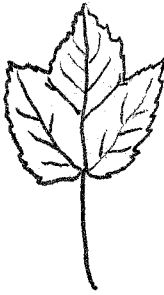
Beyond this canal, also on the west side of the river, you will pass a private dock. Here, near the mouth of the river, the *Phragmites* give way in places to hightide bush and *Spartina* grasses. To the east sits Straddle Point, and farther along, to the west,



Muskrat



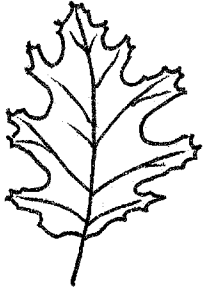
Tupelo, blackgum, pepperidge tree



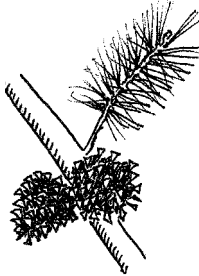
Red maple



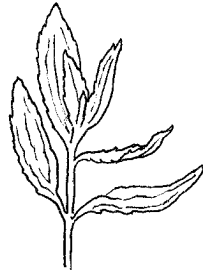
White oak



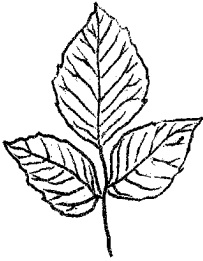
Black oak



Pitch pine



High tide bush



Poison ivy



Common cattail



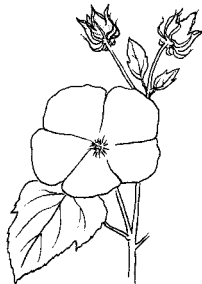
Phragmites



Spartina



Swamp azalea



Marsh mallow



Painted turtles

© Ed Sambolin

narrow Rose's Creek. Farther south on the east side you will come to the more navigable Big Fish Creek, which ends at the Refuge's impoundment (area closed to public entry). Past East Cove and then West Cove is narrow Little Fish Creek, just to the north of Sandy Point. Look for gulls and cormorants, congregating on the water's edge. Farther south, on the opposite side of the river, juts Long Point, beyond which is the Great South Bay.

Identification Guide

Plants

Tupelo, blackgum, pepperidge tree – branches at 90° angles; first to turn red in late summer

