

The Voice of our Community, Marsh and Meadow

Editor's Splash

The truth isn't always pretty, but as long as there is mud in the pond, we will dig through it!



Where to find us

Pin your comments to The Old Willow and we will collect them!

Nesting Season Chaos: Prime Real Estate War Breaks Out Along the North Canal

Photo Finish or Fowl Play? Duke Featherweight's First Scandal as Judges Question a Disputed Regatta Result

Market Day Meltdown: Mrs. Mallard's Snail Jam Sells Out in Under Ten Minutes, Riot Narrowly Avoided

Council Unveils 'Grippier' New Boardwalk, Promises This One Definitely Won't Be Slippery

Ink Wars: Roxy Ripple-Maker and Bitter-Bill Trade Barbs in Print as Newsroom Rivalry Boils Over



Grumbings from the Ruffled Feather

By Barnaby Bitter-Bill

October has arrived, and with it the marsh's sudden, mystifying enthusiasm for pretending to be frightened of things that live here every other day of the year.

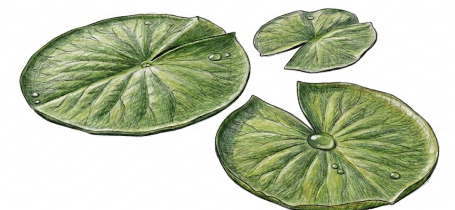
Cobwebs are going up along Lilypad Lane with more care than anyone showed the boardwalks. Somebody has taken to hooting ominously from the reeds after dark, and when I went to investigate I found it was young Gideon Greenhead's nephew, rehearsing.

Rehearsing! Back in my day a duck did not require a month's notice to be unsettling.

And while we are on the subject of things done to this marsh without consultation: an update, for readers who have written in, on the fate of my log. Relocated in September, you will recall, forty feet downstream and repurposed as a "Welcome Feature" without so much as a note left in its place. I am now informed, by three separate sources who each seemed to enjoy telling me, that the Heritage & Halloween Sub-Committee has requisitioned it a second time — sanded, propped upright, and carved into what they are calling a "Spooky Sentinel," with two lily pads glued on for eyes and a grin that does not, in my professional opinion, read as remotely menacing. **My log. A sentinel!** It could not

stand up to a dry week in July and it is now expected to guard Market Square from the supernatural.

I am told the unveiling is planned for Halloween night itself, weather and structural integrity permitting, and that I am welcome to attend "as a member of the public." I have declined, in writing. The rest of Waddletown may dress its ducklings up and parade them past a log with lily pads for eyes if it wishes; this editor will be at his desk, door shut, pretending the whole season is happening to somebody else's marsh. Sort yourselves out, Waddletown, or the next thing you read from this desk will be my resignation letter, carved into whatever is left of that log by December.



Council Unveils "Grippier"

New Board Walk

By Quillan Swamp-Scribe

The parish council gathered on Lilypad Lane this morning for a ribbon-cutting ceremony it clearly hoped would draw a line under six months of boardwalk misfortune, unveiling a fully resurfaced walkway treated with what officials are calling a "specialised traction compound" and promising, in the words of one council member, that "this one will definitely not be slippery."

Longtime residents, understandably, have heard this before. The original planks were declared a hazard within a week of installation. The subsequent Emergency Re-Mudding Initiative was later found, via leaked council memos, to have made the surface forty percent more treacherous than the wood it was meant to fix. It was against this backdrop that the same elderly duck couple present at both previous unveilings could be seen once again gripping each other's wings at the edge of the crowd, less out of ceremony than out of habit. The ribbon itself was cut without incident, though the councilmember performing the honours did pause for a noticeably long moment before committing a second webbed foot to the new surface.

Reaction along the lane ranged from cautious to openly unconvinced. "I'll believe it's grippy when I've seen a full winter of dew on it," offered one resident, declining to

give her name but not, this desk notes, her opinion. Barnaby Bitter-Bill was seen inspecting a corner plank before muttering something about "quicksand with better marketing" and walking off without further comment. The Gazette will, as ever, be watching the first wet morning closely — and printing the results, whatever they turn out to be.

THIS ONE DEFINITELY WON'T BE SLIPPERLY

- Council



***Ink Wars: Roxy Ripple-Maker and Bitter-Bill
Trade Barbs in Print as Newsroom Rivalry
Boils Over***

By Quillan Swamp-Scribe

Readers of last month's edition will not have missed Roxy Ripple-Maker's "Round Five" broadside against Editor-in-Chief Barnaby Bitter-Bill, in which she invited him, in print, to "sign the papers, take the golden watch, and let the rest of us clean up your mess." What those same readers could not have known, until this week, is that Bill read every word of it standing at the press himself — and has spent the month since drafting a reply this desk was specifically instructed not to soften.

