OYSTER POND
ENVIRONMENTAL TRUST
P.O. Box 496 Woods Hole, MA 02540

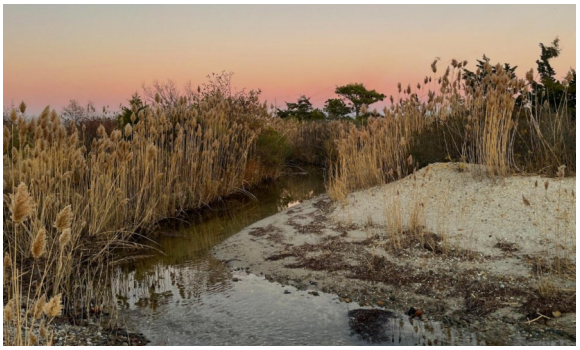
December, 2025

President's Message by Jenn Goebel

Dear Members and Supporters,

As OPET's new president, I would like to first thank Alfredo Aretxabaleta, our outgoing president, for his steady leadership and service to OPET. You may have seen Alfredo at Trunk River cleaning out a blocked herring run or removing fallen trees along the trails. He's also on the cover of our trail map. Alfredo's expertise on coastal ecosystems was of great benefit to OPET. After seven years on the board, Alfredo had to rotate off, but we know his dedication to the pond and the watershed remain, and we're sure he'll continue to be active. Thank you, Alfredo! I would also like to congratulate Chris Brothers, OPET's administrator, who retired from the Falmouth Public School system after 30 years of teaching kids about the environment. In 2022, Chris was inducted into the Massachusetts Science Educators Hall of Fame! Chris not only handles all the administrative details of running OPET, but she also puts her teaching skills to good use by promoting OPET at community events and by educating our members through newsletters and our annual meeting. We wish Chris all the best in her retirement and are pleased she'll be staying on at OPET.

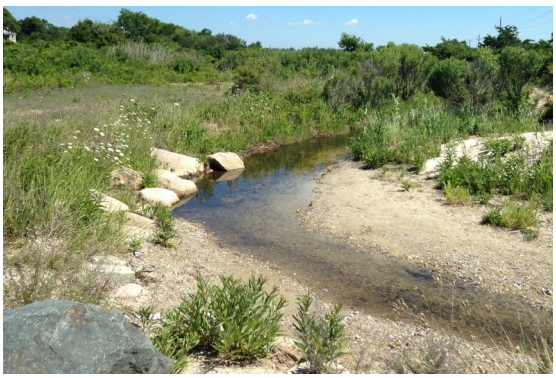
As we look forward to 2026, we are setting our sights on the non-native common reed (*Phragmites australis)* that is slowly taking over parts of Oyster Pond, the adjacent lagoon, and Trunk River that leads into the pond. While there is a subspecies of Phragmites that is native to the U.S. and Canada (*P. australis americanus),* the subspecies crowding out native vegetation originated in Europe *(P. australis australis).* Native Phragmites does still exist on Cape Cod, though it is very rare. You can tell the difference by looking at the stems: native reed stems are smooth, shiny, and reddish brown, while the invasive's stems are ridged and tan to gray in color.



Phragmites along Trunk River. Photo by Jenn Goebel.

This invasive reed very quickly takes over and outcompetes native species. Dense stands of the reed can be so thick that no other species can survive, making the pond edges inhospitable to wildlife. The reed is admirably flexible; it can grow on land or in deep water, and tolerates highly brackish water that can be nearly as salty as the ocean. The stalks can grow up to 18 feet high. Phragmites is starting to invade Trunk River's shallow waterway, which could be a problem in the spring when herring return to Oyster Pond to spawn. The reeds may block fish passage if they are not removed.

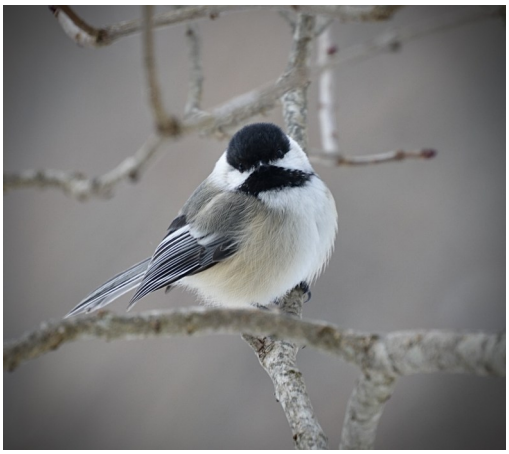
Physically removing Phragmites is no easy task as all the stalks are connected by underground rhizomes. Keeping Phragmites in check is a constant battle. Professional removal is usually a three-year process, with herbicides applied to the stalks in late summer or early fall, followed by physical removal or mowing. This process must be repeated for the next two years. If we are successful at keeping the reed at bay, cattails, smooth cordgrass, bayberry and other native species will reclaim that space, restoring the habitat's value for wildlife. OPET started Phragmites removal in 2006, and has continued control efforts periodically since then with support from the Falmouth Community Preservation Fund and the Woods Hole Foundation. By 2021, roughly 90 percent of the phragmites had ben removed, native vegetation had returned, and views of the pond from Surf Drive and the bike path were restored.



