

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System Potomac (Point Lookout) Buoy: Fall Seasonal

As water temperatures drop from this summer's mid-80s through the 70s into the 60s and 50s, water quality here will improve. With falling surface temperatures now, that upper layer has begun to sink, effectively "turning over" or mixing the river and bringing oxygen-deprived bottom water to the surface for wind and rain to refresh.

For fish and birds in and along the lower Potomac, the falling water temperatures signal the prospect of winter and the need to fatten up. Young-of-the-year menhaden, a.k.a. "peanut bunkers," and their two-year-old kin school up in preparation for migration to coastal waters off North Carolina. The majority of the fish in those dense schools will survive to make the trip, but a significant number will feed predators along the way, ranging from fishing birds like loons, gulls, and gannets to bluefish, speckled and gray trout, and rockfish.

It's a demonstration of the fecundity of menhaden to watch the schools driven to the surface by fish and loons (which can swim underwater nearly as well as fish), only to be attacked from above by gulls and spectacular white gannets, with their black wing tips and six-foot wingspreads. There is indeed strength in numbers.

You can follow the fall season on the Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy system website, www.buoybay.noaa.gov. Most fall visitors to this part of Capt. Smith's Trail are carrying fishing rods. It's a great time to be out there, but be sure you have enough boat under you, that you dress for the weather, and that you pay prudent attention to the weather information that NOAA's Potomac Buoy gives you. Be sure also to check the NOAA National Weather Service forecast for the area.