

WEEKEND



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From the cover

Breaking down area cleanups

A guide to winter events to pick up trash

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

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On a warm November Sunday, I donned yellow rubber boots and work gloves and hiked into an overgrown area just outside Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens in Northeast Washington. Masked and mission-focused, heading into battle, I carried a grabber and plastic bag — my weapons of trash reduction.

Litter doesn't stop during a pandemic. And although many are hibernating this season, getting outside for cleanups — either planned by a nonprofit organization, with your neighbors or DIY — offers fresh air, physical activity, a change of scenery and the chance to make the world a cleaner, safer place. Winter's a great time for cleanups, too: It's easier to see litter when the trees are bare, and there's little threat of bugs, poison ivy or heat exhaustion.

Anacostia Riverkeeper organized the event I attended at Nash Run, which flows into Kenilworth Marsh. Before we headed out, Trey Sherard, the organization's official Anacostia Riverkeeper, passed out fliers to a couple dozen volunteers on how to sort the trash. (This year, discarded masks and gloves have created a brand-new category.) He reviewed safety precautions: Don't pick up broken glass — it tends to slice open garbage bags — and if we're comfortable picking up uncapped needles, place them in a plastic bottle with a cap.

Safely distanced from one another, we headed down to a mucky stream and began picking up trash with our grabbers: foam cups, candy wrappers, aluminum cans, glass bottles, plastic utensils, cigarette butts and even some mud-caked shoes. Partially disintegrated plastic bags

flaked and fluttered away when I tried to grab them. I found a tattered \$20 bill, a potato chip bag filled with dirt and an unopened can of Orange Crush. That day, Sherard said, our group picked up and sorted 1,039 pounds of litter, an eighth of which was plastic bottles. Had we not picked it up, this trash would have made its way into the Anacostia River, eventually ending up in the Chesapeake Bay.

People have all sorts of motivations for participating in cleanups: beautification, animal and human safety, ecology, community building, exercise, even — dare I say it? — fun. Sherard's focus is largely on data, which is critical when it comes to lobbying for regulatory changes, such as bans on plastic bags or foam food containers. To that end, sorting, counting, weighing and documenting the trash is paramount. "The trash gets picked up, but the data lives forever," he says.

During the pandemic, many organizations have shifted to hosting small-scale cleanups or supporting individual outings. If you'd like to join a cleanup or start one on your own, browse the events, tips (and one inspiring story) below. Many of the organizations will hold events on Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service (Jan. 18) and Earth Day (April 22). For motivation, check out the third annual Wild & Scenic Film Festival. The "touring" online fest will host a virtual screening on Jan. 21 at 7 p.m., benefiting the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, which celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2021. (Tickets come with seven days of on-demand access to the film program, in case you can't make the live event.)

Volunteers Dan and Erin Ebert carry a bag of trash through an empty parking lot in Rock Creek Park during a trash cleanup event hosted by Rock Creek Conservancy on the day after Christmas.

From the cover

Anacostia Riverkeeper

This nonprofit group works to protect the Anacostia River and one day make it fishable and swimmable. (Yes, swimmable. Swimming in local waters has been illegal since the 1970s because of poor water quality.) In 2018 and 2019, the organization and its volunteers collected 13,500 pounds of trash from the river's shoreline and tributaries, sorting along the way. Anacostia Riverkeeper also runs a volunteer-based program that enlists trained community scientists to collect water-quality samples from sites throughout the District.

Join the group for its annual MLK Day of Service cleanup, with Pope Branch Park Restoration Alliance, on Jan. 18 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Pope Branch Park, M Place and Fairlawn Avenue SE. Supplies provided. Registration required. anacostiariverkeeper.org.

Alice Ferguson Foundation

Established in 1954, the foundation partners with other nonprofit organizations and local governments to educate the public and reduce trash through volunteer pickups. In a typical year, the organization works with 10,000 urban and underserved students and hundreds of teachers in the D.C. area, educating them about the natural world, sustainable agricultural practices and the cultural heritage of the local watershed.

This winter and spring, the foundation will host several free events, some of which are virtual.

District of Columbia Adopt-A-Stream Workshop: Co-hosted by the Rock Creek Conservancy, the virtual program will train participants to become citizen scientists and track levels of trash in the District's waterways; the data generated will then be shared with the District's Department of Energy and Environment to help improve waterway quality. Feb. 27 from 10:30 a.m. to noon.

