

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System

Upper Potomac Buoy: Fall Seasonal

Over the fall, rainy weather in the Potomac watershed should keep the river's salinity here well below 3 practical salinity units, the maximum value considered fresh. Riverbank trees like oaks, maples, sweet gums, black gums, and sycamores turn to complex shades of yellow, orange, red, and purple before their leaves fall around Thanksgiving.

From here downriver for 50 miles to the Rt. 301 bridge, the underwater grasses and a huge September crop of seeds from annual marsh plants like wild rice, smartweed, tearthumb, Walter's millet, tickseed sunflower, and rice cutgrass will provide a cornucopia of nutritious food for ducks and geese that arrive from northern nesting grounds to spend the winter in these mostly ice-free waters.

Despite the urban character of much of the shoreline around this buoy, major efforts at improving wastewater treatment in this part of the Potomac have resulted in better water quality that allows these life-giving plants to flourish. Those cleanup efforts must continue, though, because the region's large and active human population puts relentless pressure on the Potomac every day.

As water temperatures fall, predatory rockfish, largemouth bass, catfish, white perch, and, yes, invasive snakeheads in the river will feed voraciously to stock up fat against winter's lean season. Anglers will enjoy the best fishing of the year, as bird watchers enjoy the waterfowl and the region's many resident bald eagles. For all of these reasons, fall is a great season to explore Capt. Smith's Trail on this section of the Potomac River.

You can follow the fall season on the CBIBS website, www.buoybay.noaa.gov. Before heading out on these waters, check conditions at the NOAA CBIBS Upper Potomac Buoy, and also check the NOAA National Weather Service forecast for the area.