

Merrymeeting News

The Newsletter of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay • P.O. Box 233 • Richmond Maine 04357

SUMMER 2001

To Preserve, Protect and Improve the Unique Ecosystems of Merrymeeting Bay.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Support comes from members' tax-deductible donations and grants.

Education

Hands Around the Bay, Speaker Series, field trips.

Conservation & Stewardship

Protecting natural resources through private and public ownership, easements and stewardship.

Membership Events

Paddle tours of the Bay, field trips, conservation meetings, potluck suppers and shoreline clean-ups.

Research and Advocacy

Water quality, data collection, toxics, fisheries restoration.

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KEEPING AN EAGLE EYE OUT

During the very early spring those of us out on our skis enjoying the rising warming sun are sometimes treated to an amazing spectacle in the skies. On a day when strong melting winds sweep down over our local pack ice, soaring, gamboling eagle pairs may often be seen aloft over the Bay, talon to talon, wing to wing, each one mimicking the other's maneuvers. The annual visit of the Blue Angels to Brunswick NAS has nothing on these birds that with their almost effortless motions will leave even veteran observers jaw dropped and awestruck.



In the Merrymeeting Bay area the eagle population once numbered between 10-20 pairs dropping in the early 1970's to 2 pair and 1 immature that had been hatched from a Wisconsin transplant. The adverse health effects from a variety of pollutants (particularly DDT, dioxin, & PCB's) were one factor in nearly eliminating our eagle population. Some of the other factors included gunshot wounds, accidental trapping, disturbance from development, and loss of food supply as fish populations dropped due to water pollution. For a period of at least 7 years as reintroduction efforts were underway the only eagles hatched here were from healthy transplant birds from Minnesota and Wisconsin.

While more work remains to be done in all of the areas effecting eagle populations quite clearly conditions have improved for them. The Bay from north Bath to the north end of Swan Island currently hosts 8 eagle nests that we know of. There probably are not as many breeding pairs as there are nests and each nest is not necessarily used each year. In a healthy wild population we would expect to see 2-3 eggs per breeding pair. In the Bay this year of the 8 nests only 4 had young. Three nests had 2 chicks each and one had 1.

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife (MDIF&W) eagle biologist Charlie Todd flies an eagle survey each spring counting young from the air. He also works with groups like ours (as well as individuals) around the state to keep tabs on population trends. However because individual adult birds are not marked or otherwise readily identifiable year to year we can't learn about the sequential reproductive history of a particular individual or pair. Eagles, long listed in the Endangered Species Act were last year proposed for de-listing. We are currently part way through the 1 year comment period required for this process. As (if) de-listing occurs (not necessarily a good thing) it may become easier (regulation wise) to band some adult birds and take samples from small ones. It would appear that many Maine eagle's reproductive successes are better early on in their breeding history which could indicate sensitivity to and effects of body burden contaminants as the birds age. At the top of the food chain and feeding in a water body draining 2 of the dirtiest rivers in the state our eagles are particularly vulnerable. The ability to identify individual birds would let us accurately gauge and monitor the health of our national symbol.

Ed Friedman

BAY DAY 2001

It's an area of stunning natural beauty. Its shores harbor plants found few other places in the world (yes, I said world). You'll find huge flocks of waterfowl and many pairs of our national symbol traversing its skies. Below the surface there are fish that most people would only associate with prehistoric times.

National Park? Nope. Make believe set at Walt Disney World? Nah. The newest Biosphere project, an artificial attempt to create a perfect, natural world under a dome? Not a chance. It's Merrymeeting Bay, and it's in your backyard.

The interesting thing is, despite the scenery, Parker's pipewort, black ducks, bald eagles and shortnose sturgeon, there are a lot of people who live in this increasingly busy part of the world who have no idea that Merrymeeting Bay exists. While that lack of knowledge may seem like a good idea (we can keep it a secret, can't we?) ultimately it means that when it's threatened, there aren't enough people around to stick up for it.

FOMB undertakes many activities to get the word out and to gain voices that will stick up for Merrymeeting Bay. Some of the most important of these are our efforts in local elementary schools. If we can teach today's 4th graders why this



Photo by Ed Friedman

area is worth protecting, then twenty years from now we've got another generation of people who will stick up for the Bay.