How to Organize a Cleanup: Two virtual workshops cover topics including covid-19 safety information and data collection. March 3 from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. and March 6 from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m.

Potomac River Watershed Cleanup: Since its 1989 inception, the annual cleanup, which partners with local jurisdictions and other organizations between March and May, has involved 170,000 volunteers and removed more than 8 million pounds of trash from the Potomac River watershed. The 33rd annual flagship event is April 10 at Piscataway Park, 13551 Fort Washington Rd., Fort Washington, Md. Volunteers who want to organize their own cleanups that day must register by March 14 and can pick up supplies from the foundation at various spots in the region. fergusonfoundation.org.

Little Falls Watershed Alliance

This organization works to protect an area of Northwest Washington and lower Montgomery County that is home to Little Falls Stream Valley Park, much of the Capital Crescent Trail and three creeks that flow into the Chesapeake Bay: Little Falls Branch, Willett Branch and Minnehaha Branch. During the pandemic, the Alliance is providing gloves and bags for individual or family trash pickups on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. throughout winter, weather permitting. The organization offers to sign off on service-learning credit hours for students in Montgomery County, so many of the trash collectors are credit-earning teens who volunteer with their friends. "The kids are locked at home, so they're just excited to go out," says board member Sara Robinson. "We've been getting a lot of participants because there are limited places to volunteer now."

Find supply stations near the intersection of Little Falls Parkway and Massachusetts Avenue and at the Bethesda Pool. Participants can pick up trash in areas along Little Falls Parkway, Capital Crescent Trail and Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park. Bet-

ter yet, head farther out in the watershed to areas that are cleaned less frequently. After you've collected, you can take the trash home or leave it in a Montgomery County park and report the location to the alliance. See the organization's online calendar for details. ifwa.org.

Rock Creek Conservancy

In a typical year, Rock Creek Park — whose namesake winds 33 miles through the District and Montgomery County, and whose watershed covers almost 80 square miles — welcomes about 2 million visitors. That number doubled in 2020, according to the Rock Creek Conservancy, the park's nonprofit partner, and litter increased substantially. "Trash is a little harder to keep low now," says Alayna Smith, the organization's community engagement manager. "The National Park Service is operating at a limited capacity. They used to pick up bags from our cleanups, and now we're taking it to our home dumpsters." Smith says group volunteer cleanups (limited to 15 participants), have helped keep the trash under control. Individual cleanups often target areas of the park that aren't cleaned regularly; if you do arrange your own cleanup, register it with the organization ahead of time and report the number of participants and bags of trash you collect. Last year, volunteers removed about 17,500 pounds of litter from the watershed, roughly half that of 2019. While volunteer hours have dropped during the pandemic, enthusiasm remains high, according to Smith. "It's been wonderful to see how deeply people care about the park," she says.

Many volunteer events are held in the conservancy's "mini-oases": five sites that showcase a fully restored park, including Carter Barron, where cleanups often take place. The Conservancy has two socially distanced events planned for MLK Day of Service weekend: Jan. 16 from 10 a.m. to noon at Picnic Area 6, just inside the area of Beach Drive closed to motorized vehicles for socially distanced recreation; and Jan. 18 from 10 a.m. to noon at Carter Barron, where you'll find ample parking. The organization hosts public events on Saturdays for trash cleanup or invasive plant removal. Check the online calendar for details and information on other events. rockcreekconservancy.org.

Ward 8 Woods Conservancy

This group focuses on removing trash and cutting invasive vines, including kudzu, bittersweet and Asian wisteria, in the more than 500 acres of forest in the District's Ward 8, a section of the city east of the Anacostia River that includes such heavily polluted areas as Fort Stanton Park and Shepherd Parkway.

Volunteers meet the first Saturday of every month at 10:30 a.m. at Fort Stanton Recreation Center, 1812 Erie St. SE. On the second Saturday of the month, meet at 10:30 a.m. at Shepherd Parkway, 555 Newcomb St. SE, a wooded, federally owned parkland corridor that has been a target for illegal dumping. Registration is required for all events. To allow for social distancing, attendance at each event is limited to 10 people. If you'd like to volunteer at a different time, contact Nathan Harrington at nathan@ward8woods.org. ward8woods.org.

