

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System Stingray Point (Rappahannock): Fall Seasonal

With falling surface temperatures now affecting the Rappahannock River valley, the upper layer of the water column 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. The lower temperatures also allow the water to hold more dissolved oxygen.

For fish and birds in and along the Rappahannock and the Piankatank, the falling water temperatures signal the need to fatten up for the lean winter season. Young menhaden, a.k.a. “peanut bunkers,” 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 CBIBS 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 from the NOAA CBIBS Stingray Point/Rappahannock River Buoy. Be sure also to check the NOAA National Weather Service forecast for the area.