That reply did not appear in his column, which he insists remains above such things. Instead it turned up pinned to the Old Willow's public noticeboard, in the same spot residents usually leave complaints about scum shortages and missing nest linings, under a hand-lettered sign reading: "Any staff member currently measuring the drapes for this office is welcome to try running a print deadline on four hours' sleep and a bad hip before commenting further on this editor's competence." Roxy's response, delivered not through official channels but via a hand-corrected proof left on the print-room table, restyled the footnote's own byline in a font this desk can only describe as deliberately, personally unflattering. Neither party has claimed

responsibility for either document. Both have been seen, separately, admiring their handiwork.

The publisher has so far declined to intervene, on the stated grounds that circulation is up. Staff caught between the two desks report a newsroom now operating under an uneasy truce enforced mainly by which columnist reaches the layout table first each evening. Asked for comment, both Bitter-Bill and Roxy Ripple-Maker said, separately and within four minutes of each other, "no comment" — which, from either of them, is on its own the loudest thing either has said all year.



Spilling the Algae
Roxy Ripple Maker

**Nesting Season Chaos: Prime
Real Estate War Breaks Out Along
the North Canal**

By Roxy Ripple Maker

Darlings, if you have not yet secured your spot along the North Canal, I regret to inform you that you have already lost. Nesting season arrived a full week early this year and the good reeds — the thick, well-drained, south-facing reeds, the ones that don't flood the moment the willows so much as sneeze — were spoken for before most of the marsh had finished its morning preen. What followed can only be described as a territorial free-for-all, and this desk has the scorch marks to prove it.

The worst of it broke out Tuesday between the Featherstone twins and a newly arrived pair from the eastern flats, over a stretch of reed bed roughly the size of a dinner plate that both parties insist has "excellent light." Words were exchanged. A nest half-built by one side was, by Wednesday morning, mysteriously half-unbuilt. Neither party will confirm involvement, though this desk notes that only one of them was seen purchasing replacement twine from Market Square that same afternoon. I am told a mediator has been called in. I am also told the mediator quit within the hour.

If it is any comfort, darlings, at least nobody along the canal is as insufferable about their real estate as a certain editor is about his desk — four decades in the same corner office and still acting as though the rest of us are one bad afternoon from staging a coup for it. Say what you like about a squabble over reeds; at least it ends by nightfall. Until next week, guard your twine, and try not to nest anywhere within squawking distance of anyone named Bitter-Bill.

Other Local Scoops

Spooky Sentinel Sees Traffic: Bitter-Bill's Former Log, Now Halloween Decoration, Reports First Confirmed Fan Club; Committee Denies Log Receiving "Better Treatment Than It Ever Got From Its Owner"

Halloween Havoc Confirmed: Ducklings Demand Candied Water Snails Door-to-Door Along Lilypad Lane; Market Square Merchants Admit They Are "Not Remotely Prepared"

Noticeboard Mystery Deepens: Someone Pinned an Anonymous Rebuttal to an Anonymous Rebuttal on the Old Willow Board; Handwriting Experts Consulted, Remain "Deeply Divided"

Wanderers Streak Continues: Waddletown Notches Second Straight Win on Home Water; Duke Featherweight's Stopwatch Clocks a Personal Best for Getting the Report to Print on Time

By Barnaby Bitter-Bill



What began as an orderly line collapsed the moment word went round that only twelve jars remained. Elbows were thrown. A dispute over queue position between

two respected elder residents, whose names I will withhold purely out of mercy, escalated to the point that Market Square's two volunteer wardens had to physically separate them, and I use the word "physically" with some regret, having been standing rather closer than I intended. One jar changed hands three times before anyone had paid for it. Mrs. Mallard herself, to her credit, kept ladling the entire time with the calm of a duck who has clearly done this before and simply underestimated her own popularity.

She has since promised a larger batch and, mercifully, a numbered ticket system next market day, which this desk endorses without reservation. I will say only this: we have spent six months arguing over boardwalks and tariffs and re-mudding initiatives that never once produced a crowd this size or this determined. Give this marsh a decent jam, apparently, and it will show you exactly what it is capable of. Plan accordingly.





Photo Finish or Fowl Play? Duke Featherweight's First Scandal as Judges Question a Disputed Regatta Result

By Duke Featherweight

Let me say, first, that I have timed every heat, flap, and finish line this marsh has produced since the day I picked up this stopwatch, and I have never once called a result I did not believe in my bones to be correct. Saturday's Reed Regatta was no different. The Lilypad Lane crew came down that final stretch a wingtip ahead, I saw it happen with my own eyes from my usual post on the log, and I would make the same call again tomorrow.

Now, as to the matter of the "photographic evidence" — yes, it was a sketch, and yes, I drew it quickly, and no, I am not going to pretend it belongs in a gallery. But a quick sketch drawn by a duck who was actually watching the finish line is worth more than any amount of hindsight from a crew that was, at the time in question, still rowing. I stand by every pencil stroke of it. As for the two new co-judges the Committee has seen fit to appoint, I welcome them warmly, I will show them exactly where the good log is, and I look forward to demonstrating, heat after heat, that one committed

timekeeper with a steady wing was doing the job perfectly well on his own.