To do this FOMB hosted another Bay Day this spring, where we teamed up about 200 students with naturalists, geologists, ornithologists, archeologists and a lot of other people with relevant expertise. But rather than a lecture in front of a white board, they all got together on the shores of the Bay for a day of spring time field work. Muddy shoes, dirt under the fingernails and wide eyes were included at no extra charge.

This year's sessions included geology, digging for artifacts, water quality monitoring, birding, forest walks, fish of the Bay, and even creating your own watershed. The thank you letters we received from the students make it clear that we made an impression. Hopefully they'll carry that impression with them for a long time. There is this totally awesome place called Merrymeeting Bay and I bet Brittany Spears doesn't know anything about it. Her loss. (My daughters tell me I'm showing my age - duh, like, Brittany is, like, yesterday, dude. I have yet to figure out who is, like, today.)

This event doesn't happen without all of the guides and other volunteers who took time out of their busy schedules to be with these students. Many thanks to those who made this day a success, including: Ruth Deike, Jay Robbins, Bill Milam, Ann Hammond, Keith Sherman, Peter Milholland, Tracey Gregoire, Peter Vickery, Ed Friedman, Clancy Cummins, Suzie Drucker, Fritz Kempner, Kathleen McGee, Bob Dale, Leon Ogrodnik, and Bill Rogers. Steve Eagles not only assisted on Bay Day itself, but was instrumental in its planning. Finally, we once again thank the Chop Point School for allowing us to run amok on their grounds during their school day. It's hard to imagine a better site for a Bay Day than right at the Chops overlooking the Bay itself, and the people there again went out of their way to help make this a success.

To make this year's Bay Day even better than last year's we cut the group sizes down to about 10-12 students. The good news is that this meant much better group interaction. It also meant that we were able to accommodate fewer schools, (this spring we had students from Hawthorne, Richmond, Dresden, Fisher Mitchell, Woolwich and Chop Point Schools). To make up for that we're currently planning a second (and fall) Bay Day (September 25th) as well. Please call Whit at 666-3376 if you're interested in helping out. You don't have to be a naturalist - you should just enjoy being with kids and being on the shores of the Bay.

Warren Whitney

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Merrymeeting News

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Merrymeeting News is sent to FOMB members and other friends of the Bay. For information call Warren Whitney, Executive Director, at 666-3376.

BEAVER LODGES IN TIDAL MUD

The normal beaver lodge is an amazing engineering feat. As most readers know, beavers build a dam of wood and mud, creating a pond. Their lodge is a built-up dome of wood and mud, with entrances under the water level, and a living area just above the water line. They then maintain the dam, keeping the water level between the entrance and the floor of their living area. Some beavers also build shelters in the banks of rivers, digging entrances below the water line.

Beavers on the Abagadasset River have adapted these construction techniques to the special demands of a tidal river. For several miles before it meets Merrymeeting Bay, the river meanders between marshes within a shallow valley. Where it cuts into the edge of the valley, the banks are covered with trees. These stretches provide excellent access for beavers to gnaw into hardwoods a few feet from the waters edge.

The rest of the river flows through marshes, covered with grass and willow trees. Beavers have built several lodges in the soft mud of these marshes. The lodges are built at the base of willow trees above the high-water mark and often look like a pile of debris under the tree. The beavers have then dug down into the mud, and out into the river. The entrances are ex-

posed at very low tide, but perhaps the surrounding marshland gives them some protection from predators. I assume that they use the roots of the trees for structural support. These lodges are astonishing adaptations to the unusual environment of this tidal river.

I'm aware of three lodges built in this way. They are near a large lodge built in a marsh at the end of a tidal stream leading into the river. That colony built a dam over the end of the tidal marsh, creating a 'traditional' pond with a lodge surrounded by water. I'm wondering whether the tidal lodges were built by offspring from this older lodge. If so, this new technique may have been developed within a few generations. In the alternative, the tidal builders may be a distinct population that has mastered this environment over many generations. Or perhaps beavers are just really smart.

I would like to hear from anyone who can tell me about other beaver activity in the Merrymeeting Bay area, or who can offer a historical perspective on my neighbors. Please feel free to contact me at (207) 666-3811 or at tblcher@javanet.com.

