



SAVOR THE WEEKEND

A plant sale, French market and Colonial pub crawl are all on the docket this weekend in the Historic Triangle. **Page 1C.**

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SARAROSE MARTIN/STAFF

Andy Westrich, Colonial Beekeepers president and Virginia State Master Beekeeper, said the biggest way people can help save honeybees is to avoid using dangerous chemicals and insecticides.

What you can do about dying bees

New techniques may help remedy modern challenges they face

BY SARAROSE MARTIN
Staff writer

WILLIAMSBURG — Virginia's honeybees are dying. Last year, state beekeepers lost about 60 percent of their bees.

But Andy Westrich, who keeps bees in Hampton, hardly lost any hives.

Beekeeping is not a science, it's a 9,000-year-old art. Like many things, when it was commercialized, it became more about the beekeeper than the bees, Westrich said.

Nothing about it is guaranteed — that's why you'll almost always find him in the bee yard.

"It's like learning how to swim," he said. "You learn how to swim in the shallow end of the pool. Take a year. Get the knowledge, then get the bees. It's so much easier not to kill them when you know what



In a single frame of a honeybee colony, there are about 1,000 bees, Westrich said. Each of the five shelves holds five frames.

you're doing."

And he's been a professional "swimmer" for almost 15 years. Westrich is president of the Colonial Beekeepers Association and a Virginia State Master Beekeeper.

He keeps about 24 hives and is the primary beekeeper for the St. George Brewing Company in Hampton.

See *Honeybees*, page 8A

O'Rourke stumps at William and Mary

2020 Democratic presidential hopeful calls for compassionate politics

BY STEVE ROBERTS JR.
AND SARAROSE MARTIN
Staff writer

WILLIAMSBURG — Emerging from a crush of College of William and Mary students, Democratic presidential hopeful Beto O'Rourke took the stage to loud cheers and applause in the college's Trinkle Hall Tuesday afternoon.

"Thank you for welcoming this stranger from West Texas," O'Rourke said to the crowd before launching into his routine brand of stump speech: authentic and calling for an end to political knife fighting in Washington, D.C.

"To come together not for a person, or a candidate, or a party, but for our country at this defining moment of truth for the United States, (for) the greatest set of challenges that we have ever faced," O'Rourke said of climate change, partisan politics and the inequalities of everyday life for millions of Americans.

Before the former Texas Congressman from El Paso took the stage, hundreds of William and Mary students stood waiting, watching in winding lines in front of Trinkle Hall in anticipation of his arrival.

Sophomore Katherine Zabinski, 19, of Smithfield, wanted to see O'Rourke because she watched his close election defeat against incumbent Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz.

Cruz won re-election with 51 percent of the vote in a tight race against O'Rourke, who ran less on his record as a congressman than a campaign of inspiration that caused some to liken him more to former presidents Barack Obama and John F. Kennedy.

Zabinski, a history major, said she thinks O'Rourke's campaign of optimism could give voice to a younger generation of Americans who yearn for political power and representation in the nation's capital.

"I think he's holding down a lot of the base Democratic ideologies, but I feel like his stance on immigration and health care are a little bit forward

See *O'Rourke*, page 4A

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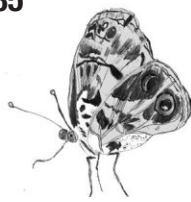
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SARAROSE MARTIN/STAFF

To inspect their hives, beekeepers use smoke which distracts the bees' defensive response.

Bees

Continued from 1A

Westrich is a semi-retired Navy engineer and a master at figuring out how things work. But really, to be a successful beekeeper, you have to take the time to learn, he said.

"I can take the time and I can take the effort," Westrich said. "It's past a hobby and it's more of a passion. I like to tell people, there are no hobby beekeepers like there are no hobby gardeners. They're just gardeners. It's the same thing. It's something we do. We're just beekeeping to beekeep."

While honeybees make up a resilient, somewhat complex ecosystem, nature can be fickle, and new techniques may help remedy the modern challenges they face. But to develop these techniques, you have to get back to the core of the art of beekeeping: you have to care about the insect, Westrich said.

Every winter, Virginia's honeybee population experiences colony losses, according to a report by the Virginia Farm Bureau. Over the past five years, those losses have grown to more than one-third of the statewide population. But last year, the state's honeybees took a larger hit.

Why are the bees dying?

There's no single answer as to why honeybees are dying, but many possible factors contribute: shifts in land use, over-use of pesticides and parasites such as mites that transmit viruses harmful to bees.

The Virginia Farm Bureau said the most recent losses may be attributed to Varroa mites and Nosema infections. The infections were once treated with antibiotics, but with new FDA regulations, those medications are only accessible through a veterinarian.

