



Gently Down the Stream

Boating on the Carmans River is an exercise in tranquility

Oceans are too vast for me to contemplate. They dwarf the land and put me in my place. They're just there — always and forever, both comforting and terrifying. Lakes, on the other hand, even the greatest of them, seem oddly self-contained. But rivers — well, rivers are something else. They wind and flow, they meander and rush. They have a beginning and an end. They carve their own paths. I can understand rivers.

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Irene Virag

And they run through my life.

I've punted on the Thames and white-water rafted on the Colorado. I've watched the lights of Paris from the dining salon of a yacht cruising the Seine. I've listened to gypsy violins on the banks of the

Danube. I've lived along the Charles and jogged along the Potomac and hiked along the Rio Grande. I've applauded fireworks lighting the sky above the East River.

These are all famous rivers and they have much to recommend them, from rapids to romance. But it was here on Long Island, on the Carmans River, a relatively modest 10-mile stream that winds its way from Yaphank to the Great South Bay, where I came closest to nature. On a late September day in the silence due the splendor of a setting sun, I had a front-row seat for the ballet of the tree swallows. And they flew into my memory.

I had guides — Jen and Peter Clements, both of them naturalists who live in the hamlet of Brookhaven, close to the river's edge. Jen is the daughter of the late Dennis Puleston, perhaps the Island's most revered naturalist. Sto-

ries about Dennis are legend — his knowledge of our woods and streams and the birds and plants and creatures that inhabit them.

Shards of silver sunlight extend like skywriting across the muted-blue above our small boat. We talk quietly, loudness seems like sacrilege. Jen and Peter treat the river and its creatures as companions. They are part of the natural world as I can never be. They speak sparingly — but with a sense of delight in everything from the snappers they caught for dinner to the whip-poorwills that call in the early morning and the tree swallows they hope to see this autumn evening.

Jen talks about her father, and it is easy to think of Dennis Puleston on the river he loved, taking pleasure in the cool of a newborn season, listening for birdsong, looking for old friends and new discoveries along the curving river burnished by the sinking sun in shades of brown from beige to copper. Early autumn color tinges the spartina grass, and patches of golden-rod shine in the deepening glow.

"My dad loved this river," she says. "Growing up, it was an extension of our backyard. There were no phragmites then and you could see across the marshes. You'd see things that you hardly ever see now — spotted turtles and whistling swans and hog-nosed snakes. Toward the end of his life, when it was hard for him to walk, we brought him out on the river one more time. Like always, we argued to get him into a jacket. We never got him into a hat. He was a hardy sailor who'd been around the world. But the Carmans was always home."

I had been on the river with Jen and Peter once before. An eel swam by, a great blue heron settled briefly in a pepperidge tree and a kingfisher swooped

into the water for dinner. The tree swallows didn't show up that day but a starling flew boldly down and lit on our heads. Jen smiled as the bird picked at her long braid. "You're a sweet little bird. I had a pet starling once. I even had a cowbird for a while. And I raised a bluejay. My father always gave me the injured birds to take care of."

Now the river flows and bends. The boat drifts gently. We watch the sky, hopping the tree swallows will come this time — the glossy, iridescent



A tree swallow is among the sights for bird lovers on the 10-mile Carmans River.

blue-green birds with white cheeks that catch insects on the fly and make their homes in tree cavities and woodpecker holes. In the fall, they migrate south in flocks that can number in the thousands. They're small — about 5 inches long — but when they come together, Jen says, they can darken the sky. "They fly in a vortex. Higher and higher."

"We didn't get tree swallows in here when I was a kid," Jen says. "Probably because we didn't have so many phragmites — the tree swallows dive into the reeds at night." The little birds became one of the pleasures of her father's twilight — autumn evenings when they danced for him above the Carmans River. "They were one of his last discoveries."

Suddenly, Pete says, "There they are." It's about 6:30. Beyond us, high, high above, a dark brown cloud appears. It is made up of birds. Then I realize that the specks are tree swallows, hundreds of them. They seem like a single entity. An entity greater than all its parts.

It is as if a great amoeba is performing a ballet in the sky. It is swift, graceful, almost hypnotic. Up and down, back and forth, the distant mass dipping and rising, curving and swirling. "Magnify this 100 times," Jen says. "More even, and that's what it's like some nights."

We sit in the boat on the burnished river and watch quietly. The sky is a fireball of pink and orange and yellow. The living cloud dips in a final swirl and disappears into the tall, rustling reeds.

"Good night," Jen says. An owl hoots. Evening draws its curtain over the river.



Newsday Photos / Bill Davis

Jen Clements lends a shoulder to a starling during a trek on the Carmans River. The daughter of a revered naturalist calls the river an extension of her backyard.