Tim Belcher

SWAN ISLAND

Swan Island, at the head of Merrymeeting Bay, is a most unique, historic and many-faceted natural place - yet little known to most of us who have looked out onto its shores from the Bay and Kennebec River.

"The Island is a wildlife sanctuary, a wildlife management area, an abandoned 19th century village listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a recreational resource, an open space preserve on the edge of a growing community, and a natural resource located in a watershed which is the largest tidal freshwater estuary on the Atlantic coast. (From the Introduction to *A Master Plan for Swan Island* Winter, 1999-2000.) The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has owned the island since 1940, and for many years has maintained a wildlife specialist living on Swan Island year-round.

Last April, members of the Woolwich, Bowdoinham, Richmond, and Dresden Historical Societies gathered to talk about the serious problem of preserving the two oldest houses on the island. Rusty Dike, Wildlife Specialist for Swan Island, had recently given talks to two of these organizations, describing the island and the plight of these historic buildings. These houses, the Gardiner-Dumaresq house of 1759 and the Tubbs-Reed house of 1800-1810 were not the first dwellings on the island, but are the oldest still standing.

Silvester Gardiner apparently built this house as a gift to his daughter, Rebecca, on her marriage to Philip Dumaresq of Boston, for use as a summer home. This saltbox may be the first house constructed for out-of-state visitors in New England - and thus the beginning of the summer tourist industry.

The handsome early Federal period Tubbs-Reed house on the northern tip of the island is visible from the Richmond Bridge.

Both houses were restored in part, in the early 1960's, but some of the work was inconsistent with good historic preservation and some efforts were actually damaging to the buildings. Now there are leaky roofs and wet basements causing decay and mold, and the sheet rock walls should properly have been plastered.

Christopher Lawson was probably the first settler in 1667 (and only for a few years) but his dwelling house on the southern tip of Swan Island is long gone. Also gone is the home of Captain James Whidden of 1750, which was raided by Indians in September of that year. They carried off his children to be sold to the French in Quebec, as the parents hid naked in the cellar.

Friends of Swan Island was organized with the mission of properly preserving, restoring and maintaining the Gardiner-Dumaresq and Tubbs-Reed Houses. Both are seriously endangered, and if we don't do it soon, they will fall into their cellar holes. Nobody else is going to do it - and this includes the State of Maine.

Friends has already received over \$700 in cash donations and offers for in-kind help, when the time comes. The cost of accomplishing this mission will be over \$200,000, and our initial major efforts will be directed towards applying for grants from private, corporate and Federal organizations.

Donations may be sent to the Dresden Historical Society, Swan Island Fund, P.O. Box 201, Dresden, ME. 04342. This money is being held in a special savings account until the Friends have obtained a Federal tax number. We are also searching for a capable and interested person to head this group.

Bruce Trembly, Dresden (737-4352)

TIDINGS/SUMMER

I spent most of May and June clearing land, preparing a house site in the parcel of benignly neglected woods I've owned for just over a quarter of a century. Land in Bowdoinham was cheap when I bought it, so I could afford to do as its previous owner had done, and leave it alone. I used it as a woodlot, and hunted grouse along its gullies in the fall.

The years passed, development encroached, spreading north from Topsham, and the grouse disappeared. In the settled parts of Maine, grouse reliably indicate a depressed real estate market, and the tide in Bowdoinham has turned against them. It has been a decade since I last heard one drumming in my woods.

There are good arguments against building a new house, particularly against building it in the middle of a woodlot. I have tried to mitigate and limit the damage in a variety of ways, but high-minded friends, my own carping conscience, deerflies, mosquitoes, and no-see-ums have made it clear to me that these gestures cut, when all is said and done, insufficient ice.

But I liked the two months of going early into the woods each morning, with the chainsaw and the wedges, maul, tape measure, timber scribe, and other professional paraphernalia, and getting down to it. I discovered two things I had not quite expected, although in retrospect they seem obvious enough.

One was that clearing shrinks a piece of land remarkably. A woods is like a house with many rooms, each room a part of the whole but also a distinct microhabitat in itself. The absence of perspective in them creates, paradoxically, a sense of psychological space, of many spaces screened and secluded from each other, offering privacy and the possibility of novelty.