However, with Phragmites once more encroaching in areas adjacent to Oyster Pond, the lagoon, and Trunk River, it's time to address this issue again. While the removal of Phragmites is challenging, perhaps equally challenging is the expense, the permitting process, and the need for coordination among the abutting property owners. In the coming year, we will be mapping the locations of Phragmites around the pond and developing a coordinated strategy for removal. If you are interested in getting involved, please let us know. Working together to return native plants and wildlife to our beloved watershed is one positive action we can take to usher in a healthier environment in the new year.

Trunk River after Phragmites removal in 2016. Photo by Wendi Buesseler.

Species Spotlight: Black-capped Chickadee *by Chris Brothers*



Black-capped Chickadee, the Massachusetts and Maine state bird. Photo by Linda Louise.

Who doesn't love Black-capped Chickadees, with their adorable fluffy bodies clothed in black, gray, and white formal attire? Only five inches long and half an ounce, there's much more to this diminutive bird than meets the eye.

There are seven species of chickadees in North America separated by fine distinctions of their feathers and songs. Where their ranges border each other, chickadees show an unusual bilingual ability to sing both their and the other species' song. Their song is a two note whistle (fee bee), with the second note lower than the first. The song is used to defend a territory and attract a mate.

In fact, the chickadee "song" we associate with this bird, and for which they are named, is not actually their song but their call. The call is used to coordinate within the flock and warn other birds, especially of avian predators. The more "dees" in the call, the greater the threat. Chickadees often travel and forage in mixed flocks, with titmice, woodpeckers, kinglets, creepers, and migrating sparrows and warblers. Other birds in the flock rely on and respond to chickadee warnings. So if you hear a chickadee, look around to see what else might be nearby! Within their flocks, chickadees show a dominance hierarchy. Some birds belong to multiple flocks and are at a different level in each. Birds with higher dominance typically have access to better food supplies and greater reproductive success.

When you see a chickadee at your feeder, it will often take one seed, then fly off without eating it. It often does this repeatedly. What is it doing with all these seeds? It's hiding them throughout its territory to eat later. The chickadee's brain is capable of remembering hundreds, even thousands, of hiding spots or caches. This spatial memory is facilitated by the hippocampus which grows in size during the fall and early winter to accommodate these memories. Birds that live in the harshest climates have the largest hippocampi and these shrink as the caches are used up. At the same time, in the fall, the part of the brain responsible for song shrinks; it enlarges again come spring. Chickadees can go into regulated hypothermia, dropping their body temperature up to 18 degrees Fahrenheit to conserve energy in extreme weather (very few birds can do this, most notably hummingbirds). In one day, they may lose 60 percent of their body fat, by shivering to stay warm.

Chickadees live in deciduous and mixed forests, nesting in old woodpecker holes or in cavities they hollow out in dead trees. Their winter food is a 50/50 mix of seeds and berries and insects. In the spring and summer while raising young, they switch to a higher protein diet of 90% insects and spiders (many seed and fruit eating birds show this seasonal pattern). Chickadees lay an average of 6-8 eggs which hatch after 12-14 days of incubation, and the young fledge another 14 days later. Chickadee populations are generally on the rise as the country is reforesting through natural succession. There are an estimated 43 million Black-capped Chickadees globally, so it shouldn't be too hard to find one on a walk this winter!

Oyster Pond Reflections. Photo by Rob Craig.

We thank our members for continuing to support our efforts to protect the waters of Oyster Pond, the land surrounding the pond, and the plants and wildlife that depend on both. Please consider making a year end contribution to support our important work.

Wishing you Peace, Serenity,

and the Gifts of Nature

this Holiday Season.

Jennifer Goebel, OPET President

Chris Brothers, OPET Administrator