SUP Garbage Man

Joe Wright, a.k.a. SUP Garbage Man for his penchant for picking up trash from his stand-up paddleboard (or SUP), came onto the cleanup scene almost two years ago, tired of seeing trash in the water and wanting to show that one person could make a difference. Wright and I met last summer on the Potomac, on our paddleboards. He doesn't consider himself an activist or environmentalist but has made a notable dent in reducing river trash on his own and has inspired others to do the same, largely through his Instagram posts. As of Novem-



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MAYOR'S OFFICE OF THE CLEAN CITY

Clockwise from top: Matthew Daniels carries out a bag of trash during Rock Creek Conservancy's cleanup. Trash sits in a bucket after being picked up by volunteers during the same cleanup. Robb Dooling and his neighbors participate in the District's Adopt a Block program. Joe Wright (also known as SUP Garbage Man) collects trash from the Potomac River.

Cleanup tips

Not sure what to wear? Choose clothing that you don't mind getting a little dirty, including close-toed shoes or boots, and long pants to protect yourself from sharp plants, debris and poison ivy. And don't forget these essentials: a hat and sunscreen (even on cloudy days); work or gardening gloves, which are often provided by the cleanup organizer; and a mask.

For your backpack or waist pack: Bring a water bottle and hand sanitizer.

Exercise good judgment: Don't pick up anything that seems unsafe or unsanitary, and follow CDC guidelines for social distancing.

Sort it out: Separate trash and recyclables.

Inspire: Share pictures of your bounty on social media.

ber, he had hauled 2,000 cubic feet of trash and recycling from the waterways, which could fill about four 20-yard dumpsters. Wright carries a milk crate on his paddleboard (laundry baskets or other containers with holes in the bottom also work well) and a couple of grabbers. He said he's been collecting trash his whole life: As a child, his mother would challenge him and his sister to collect pieces of litter for every letter of the alphabet — A for Advil packaging, B for bottle cap, C for a Cheetos bag — and the cleanup habit stayed with him as an adult. No matter how you approach a cleanup, Wright suggests making it something that doesn't require a drastic change in your life. Instead, he said, use your life "to make a drastic change for the planet." For him, that's grabbing trash from his SUP, year-round. "I'm just a dude with a paddleboard," he says, "doing my part." [instagram.com/sup.garbage.man](https://www.instagram.com/sup.garbage.man).

Adopt a Block

You don't even have to leave your block to help clean up the city. The signature program of the Mayor's Office of the Clean City encourages individuals, families, businesses, schools and other organizations to make a difference on their own turf. Participation in the program has doubled in the last few years, says Julie Lawson, the Clean City director. Much of her work has been connecting participants in various cleanup camps and encouraging nonprofit organizations to schedule events in neighborhoods — in addition to parks and streams. "During the federal government shutdown in 2019, groups couldn't host events on National Park Service property, but they could organize activities just across the street," Lawson says. "It continues now in the pandemic when they've had to modify events to follow gathering limits." The city, which is required by federal law to limit trash in the Anacostia River, offers cleanup protocols for those organizing their own events. For example: gatherings must include fewer than 50 people, activities on national park land require National Park Service permits; and trash must be disposed of at the participants' homes or at Fort Totten Transfer Station. Supplies are available from the mayor's office.

The annual Mayor's Office of the Clean City Spring Cleanup is March 20, but you can always venture out solo, like a lot of caring and dedicated individuals already do in their neighborhoods across the region. Some carry a trash bag and grabber when they walk their dogs, while others bike around picking up recyclable cans and bottles. Hyperlocal groups such as Guerrilla Gardeners of Washington, on Capitol Hill, help clean up abandoned and littered lots and neglected tree boxes and plant lovely pocket gardens. adopt-a-block-dcgis.hub.arcgis.com.

More events to mark on the calendar

Several other organizations will kick off their cleanups in the spring, including Friends of Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, which hosts events starting in March; the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, which will hold its kickoff event in April; and Potomac Conservancy, which will train its next cohort of volunteer leaders this winter and will organize small cleanups beginning in April. Anacostia Watershed Society's largest annual volunteer event is the Earth Day Cleanup, scheduled for April 25. AWS is recruiting for its in-depth spring programs: Saturday Environmental Academy, free to middle school students in Wards 5, 6, 7 and 8, and Watershed Stewards Academy for adults (\$75; scholarships are available). Both programs train community leaders to address local pollution; the application deadline is late February.

Find out more at kenaggardens.org, allianceforthebay.org, potomac.org and anacostiaws.org.

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