A low ridge of glacial till, with big oaks and ashes growing on it, is very different from the flat, damp thicket of fir and hemlock only a few yards away. And trees, particularly hardwoods, have the same effect on vertical space that they do on horizontal space, as you find out when you look up through the layered, leafy canopy of one of the oaks or ashes. Once the land is denuded, it is simply a blank space, like futurity, or like the meager little rectangle of stakes and strings that outlines a house that has not happened yet.

The other thing I learned was that my woodlot is a kind of de facto town common. I had of course known that some people hunted deer and turkeys there, and a good many more skied on its vestigial tote roads. I have often taken equivalent liberties with other people's land, and had no objections.

But as I worked now, I would look up and see somebody watching me. He would say that he had heard rumors somebody was building back in here, or had simply heard the sound of my saw, and had had to come over to see what was up. Sometimes it was a nuisance. I did not like to waste the time, particularly the cool hours of the early morning, in chatting, and yet felt that these visitors were somehow

entitled to having their curiosity satisfied. But more often it was pleasant enough, an opportunity to

meet people in town I did not know, or catch up with ones that I did, but saw infrequently. Some of these people were obviously pretty regular patrons of my woods, and knew the

lay of the land quite well; most, however, came to find out what

was going on in the same way they might have ventured up into their own attics, if they'd heard strange noises there.

As I drove in along the roadway one morning in late June, I met a boy of about sixteen, walking out. The site was cleared now, and heavy machinery was on it, pulling up stumps and bulldozing it into uniformity. The boy's face had a look of self-conscious nonchalance. I recognized it from having myself of-

*A woods is
like a house with
many rooms*

ten tried to assume it in my long-ago and undistinguished career as a would-be juvenile delinquent. It tried so hard to say *I'm just here minding my own business* that it wound up saying *I'm up to no good*.

I asked him what was up. Just walking, he said. Early to be out walking, I said; were you looking for anything in particular? Yeah, he said, yeah looking for mushrooms. What kind? Meadow mushrooms, he said; they're the only kind I know about.

It seemed to me odd to be looking for a fungus of that name in the middle of the woods, and everything about the boy's manner would have made you doubt the truth of what he said, even if he'd avowed that the sun had set in the west last night.

I asked him his name. He gave it as Jason, let's say; Jason Easterby. I gave him my name, said goodbye, and drove on. Not fifty yards from where we'd talked were two plastic bags, off to the side of the tote road, and a shovel. Inside each bag was a hemp plant, neatly potted, the foliage that protruded from the bag dark, glossy, and vigorous.

I turned around. Jason must have waited to see if I'd notice his cache because, although he was now walking briskly away, he hadn't gotten very far. I called him back. Somewhat to my surprise, he complied, sheepish and crestfallen. I told him to dig a hole. Won't grow here, he said. Too shady. We aint planting it, I said. He dug the hole, I chopped up the plants and put them in it, and he covered them mournfully. He started to go, but something about his unhappiness asked to be talked to, and so we talked a little. Then he left. When he was some distance down the road, he turned back. By the way, he called back. My name aint Jason Easterby. It's [let's say] Jason Weston. Just in case you wanted to know.

It's a small town. Three days later, I mentioned the incident to a neighbor. Oh, she said, as soon as I said the boy's name was Jason. That would be Jason Weston. Used to play with my kids back in elementary school. His dad ran out on him and his brother and his mother even before that. I don't hear much good about his mother, either, but he was a

nice kid back then, maybe a little hyper is all. He started getting into trouble in junior high; sounds like he's still at it. His mom could care less about where those boys are and what they're up to. Somebody said they were planning to set up a tent in your woods, back along the river, and go live there. Just boys talking big, I expect, but can't say I blame them.

Every day when I worked, almost as soon as I started the saw, a chipmunk or two would materialize, sometimes twitching and skittering toward me on the very log I was bucking up, always tensed to flee, but full of curiosity, its bright eyes fixed on mine. They have now colonized the big windrows of slash I piled up around the edges

of the site. People I know and people I don't know have dropped by. All habitats and all undertakings are to a greater or lesser degree transitory; in their transitions, they open windows of opportunity to such enterprising species as chipmunks and ourselves. A well-driller stopped by, introduced himself, asked if I'd be needing a well; a couple of people came in to inquire about the big piles of loam left over from clearing a road bed through the pasture between the woods and the road. A subcontractor wanted to talk to me about the design of the heating system.