In addition, the manufacturer of the antibiotic Fumigillin, which treats Nosema, closed in 2018.

But Westrich said Varroa mites have been a problem for 30 years, they just haven't been handled properly.

"The federal government and commercial beekeepers have thrown chemical after chemical and every single time the mite ends up being resistant to the chemical. A lot of time those chemicals are very harmful to the bees," he said. "And we're back at square one now."

Westrich has almost no colony loss each year, and attributes it to a few things he's learned.

After building his own colonies for the first five years, he started to purchase bees from outside the area. Often times, purchased bees were raised in factory farms, doused with chemicals and moved around frequently, he said.

He stopped buying bees two years ago when he had a 40 percent loss. He started to raise his own hives by making his own queens and building his own colonies. Last year, he lost only two of his 24 colonies.

"When I look back at my records two years ago, what I noticed is that the first five, six years I was beekeeping my losses were near zero," Westrich said. "When I started to buy bees and I was buying to

Take a look

■ Andy Westrich, president of Colonial Beekeepers and a Virginia State Master Beekeeper, opened up his hives for some insight into the life of a beekeeper. You can view the video at vagazette.com.

see what other people were bringing in, what I noticed was those bees didn't survive."

If you're not a commercial beekeeper, you have options, he said. You can build your own colonies and treat mites through a drone trapping technique. He also uses a solar hive at St. George Brewing Company, which regulates the temperature in the hive and kills mites.

"Fighting this mite is an important issue, doing nothing is not an option. Especially in an area like this where we have a lot of beekeepers," Westrich said. "You should be thinking outside the box."

Williamsburg's Wildwood Farm Owner James Ewell has kept bees for three years. He hasn't had problems with mites, but he has lost several colonies to wax moths.

"My opinion (is) the bee problem is due to lack of food, pesticides, herbicides and genetic modification in plants. So much land is being used for residential with everyone keeping their grass short and sprayed to look nice instead of letting the clover and wildflowers grow and bloom," Ewell said. "Not to mention the food that is available is, again, sprayed with chemicals that the bees pick up and bring back to the hive. (It) can produce genetic issues."

But he said he thinks bees are getting stronger, and more backyard beekeepers are becoming organic in their habits.

And it's this learning curve that could be contributing to the losses, as well, Westrich said.

Williamsburg's Silver Hand Meadery Founder Glenn Lavender started beekeeping a couple of years ago and lost all three of his colonies: one from cold winter temperatures and another to Colony Collapse Disorder, a situation characterized by an exodus of an entire hive.

"We're all learning still. It's agriculture, so there's always going to be a loss," Lavender said. "There's a lot more people keeping bees in their backyards, which is great. I think it helps everybody understand better. (If) somebody comes around and

sprays for mosquitoes and all your bees die, you figure out really quick, 'oh, that actually has an impact'."

In 2006, beekeepers reported losses of between 30 percent and 90 percent of their hives. Most beekeepers had the same experience: a dead colony with no adult bees and no dead bee bodies, but they had a live queen. The problem has been named Colony Collapse Disorder and is now widely known, but there's still no definitive scientific explanation for it.

There have been reports of similar honeybee disappearances in the 1880s, 1920s and 1960s, but it's unknown if the cause is the same, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. There also have been several cases of sudden significant bee loss with no known cause.

But the problems honeybees face today may be less mysterious.

Helping the bees

The Virginia Department of Agriculture estimates there are about 5,000 individual beekeepers in the state, but because reporting hives is voluntary, there's no way to know for sure.

But they have noticed a growing interest in keeping bees.

In the Tidewater region, there are multiple beekeeping groups: Colonial Beekeepers, Norfolk Beekeepers, Nansemond Beekeepers, Tidewater Beekeepers, Beekeepers Guild of Southeastern Virginia and others.

And even people without hives can help, said Tony Banks, senior assistant director of the Agriculture, Development and Innovation Department at the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation.

People can create foraging honeybee habitats throughout the year and make pollinator gardens and window boxes.

"(People can) incorporate flowering plants in their landscape that can serve as a food source for honeybees and other pollinators

See *Bees*, page 9A



EAGLES GROUNDED

Jamestown boys and girls soccer teams fall in state semifinal matchups. **Page 1B**



THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

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Commission recommends proffers in zoning law

BY JACK JACOBS
Staff writer

JAMES CITY COUNTY — The James City County Planning Commission voted Wednesday to recommend residential proffers be reintroduced to the county's zoning ordinance.

