HIGH TIDE AND GREEN GRASS

Review of:

[Fourteenth in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

Chesapeake Bay is a very long, north-south inlet on the east coast of the USA with a narrow mouth opening into the Atlantic Ocean. It has a complex shoreline on both sides, so that we can think of Chesapeake Bay as lined with inlets throughout. Despite the narrow mouth, tides and changes in salinity are an important factor in Chesapeake Bay and the rivers that feed it. Separating the bay from the ocean is a peninsula, the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Delaware. The area is extremely rich in history -- natural and otherwise -- and a visit to the Maritime Museum in Easton, Maryland is very much recommended.

The Nanticoke River opens into the bay about midway on the Eastern Shore. The fastlands along its shore are dense with buildings and yards, but the extensive marshlands largely exist in a wild state. Robert Hedeen was an academic biologist who bought a cottage on the Nanticoke in 1977 and set about to understand its biota, seasons and plankton-based food chains.

This charming, well-focused book is his account of what it was like. Each of the 11 chapters is devoted to a particular creature or group of creatures, with attention to more general themes. Here we meet the wonderfully archaic horseshoe crab (Limulus polyphemus, common all along the mid-Atlantic shore of North America), the seasonally abundant sea-nettles (jellyfish with very long stinging tentacles), the anadromous blueback herring (Alosa aestivalis), the venomous, incredibly ugly toadfish (Opsanus tau), the diamondback terrapin (Malaclemmys terrapin), the osprey (Pandion haliaetus) and various biting flies (with a disquisition on various commercial and home-made repellents), among others.

Hedeen gives proper attention to conservation questions, especially with respect to waterfowl. Because of the unusually well-documented history of the Chesapeake Bay area -- again, let me mention the Maritime Museum -- we have good records of the decline and extinction of some species, while some others flourish, in some cases due to conservation efforts.

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