And Jason, not really thinking very practically, saw in the screened illusion of space and privacy that my woods afford the possibility for one kind of escape, and in the bare, sunlit earth of the house site, the possibility for cultivating another. I imagine he just wanted to mind his own business, to just say no to the reality of his life. But the whole world is a busy-bodied place; his business and my business and your business and its business are never as discrete as we either wish or fear them to be. It will be years before Jason will know if that is a good thing or not; I'm still undecided myself.

Franklin Burroughs

Tidings is a regular feature of Merrymeeting News

*he was
a nice kid
back then, maybe
a little hyper is all*

BOAT COUNT

As the waters of Merrymeeting Bay and its tributaries continue to gradually improve since the pollution of the 50's, 60's and 70's, the Bay has become a more attractive area for recreational activity. This activity has taken many forms - swimmers out on the Sands in the middle of the Bay, fishermen stalking striped bass, and general increased recreational boat use.

The Bay has seen heavy boat use in the past. Nathan Lipfert of the Maine Maritime Museum has a slide show that relates the history of ship building and shipping in the Bay and Lower Kennebec region. Enormous, ocean going vessels were built in many areas around the area and first got their hulls wet in Merrymeeting Bay. Packet ships provided transportation and small fishing boats were seen everywhere. Boating activity declined as transportation modes changed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and until recently pollution meant that the Bay was not attractive as a recreational resource.

With cleaner water the Bay has become much more popular, and boating activity has correspondingly increased. Clearly, there are many positive aspects to this recreational use, not the least of which is the growing number of people who are aware of the Bay and find it worth protecting. But are there also negative impacts? Would it be possible to harm it by loving it too much?

Understanding how much boat use there was and is will be one piece of information used in studies and solutions for identified problems in the future. Today we don't know what those studies will be, but it might be helpful to begin collecting data now so that there is some historical context from which trends can be determined in the years and decades to come.

Spurred on by Linwood Rideout, long time duck hunting guide and Bayman, FOMB recently undertook a boat count. The concept was simple. For one day

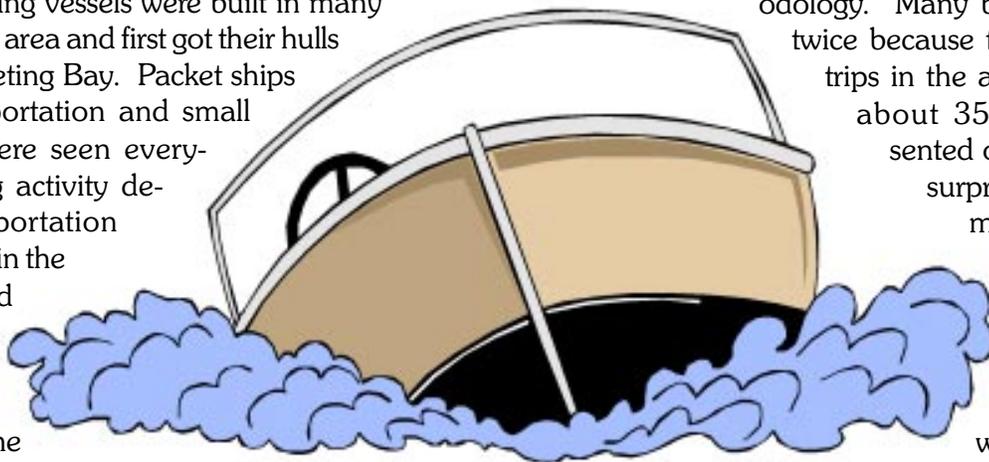
(ten hours in this case) go to a place where you can see boats leaving or entering the Bay (Androscoggin River, Muddy River, Cathance River, Abbagadasset River, Kennebec River and the Chops) and count the number of boats, what type they are, where they are going to and coming from and how many people are on board. Add a lawn chair, a pair of binoculars and some snacks and you've got the first FOMB boat count.