The proposal, which would make residential proffers available to rezoning applicants again after the proffers had been prohibited since 2016, will now go before the Board of Supervisors for final approval.

A proffer is an binding agreement between the county and a rezoning applicant in which the applicant provides something to offset anticipated impacts of the rezoning, such as money or an agreement to perform some type of action.

As such, the return of residential proffers, being essentially incentives, could make such projects more appealing to county officials as they consider approval of applications in the future.

The Planning Commission voted 4-2 in favor of recommending a resolution that would strike out the language

Proffers, being essentially incentives, could make projects more appealing to county officials as they consider approval of applications in the future.

that prohibits the use of residential proffers from the county zoning ordinance. Commission member Julia Leverenz wasn't present at the meeting.

Among the majority, commission member Richard Krapf said proffers are a more straightforward development tool than the "workarounds" the county came up with since proffers were taken off the table.

"I look at this strike through on the proposed ordinance to allow proffers as something that is cleaner and more effective than coming up with easements or other workarounds," Krapf said.

Tim O'Connor also spoke in support of the amendment, saying proffers bolstered the rights of property owners.

"I think proffers are a property right

See *Proffers*, page 5A

TRAPPED

When crabbers' ghost traps fall into shallow waters, turtles climb in and drown



BY SARAROSE MARTIN
Staff writer

WILLIAMSBURG — On the marshy, shallow edge of the York River, Randy Chambers and his students from the College of William and Mary lined up the dead turtles they found drowned in a commercial crabbing trap.

Chambers, a wetlands ecologist, and his students selected for directive summer research laid the turtles on the grass, shell to shell. They counted 30 dead, all diamondback terrapins, the only turtles native to the brackish saltwater marshes.

The group found the turtles the first time they visited the Catlett Islands to begin their summer research. The topic: A population study of the terrapins.

The shallow edge of the river is not a common crab fishing spot, Chambers said, but finding dead turtles there is.

While 30 dead turtles — each about 5 to 7 inches long — in one trap may sound like a lot, but the known world record is 94 caught in a 2x2-foot wire trap. The trap, which was found in a Georgia creek, almost wiped out the entire local population.

See *Trapped*, page 6A

ADRIANNA GORSKY/STAFF

College of William & Mary biology professor Randolph Chambers visited marshes on the York River with his students and came across a crab trap that killed 30 diamondback terrapins.

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Trapped

Continued from 1A

Among the turtles found in the trap at Catlett Islands was one crab; it was alive.

Traps often get swept down river and catch turtles, which can't breathe underwater and drown.

But careless commercial crabbers aren't to blame, said Dan Knott, vice president of the Virginia Waterman Association. Commercial waterman set their traps in open water, far from the terrapins' habitat.

"Crabbers don't want to lose pots at all. They do everything they can to prevent that," Knott said. "I love the turtles, the last thing I want to do is kill a terrapin."

It's recreational crabbers who most often fish along the shoreline, where the turtles live and aren't aware of the consequences of unintended traps.

The Catlett Islands are part of the national estuarine research reserve on the York River. The site is protected and there is not supposed to be any commercial or recreational crabbing activity.

"When these crab

traps break away from their lines or are lost during storms, they sometimes tumble into shallow water habitats and there they morph from crab traps into death traps," Chambers said. "Turtles are inquisitive and they swim into the traps. They drown and unfortunately, they seem to have this social dynamic where one goes in and they just follow."

Diamondback terrapins are found along the eastern and southern seaboard, according to the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. Their presence is a sign of a healthy ecosystem.

"It's one of those species, because they require access to open water, they need marshes because that's where they feed and the female turtles have to get out onto land in order to nest. There has to be habitat connectivity," Chambers said. "Some people argue they control populations of snails. I'm not sure that's the case."

Diamondback terrapins eat a lot of things, he said, and they probably maintain the trophic connections among the food web in the wetland ecosystem.

The turtles' natural life expectancy is up to 40 years.

Derelict crab traps

Tens of thousands of crab traps get lost each year, according to Chambers and VIMS. A 2016 report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimated about 145,000 derelict crab pots — also known as ghost pots — are in the Chesapeake Bay at any given time.

Based on responses from watermen, the report also found between 12% and 20% of all crab pots deployed annually are lost.

Commercial watermen removed more than 34,000 derelict traps from Virginia in a VIMS removal program between 2008 and 2014. At least 10 other states have similar ongoing programs.

"(It's) sort of like when you go out to the highway and you see the Kiwanis Club cleaning the highway," Chambers said. "Then the next day it's completely covered with litter again. There's a lot of marine debris associated with fishing. There (are) tens of thou-



SARAROSE MARTIN/STAFF

Commercial crab traps are two-by-two-foot and have a one-way funnel entrance so crabs or any other bycatch are unable to get out.

sands more." While the traps do decompose in a year or two, it doesn't take long to do damage.

