



The Natural History Museum in Brewster: A Place for Birding, Walking and Volunteering.

by Barbara Struna



Natural History Museum Garden Photograph by Barbara Struna

The Cape Cod Museum of Natural History is alive and bursting with life. From its humble beginnings in 1954, where it was housed under a tent, to the current 17,000 square foot building, this "natural" treasure nestled on 80 acres in Brewster and surrounded by 300 acres of town conservation land speaks to the very young and the young at heart.

On a recent Saturday morning, I visited the CCMNH and met Barbara Knoss, Volunteer Coordinator for the museum.

A retired kindergarten teacher from Minnesota, Barbara had fond memories of vacationing on the Cape with her family, prompting her to settle on this sandy spit. After arriving permanently, she happened to participate in a Wednesday Walk session at the museum.

Since that day her involvement with the museum has grown. She started with volunteering and then one year later, her appointment to Volunteer Coordinator and the person in charge for Kids Summer Program was initiated.

She laughed and told me, "I was volunteering five days a week, almost every day. Since I was always here, it was a natural match for me to take on these two positions, given my background and respect for the wonderful beauty that surrounds us here at the museum."

Ms. Knoss explains the fact that she is part of a very small paid staff, and it's part of her job to coordinate over 200 volunteers. They range in age from high school to senior citizens and range in commitment from once a week to daily visits.

This might be an overwhelming task in organizing to others but not to Barbara. She is passionate about her work and enjoys every minute.

One quickly understands the value of the volunteers, the "people" component of the museum. They compliment and act as a buoy for this oasis of nature, keeping it afloat. Oftentimes, 170 volunteers will pass through the museum in a week's time, sharing their talents in guiding, talking, teaching, manning the gift store and front desk.



One Square Foot of Provincetown / Acrylic on panel

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After a quick tour of several newly renovated displays, we passed through "Bird Alley." Almost completed, this exhibit of bird mounts have been painstakingly restored and the background walls freshly painted by Marjorie Mellor, highlighting the birds individual habitats.

Ms. Knoss was quick to point out that the museum's volunteers, all winter long, used q-tips for cleaning and small brushes to repaint the birds for the new exhibit.



Barbara Knoss at the Bird Alley display Photograph by Barbara Struna

Glancing down the roster of scheduled events and classes, I wondered about all the outside activities that were listed on the schedules and asked, "What do you do on rainy days?"

With a chuckle, she replied, "We call out the SWAT team. It entails an extra 40 volunteers that report in to help with the overload of visitors. We usually have a list of spontaneous programs that we pull out when needed."

Always cheerful, Ms. Knoss is enthusiastic about the coming year. "We had a record number of kids coming to participate in our classes over the Spring Break and look forward to more of the same this summer."

She also mentioned a new program for teens from 13-18 called, "Art Lab for Teens." Guided by a certified art teacher, students will explore the museum's spectacular vistas, abundant animal and plant life, sketching, painting and printmaking.

Feeling inspired by all the activities offered at the museum and eager to take a walk, I thanked Barbara for her time and reassured her that I would renew my membership.

As she escorted me out, we walked into the great viewing room. The massive glass windows across one side of the building are breathtaking as they open to the marsh and the Atlantic beyond.

Up close the birds and squirrels scamper and flit across branches and limbs of a large tree, and feed at birdfeeders strategically placed within eye's view. Several upholstered chairs face the window where you can leisurely enjoy the antics of these feathered and furry friends that make their home on the Cape.



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Osprey Nest Photograph by Barbara Struna

To your right as you face this beautiful living phenomena is a large flat screen where you can observe a live-cam of an osprey nest out in the marshes. This unique exhibit has been up and running for over two years. You can actually see one of the resident Ospreys. According to Barbara, there are two eggs this year and their nest is twice as high as normal.

She pointed on the screen to a turquoise piece of material intertwined in the sticks of the nest, "That's a skirt they picked up from somewhere and used it in their nest. In fact last year, we found two strings of Christmas lights wound in and around the twigs."

I thought it was a fine example of Yankee thrift.

If you are looking for a unique place to visit for yourself or your children, no matter your age, the Cape Cod Natural History Museum on Route 6A in Brewster is the place to go. It has something for everyone, inviting you to discover and learn what's around you and find your sense of place in nature.

Included is a link to the Museum's Home page, where you will find the schedules of all the classes and events, a link to the Live-cam of the Osprey Nest, plus how you can volunteer and purchase a membership. A great investment! Tell Barbara I sent you!

Barbara Struna lives in Brewster with her husband, Timothy Jon, and the two youngest of her five children.

Along with managing the business part of her husband's art gallery, Struna Galleries, she has just finished her first historical novel.

For over twenty years, Barbara and Tim have walked the back roads of the Cape looking for inspiration and scavenging its beaches discovering unique findings and treasures.

Always marveling at the ever-changing landscape of this narrow spit of land, they know each day will bring a new adventure.