Like on many July weekends this year, the day we chose to count boats ended up being cool, often cloudy and with showers several times during the day. We logged about 150 trips from one location to another in the Bay. (Note: Because it would be almost impossible to match up boats that have left the Bay and then came back several hours later, we chose this trip methodology.

Many boats are counted twice because they've made two trips in the area.) We counted about 350 people represented on those trips. Not surprisingly, by far the most traffic came from boats coming down the Kennebec and through the Chops on their way to Bath and the ocean (about 50).

Obviously, no conclusions can be drawn from this one count. To begin understanding how many boats and people are using the Bay we'll have to do many counts. Some on weekends, some during the week; during blazing hot, sunny days and, unfortunately, more cool, rainy days. Over time we'll begin to pick up on trends and create a valid body of data. For this initial count, thanks go to Steve and Lissa Pelletier, Bill and Trey Milam, Steve Eagles and especially to Linwood Rideout who had so much input and enthusiasm for the concept to begin with.

Spending a couple of hours just watching the Bay is, of course, time well spent. The sturgeon were leaping, osprey were fishing and just experiencing the Bay in one of its many moods was an enjoyable way to pass part of a day. If you're interested in helping out for a couple of hours in future boat counts, contact Whit at 666-3376.



NEW WEB ADDRESS

Hmm... Wasn't there something strange about the front page? By Jove, the web address is different!! Apparently, the gods of electrons and jiggle-hertzies have seen fit to bestow upon Friends of Merrymeeting Bay this esteemed and honorable address:

<http://knox.link75.org/mmb/>

Note the mellifluous way it tumbles past the epiglottis:

<http://knox.link75.org/mmb/>

Close your eyes. If you were following instructions, you wouldn't be reading this, but take a deep breath anyway and say it again:

<http://knox.link75.org/mmb/>

Now go and get yourself a nice cool glass of water. You've earned it. Oh, and on the way back, check out our web site. Hmm... What was that address again?

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Thank you to David Hansen for designing this issue of MMNews.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, P.O. Box 233, Richmond, Maine 04357

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\$6.00 enclosed for a copy of
**Conservation Options: A Guide
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(\$5 for the book, \$1 for postage)

- Renewal Gift From:

WISCASSET BY-PASS AND THE BAY ROUTE

The town of Wiscasset has been besieged by traffic along Route 1 for decades. During the peak of the summer season traffic through the downtown slows to a crawl, or worse, frustrating visitors and residents alike. There have been many attempts to create solutions to this problem, but so far all ideas have remained on the drawing board.

The area around Wiscasset is currently embroiled in another attempt for a fix. There were many consultant-designed options recently proposed to relieve the problem. Options included "No-build" proposals that involve new signage, one-way streets within the town, and other relatively low impact solutions. In addition, there were many "Build" proposals that included new roads and bridges to the north and south of Wiscasset and even tunnels underneath Wiscasset.

Some of these build options were very local, skirting just around the downtown of Wiscasset, but others were more far reaching. Perhaps the most outrageous was a road that started at I-95 in Bowdoinham, went through the town and down Brown's Point Road through the heart of the agricultural fields in that area, across the Bay via a

(to be built) bridge at Abbagadasset Point, across the Chops Creek and Nequasset Brook watersheds in Woolwich and around the north end of Wiscasset. This option included multiple bridges, wetland crossings and untold disruption of natural areas.

At the end of June the Department of Transportation and its Public Advisory Committee held a hearing to reduce the number of options down to a short list. FOMB representatives attended and provided written testimony as to the failings of the Bay Route. Fortunately, the Bay Route was probably doomed before it was even discussed due to its high cost and extreme, non-local solution. Nonetheless, when this route came up for discussion the PAC board members were alerted to FOMB's testimony, which perhaps provided a little extra nudge, and the route was removed from consideration.

Unfortunately, and as with almost any by-pass proposal, none of the remaining build options are without significant consequences. Some of the options would have alarming consequences in very sensitive natural areas. If you're interested in knowing more, please contact the Sheepscott Valley Conservation Association at 586-5616.

Warren Whitney



**FRIENDS of
MERRYMEETING BAY**

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BAY DAY 2001 (pg 2)
COUNTING CRAFT (pg 6)

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