Chambers said the trap he found couldn't have been in the water for more than a few days. The freshly dead turtles ranged in age from 2 to 10 years old and were mostly male because they're smaller in size.

While there are more of the turtles now than when they were hunted 100 years ago, their population in Virginia is

considered "near threatened."

The turtles may be hit by boats, eaten by predators such as bald eagles or raccoons, which feast on their eggs, but lost or abandoned crab traps remain the biggest threat.

"The Chesapeake Bay is America's estuary and the... crabbing pressure is greatest in Maryland and Virginia," Chambers said. "Waterman can go into small tidal creeks and set commercial crab traps, which unfortunately become a real problem."

But there is disagreement among scientists and watermen when it comes to the real impact of derelict pots.

Donna Bilkovic, a VIMS marine scientist, first noticed the problem in 2006 when she used side-scan sonar to map fish habitats. She began to see square objects on sonar images, and later found out they were crab pots.

She said the lost pots compete with the fishery and decrease the harvest of blue crabs.

"Until that time, no one was really talking about it. We did a small area at the mouth of the York River and there were a lot of pots in a very small area and so that was kind of eye-opening for us," Bilkovic said. "It's definitely a bigger issue than just the turtles, although the turtles are heartbreaking. The pots were designed to catch crabs, so they are capturing and attracting a large number of crabs."

In 2016, she and other VIMS scientists released a report titled "Ecological and Economic Effects of Derelict Fishing Gear in the Chesapeake Bay."

In 2018, the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assess-

ment Committee of 14 scientists from VIMS and around the country assessed her findings and expressed caution that her report may over-inflate the problem.

Knott, a commercial crabber, has about 150 pots in the water at any given time from about March to November. Commercial crabbers in Virginia can have a license for up to 425 pots.

"Full disclosure, this whole derelict pot issue — I kind of started questioning the science and the numbers. I think there's a lot of misrepresentation," Knott said. "I think most watermen feel this way; it's not as big of an issue as they're making it out to be."

Last year, he didn't lose any pots and he can only remember ever killing one terrapin turtle, after leaving a crab pot hanging on his boat overnight.

Crabbers usually set lines of traps no closer than 300 to 500 meters from the shore, away from the terrapin's habitat.

"When I got into this, I thought I was an environmentalist. The effects of pollution, when you start seeing that, most of these watermen, that's how they make their living," Knott said. "The last thing they want to do is see anything affect their catch, their living and where they work. I'm not saying we don't have any bad eggs, but for the most part, guys love their water and they want to do everything they can to protect it."

Both groups recognize a negative impact of derelict crab pots, but disagree on the size of that impact, Chambers said. And they all agree

See *Trapped*, page 7A

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Trapped

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recreational crabbing may result in the most damage to terrapin mortality.

“The terrapin travel around the shoreline and so they’re right in the same areas where people are fishing off of their pier,” Bilkovic said. “It may be even if people aren’t tending their pots regularly — they just leave it at the end of their dock and if they don’t check it regularly then the terrapin are going to perish in the pots.”

There’s no way to know how many recreational pots are out there, Bilkovic said, so recreational fishing and its impact create a lot of open questions.

“There are these occasional, acute mortality events in lost commercial pots against the backdrop of more chronic but low-level mortality in actively fished recreational pots,” Chambers wrote in an email. “Neither group thinks these terrapin losses amount to much — watermen because the mass drownings most frequently occur in their lost pots for which they have no responsibility, and recreational users because each user may drown only a couple terps every year.”



COURTESY OF ADRIANNA GORSKY

Traps often get swept down river and catch turtles, which can’t breathe underwater and drown.

Regulations may help

With marine regulations, the bycatch of fishery gear could decrease and many turtles could be saved.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission is in charge of commercial and recreational crabbing and it sets regulations for where and when crabbers can crab, how much they can harvest and what type of gear they can use.

In Virginia, people can crab recreationally with up to two pots without a license or a ter-

rapin excluder device. With a recreational license, people can have up to five crab traps. If licensed recreational crabbers use an excluder device, their license is \$36 instead of \$46, but no one is required to use one.

“The reason excluders are not required commercially is the additional cost, potential escapement of legal-sized crabs, and terrapins are more of an issue in shallow creeks and along the marsh edge

than where many commercial crabbers fish,” Ellen Bolen, VMRC deputy commissioner wrote in an email.