Red maple – freshwater indicator species; “palmate” leaves turn red in fall

White oak – rounded lobes on leaves; smooth-ish white bark

Black oak – pointy leaves and rougher; darker trunk

Pitch pine – scraggly-looking, yellow-green pine

High tide bush – grows on marsh in salty water; thick, fleshy leaves

Poison ivy – vine with three shiny leaves; turns red in fall; avoid touching

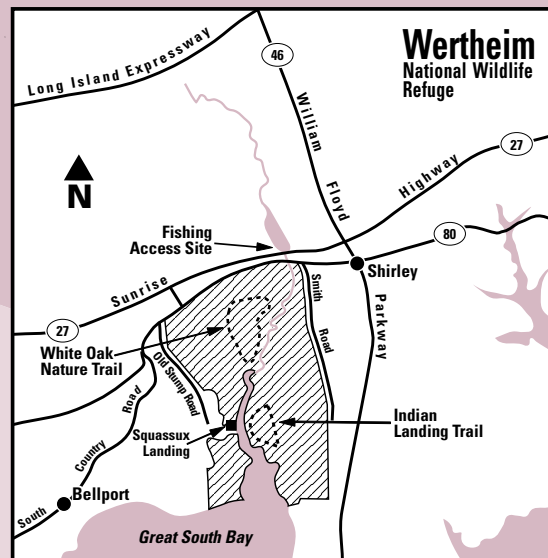
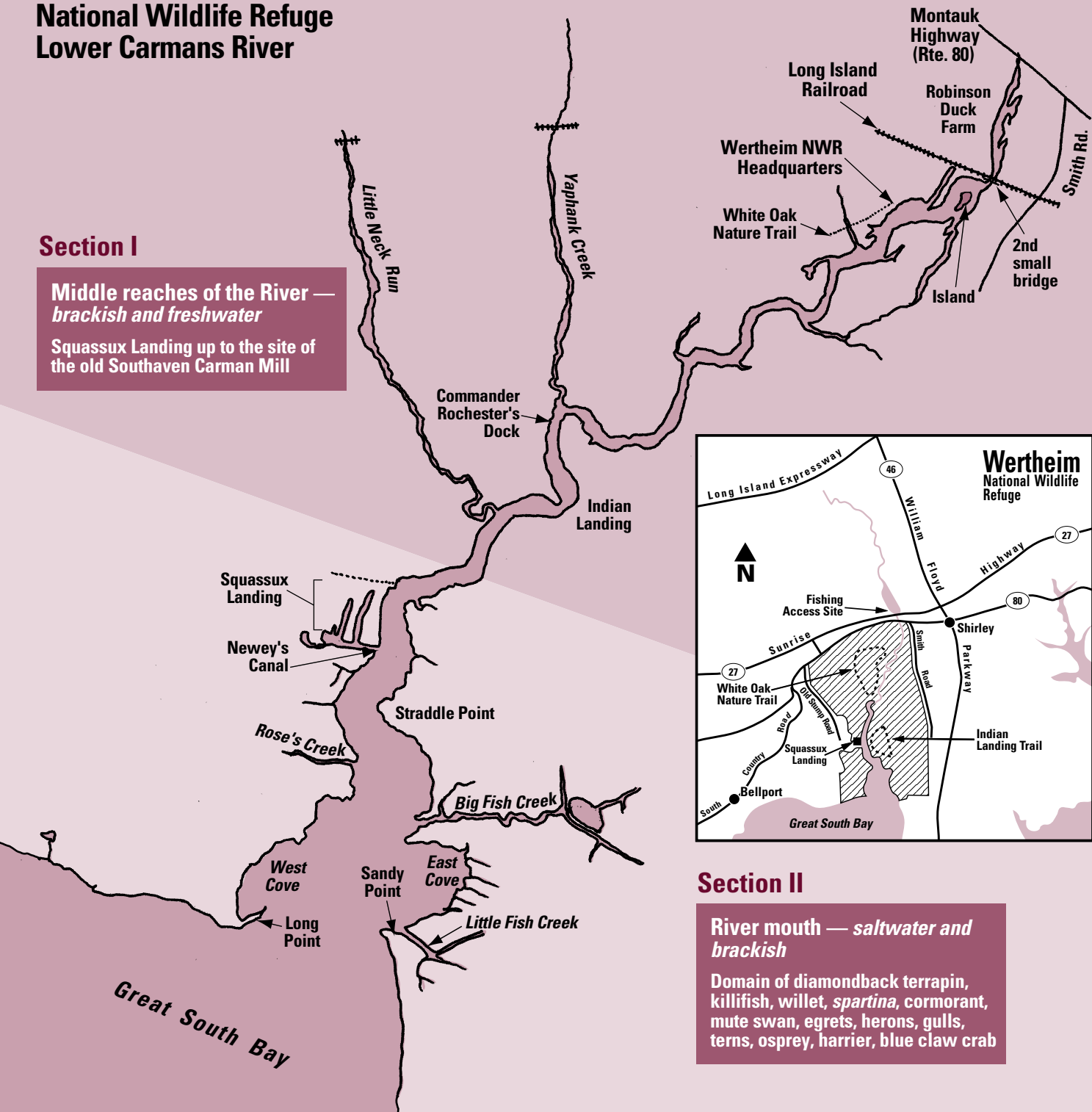
Wertheim

National Wildlife Refuge Lower Carmans River

Section I

Middle reaches of the River —
brackish and freshwater

Squassux Landing up to the site of
the old Southaven Carman Mill



Section II

River mouth — *saltwater and
brackish*

Domain of diamondback terrapin,
killifish, willet, *spartina*, cormorant,
mute swan, egrets, herons, gulls,
terns, osprey, harrier, blue claw crab



Green heron

Common cattail – thick spiky, brown tops and flat, narrow leaves

Phragmites – most common reed; plumed tops; introduced, invasive plant

Spartina – low, green marsh grass; called “salt hay”; turns yellow-green in autumn

Swamp azalea – small and fragrant white flowers bloom in summer; grows in fresh water of upper reaches

Marsh mallow – pink, hibiscus-like flowers bloom in summer; grows in brackish water