The result stands. I stand by it. And I will be back at the water's edge for the next heat, stopwatch running, sketchbook ready, whether the Committee thinks I need the company or not.





From Plot to Pot - The ultimate guide to growing your own marsh greens and turning them into a five-star lakeside feast.

Candied Snails - A Halloween How-To

With the ducklings already going door-to-door along Lilypad Lane demanding something sweet, this is the year to finally perfect the marsh's favourite Halloween treat: candied water snails. The trick is in the harvest — wait for the first cool evening after sundown, when the snails come up onto the shallow rocks near the Reed Beds to feed, and take only the plump, mid-sized ones. Anything smaller than your bill isn't worth the shell-cracking, and anything larger has usually earned the right to be left alone.



Candied Snails

A glossy, spooky-shelled treat perfect for handing out to trick-or-treating ducklings, or for setting out in a hollow log for the older bachelors pretending they're "just here for the cider."

Ingredients:

- 2 dozen fresh water snails (shelled and rinsed of pond grit)
- 1 generous bill-full of cattail nectar
- A pinch of crushed willow bark, for that "bitter Halloween edge"
- A few drops of dark pond-berry juice, for colour

Instructions:

1. **Prep the Snails:** Give each snail a firm tap against a flat rock to crack the shell, then twist free the meat with your beak. Set the shells aside — you'll want them for presentation.
2. **Warm the Syrup:** In a hollowed gourd set over a sun-warmed stone, blend the cattail nectar with the crushed willow bark and pond-berry juice until it thickens to a dark, glossy syrup.
3. **Coat and Set:** Drop the snails into the syrup one at a time, turning with your foot until fully coated, then lay each one out on a lily pad to harden in the evening air.
4. **Reassemble for Effect:** Once set, nestle each candied snail back into its own cracked shell. Arranged in a row on a dark leaf, they pass very convincingly for a row of small, glistening eyeballs — which is, of course, the entire point.

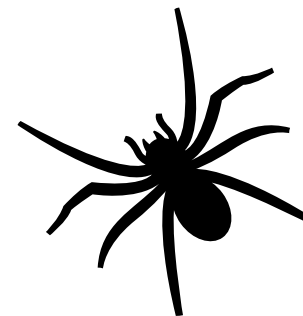
Chef's Tip: For the ducklings who find shells too spooky to touch, skip the reassembly and simply serve the candied snails loose in a hollow pumpkin. Nobody has ever once complained about skipping a step that involves fewer shells.



The Daily Preen

By Penelope Pinfeathers, Fashion Editor

Where High Fashion Meets High Flying



Little Terrors: This Season's Must-Have Duckling Halloween Costumes

Darlings, nothing delights me more than dressing the very smallest webbed feet in this marsh for a proper fright, and this year's duckling costumes are, I am pleased to report, an absolute triumph of imagination over the fact that most of my clients are roughly the size of a dinner roll. Whether your little one is trick-or-treating along Lilypad Lane or simply terrorising the nest from the inside, here are three looks I have personally fitted, hemmed, and — in one memorable case — talked down from eating.

The Halloween Duckling Collection

Tiny Terror Turtle Shell — a soft woven reed shell dyed a menacing green, snapped snugly over the back so your duckling can pretend, for one glorious evening, to be the very creature every parent in this marsh has warned them about. *Sedge-Side Stoneworks*

· Woven Reed, Pond-Moss Dye

Little Lily-Ghost — three overlapping white lily petals draped and pinned into the world's smallest, floatiest ghost costume, with two small holes for the eyes that this correspondent will admit took several attempts to get symmetrical. Drifts beautifully on water, which no other ghost costume on the market can claim. *Quill's Personal Atelier* · 3 White Lily Petals, 1 Reed Pin

Miniature Scarecrow Bonnet — a tightly bundled straw-reed cap with a single crooked feather standing up at the front, for the duckling who would rather frighten the crows than be frightened by anything at all. Pairs beautifully with a scowl, which most ducklings already have on hand. *Lakeside Lutra Leathergoods* · Dried Reed Straw, 1 Crow Feather

All three, darlings, wash clean of pond mud with nothing more than a good shake and a firm talking-to. Happy haunting.



NEXT MONTH

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**First Storm Puts It to the Test: New 'Grippier'
Boardwalk Faces Its Day of Reckoning as Rain
Returns to the Marsh"**

**Regatta Reversal: Co-Judges Strip Duke
Featherweight of His First Call, Sports Desk
'Devastated but Dignified**

**Numbered and Numb: Mrs. Mallard's New Ticket
System Debuts to Its Own Small Riot**

**Duckling Uprising: Schoolhouse Pupils Stage a Sit-In
After Term Four Opens With a Ban on the Beloved
Mud-Sliding Championship**

**Ink Wars, Round Two: Bitter-Bill and Roxy's Uneasy
Truce Collapses Over a Missing Byline**