Bolen said she’s not aware of any efforts to pass more regulations on recreational crabbers, but the commission has discussed modifying a regulation to improve the identification of recreational gear and to better enforce reporting requirements.

Ghost gear has been a problem in the past, she said, and

the commission has funded efforts to remove it. But she knows the degree to which the pots affect the environment and the fishery has been up for debate.

The bycatch reduction device, or TED, are plastic inserts which make the opening into the pots a little bit smaller. Crabs can still get in but because of turtles’ high shells, they cannot fit. There have been a lot of studies that show bycatch reduction devices will limit terrapin mortality and don’t it doesn’t affect the crab catch either, Bilkovic and Chambers said.

“We decreased the overall catch of turtles by like 70% or something like that,” Chambers said. “But again, convincing VMRC that this is something they need to consider is a tough sell.”

Maryland requires an exclusion device for commercial and recreational crabbers and New Jersey requires all commercial style crab pots to be constructed to include a biodegradable panel as a means of escape for marine organisms.

At \$2 a device, both scientists and Knott agree all recreational crabbers should be required to use them.

“I think recreational should use it. I think the proximity of where they fish — that’s who’s going to be catching the terrapins,” Knott said. “Two to five pots max is what a recreational fisherman can put in the water, you’re talking \$4 for them.”

To require the million crab traps in the Bay to have bycatch reduction devices on them isn’t practical, Knott said, and Chambers agrees.

“Most of the pots are put out where turtles don’t occur,” Chambers said. “So how do you know which of your pots is going to be lost and tumble into a turtle habitat?”

While losing large numbers of terrapins in a single crab

trap is a big deal, Chambers doesn’t think they will ever go extinct. They’re resilient and can reproduce for a long time.

Terrapin turtles tend to stay at home, so the populations between states don’t mix. But no one knows exactly how many there are in Virginia.

Although Chambers and his students have only conducted research at Catlett Islands for a short period, they are happy to see the mass mortality event doesn’t seem to have put the terrapin population there in danger.

However, there are 30 fewer turtles.

“The population at Catlett Island is the population at Catlett Island, so if we lose some to drowning in a commercial crab trap then it’s going to take a while to recover from that loss of individuals in the population,” Chambers said.

Chambers grew up on the shore and has seen crab traps kill turtles since he was a child. People are upset by a trap full of dead turtles when they see it, he said.

But because mass mortality events happen at unpredictable intervals, it becomes an issue and then goes away.

Chambers said if people take kayaking or canoeing tours of the Chesapeake Bay, they may run into derelict crab traps in some of the shallow areas. It may be worth it to check them out and see if there are any turtles trapped that they could release.

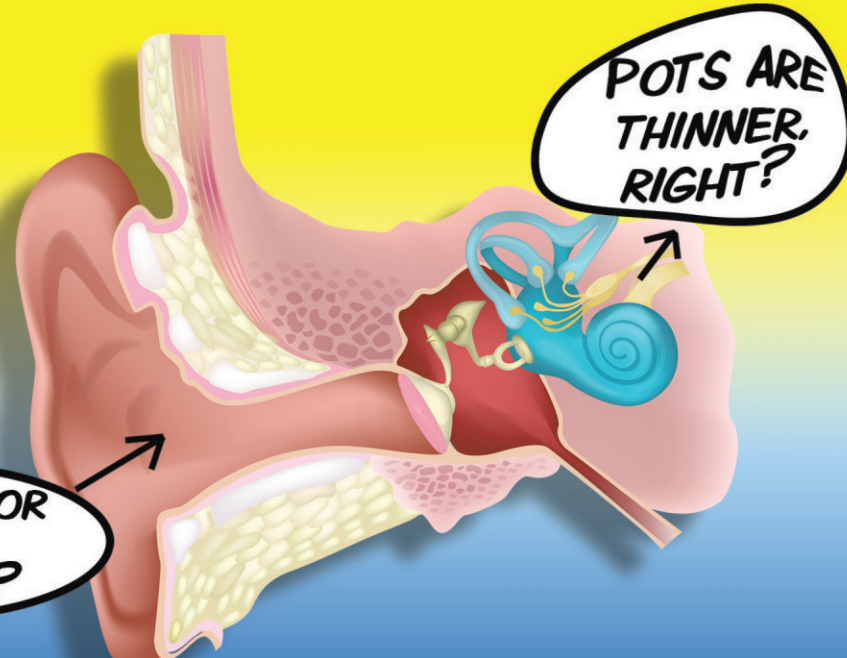
The only other thing that may help the terrapins, he said, are more requirements to use the bycatch reduction devices.

“Maybe public opinion will hold sway here.”

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