Blue flag iris – blue-purple flowers bloom in summer; grows in fresh water

Canadian burnet – spiky white flower; compound leaves

Cardinal flower – bright red flower blooms in late summer; on the NYS protected list and is unlawful to pick

Goldenrod – yellow spray blooms in late summer; provides food for butterflies

Joe Pye weed – late blooming composite in aster family; pale pinkish flowers clustered at top

Wild aster – bright purple flowers seen in marshes in the fall

Arrowhead – freshwater plant; distinctive, arrow-shaped leaves

Skunk cabbage – large green leaves with yellow flower; grows in boggy places, appearing in March; melts its way through the snow



Blue flag iris



Canadian burnet



Cardinal flower



Goldenrod



Joe Pye weed



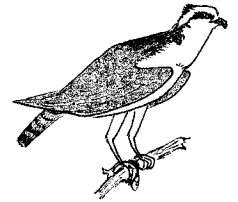
Wild aster



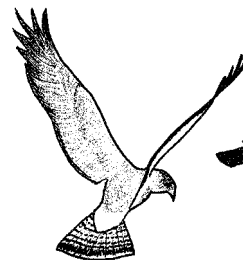
Arrowhead



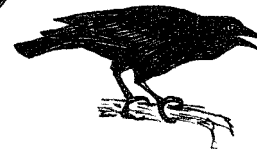
Skunk cabbage



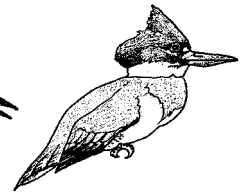
Osprey



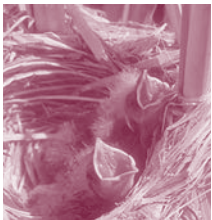
Northern harrier



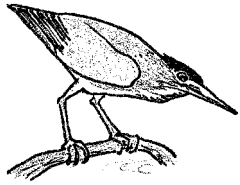
Common crow



Belted kingfisher



Nesting redwing blackbirds



Green heron



Great blue heron



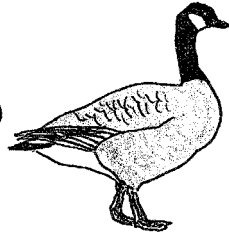
Great egret



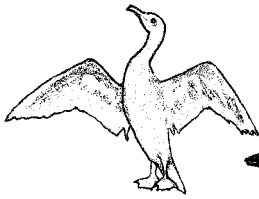
Snowy egret



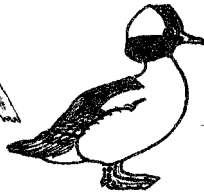
Mute swan



Canada goose



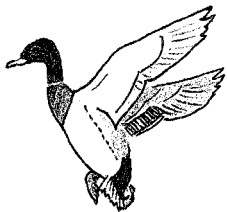
Cormorant



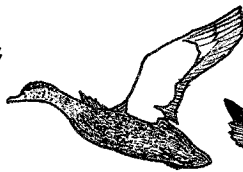
Bufflehead



Hooded merganser



Mallard



Black duck



Wood duck



USFWS

Belted kingfisher

Birds

Osprey – fish-eating hawk; call a series of clear whistles

Northern harrier – also called marsh hawk; seen flying low over marshes; note white rump patch

Common crow – large and black; its smaller cousin, the fish crow, has a raspy voice

Belted kingfisher – blue-gray with crest; dives at fish; loud, rattling call

Green heron – small heron with greenish back and reddish neck and breast

Great blue heron – large, gray body, long legs; white face with black crest

Great egret – large, white wading bird; yellow feet and yellow bill

Snowy egret – smaller, with yellow feet and black bill

Mute swan – large, white bird; very aggressive, especially when breeding!

Canada goose – common; black neck and head, white on face

Cormorant – dark, diving bird with orange throat patch

Bufflehead – diving duck; male has large white patch on greenish head, dark wings

Hooded merganser – small diving duck; male has black and white crest on head

Mallard – common duck; male has green head, yellow bill; female brown

Black duck – larger than mallard; white patches under wings; fly straight up when startled

