

I BID FAREWELL, FELLOW NATURALIST

by Eric Dinerstein

Illustrations by Trudy Nicholson



Close readers of the *Village News* might have noticed the absence recently of my monthly columns on local natural history and the stunning illustrations of our esteemed Cabin John artist-in-residence, **Trudy Nicholson**. The truth is that this current article, my last, has been a challenge to write. Farewells are always the most difficult of human interactions to put into words. This task is especially difficult because of those of you who have expressed appreciation to me verbally, by email, or even old-fashioned letters. I will miss you even if you never wrote, but perhaps took a second look at the bird at your winter feeder or that plant along the Potomac because your eyes have been opened to natural history.

For me, writing the monthly nature column and spotlighting the remarkable species living on our doorstep beginning with the April 2013 issue, has been an enriching 11 years of local discovery. The first essay focused on spring singers—the wood warblers that herald the arrival of a new season—while the last, in the October 2024 issue of the *Village News*, featured the common carp. In between, there have been 100+ articles, each exploring the ecology of our non-human neighbors in Cabin John. Over that long decade, my professional work has increased in geographic scope and interests. Now, the demands of creating a company to manufacture a new technology called TrailGuard AI has taken center stage. This company uses state-of-the-art artificial intelligence (AI) in tiny cameras that is sent over cell, long-range radio, or satellite to park rangers or villagers in Asia and Africa to provide real-time alerts to: 1) stop poachers before they kill wildlife and 2) detect large mammals that enter into conflict with humans near villages—think elephants and tigers. I have also started on other projects to help save nature around the world, so something had to give.

Even after 11 years of these essays, there are still many more stories to tell: there are more than 1,800 native plant species in our area, hundreds of species of vertebrates, and thousands of invertebrates, and I have covered only a fraction of them. I hope that in some small way I have inspired you to take a fresh look at the natural world around us. The great biologist and defender of Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, once wrote, “To persons uninstructed in natural history, their country or seaside stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wondrous works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall.” It was Trudy’s aim in fine illustration and mine in prose to serve as a kind of periodic gallery guide to Cabin John’s nature.

I was planning on writing a longer piece on a vision for Cabin John in January 2035—what our community would look like if we find a way to continue to reconnect with nature and each other. Since this is the last column, here is an annotated wish list:

By 2035, most Cabin John residents would have converted their monoculture grass lawns to delightful gardens of native shrubs, trees, wildflowers, and ferns, or at least a quarter of their yards, to enrich our lives with more birds, beetles, and butterflies.

By 2035, Cabin John residents would have decided to join the movement to reduce light pollution and return to children,

non-human creatures and ourselves the dark sky and an enhanced experience of star gazing. Light pollution hurts us all.

By 2035, the majority of Cabin John residents would have switched over to native plants that have no need for watering, fertilizers, or insecticides, keeping us free from exposure to cancer-causing substances.

By 2035, even where new houses have gone in and trees cut down, efforts would be underway for a massive replanting of oaks, maples, hackberry, and other natives to create a band of forest stretching from the water tower on Archbold Terrace and Cabin Road, down to MacArthur Boulevard, and all the way to Riverside Drive on the Canal—a fully connected forested corridor allowing birds to fly from the Potomac River to the top of our neighborhood in uninterrupted greenery.

By 2035, when on a walk along the Potomac you would be able to stop and drink the water and see native fish and plants in a restored river.

Finally, by 2035, every child growing up in Cabin John would be able at age ten to name at least ten native plants and animals.

Together, we can do this. Thank you again for your attention to these columns. May your Cabin John nature strolls in the days and months ahead be glorious and filled with discovery and resolve to do what you are able to preserve and restore our area’s nature. ~*ED*