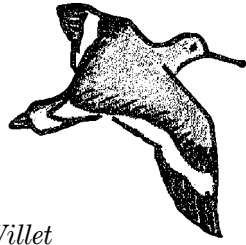
Black ducks in winter



© Ed Sambolin



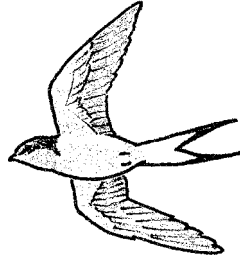
Coot



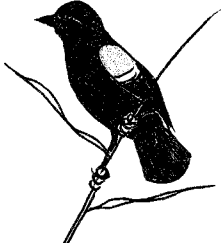
Willet



Tree swallow



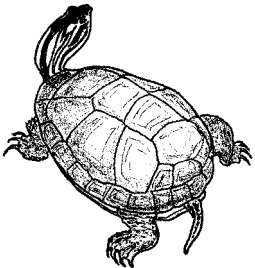
Barn swallow



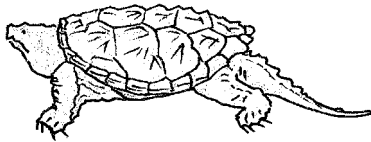
Red-winged blackbird



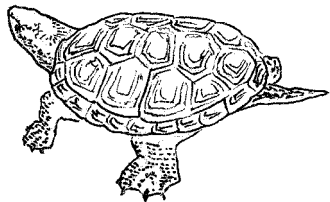
Marsh wren



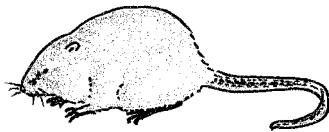
Eastern painted turtle



Snapping turtle



Diamond back terrapin



Muskrat

Wood duck – smaller than mallard; nests in tree cavity or box provided; male ornately colored

Coot – duck-sized bird, dark gray with black head, white bill and large, lobed feet; seen mostly in fall and winter

Willet – brown wading bird with distinctive black and white wing pattern

Tree swallow – small, dark green bird with white belly and slightly forked tail; eats mosquitoes

Barn swallow – small, brown bird with peachy colored breast; deeply forked tail; nests in buildings and under bridges

Red-winged blackbird – black bird with red shoulder patches on males; nests in *Phragmites*

Marsh wren – very small brown bird; nests in grasses and high tide bush; call a buzzing rattle

Miscellaneous

Eastern painted turtle – smooth-backed water turtle with striped face; suns on logs

Snapping turtle – large, dark water turtle with rough back

Diamond back terrapin – seen near mouth of river; gray body, dark shell

Muskrat – beaver-like mammal seen along shore or swimming; makes “V” shape in water

Carp – brackish to fresh water fish; seen near banks of river above Indian Landing

Snapper – immature bluefish

Northern water snake – sometimes seen swimming; black body with white undersides

Killifish – small, chubby minnow specially adapted to brackish water

Mosquito – important base of wetlands food chain both in larval and adult stages

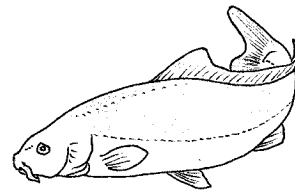
Blue claw crab – males have blue claws; red when cooked!

Further Reading

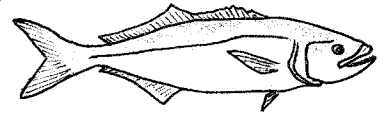
A Nature Journal, Dennis Puleston

The Carmans River Story, Pamela Borg and Elizabeth Shreeve

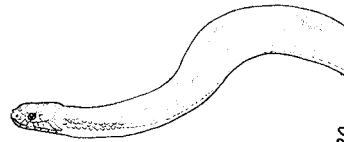
Many thanks go to our neighbors, Carin Clevidence and Jennifer Puleston, who lent their knowledge and love of the Carmans River, as well as their creative expertise, to this project. Their work truly made this guide a reality!



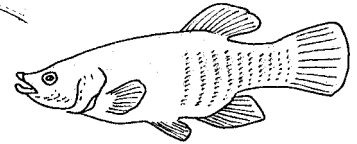
Carp



Snapper



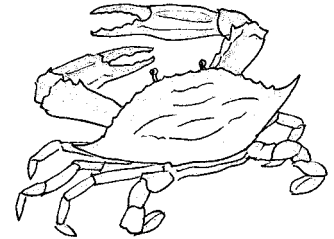
Northern water snake



Killifish



Mosquito



Blue claw crab

Great egret



Canoeing the Carmans