

# CONNECTING WITH THE CONNECTICUT RIVER

*Tours aboard RiverQuest don't just entertain; they teach about the river and its inhabitants*

By Jason Fell

STAFF WRITER

From its source just shy of the Canadian border, the Connecticut River begins a winding 410-mile pathway carved south through mountains and forests, and past cities and villages. In its lower valley, just before it empties into Long Island Sound, the Connecticut River flows through wooded hillsides and opens into numerous coves and brackish tidal marshlands.

It's here at the mouth of the river that birds like great blue herons, osprey and snowy egrets call home. Every winter bald eagles migrate down the river in search of open water. This is where you'll find fish like stripers and shad. Rich with natural beauty, it's no wonder the lower river has been called one of the nation's "Last Great Places."

No one knows all this better than Mark Yuknat, captain of RiverQuest, a 54-foot twin-hull pontoon boat. For three years Yuknat and his wife, Mindy, have been taking people on boat tours



**The 54-foot custom pontoon boat, RiverQuest, and captain Mark Yuknat (above) take passengers on tours of the lower Connecticut River.**

of the lower river.

"It's so nice to be able to share with others what we have here, the beauty of the river," Yuknat says. The 52-year-old former UPS deliveryman grew up in Old Lyme, Conn., a small town at the mouth of the river. Having spent his life on the water — learning the histo-



ry, ecology and local wildlife of the lower river — starting Connecticut River Expeditions seemed to be the perfect venture for Yuknat.

"Well, I couldn't jump out of a truck 300 times a day forever," Yuknat says with a laugh. "I had my captain's license, had been working part-time on different boats and love the lower river. Mindy and I wanted to do something we really enjoy, so we did some research and approached the Connecticut River Museum [in Essex, Conn.] with our idea."

"For a long time, the museum had wanted to someday have a boat to take visitors out on the river," explains Stuart Parnes, the museum's executive director. "Mark came along at the right time. We worked together and, so far, it's been great."

"We'd have kids, visitors to the museum, come down here, get near the water, but that was it," Parnes continues. "Now we can get them out on it. Now kids can get excited about the river and about going out on a really neat boat."

With the museum supporting the project, Mark and Mindy began their search for a boat. It couldn't be just any old boat, Mark says.

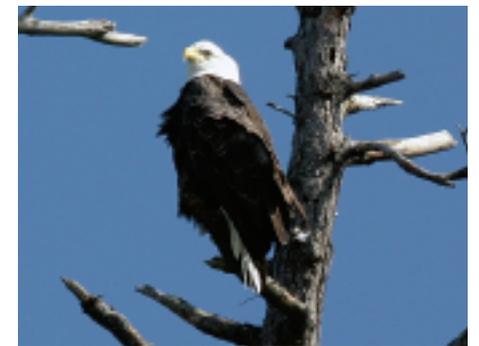
"We needed a boat that would serve many purposes," he says. "It was going to be a floating classroom, so it had to be safe and be able to go into shallow water. We drove all over the East Coast looking for a proper boat, and decided we should just have one custom built."

And that's what they did. Mark and Mindy had built what they call a "high-tech pontoon boat" designed with an inverted vee bottom. In addition to providing a safe, stable ride, RiverQuest draws only about 20 inches, making it easily beachable.

With an overall length of 54 feet and a 14-foot beam, RiverQuest can accommodate up to 58 people. RiverQuest has a fully enclosed and heated cabin so the boat can cruise in inclement

weather. The cabin is outfitted with large windows and an open deck for optimal views of the river, and there is a collection of binoculars on board. A ramp under the bow can be pulled out when the boat is beached, allowing passengers to easily leave the boat and go on land excursions. The boat is powered by twin 4-stroke 225-hp Suzuki outboards.

"We usually push the boat at about 8-1/2 knots, which is a good cruising speed for the river," Mark says. "At that speed, we normally burn between 6 and 8 gallons of fuel per hour. These engines are economical and extremely quiet."



**The boat serves as a floating classroom that puts children amidst the ecology and wildlife of the lower river.**

From its dock in front of the museum, Mark captains RiverQuest upriver on her twice-daily 90-minute narrated public cruises (1 p.m. and 3 p.m.), turning just below Gillette Castle in East Haddam. RiverQuest also offers relaxing adults-only sunset cruises and

specialty cruises that may be sponsored by the Connecticut River Museum, Connecticut Audubon Society and/or other groups. RiverQuest also offers exclusive private charters.

Some of the specialty cruises include a tour of Lynde Point Lighthouse in Old Saybrook, Conn.; a Swallow Spectacle cruise, where an Audubon Society naturalist speaks about the various types of birds that congregate at sunset over Goose Island in Old Lyme, Conn.; a midday circumnavigation of Selden Island; and a Selden Island Exploration cruise that includes an exploratory walk around the 610-acre state park.

Mindy, who is 50, says she enjoys running RiverQuest. "What's rewarding is helping to educate people about how clean the water is now, and about all the organizations that help take care of the river," she says. "It's wonderful, being able to share this part of the river with people who come here from all over the world."

Mark and Mindy say they have plans to expand Connecticut River Expeditions. By February of next year the couple hopes to get Adventure, a 61-foot steel-hulled powerboat, into the water and ready for business.

"Ultimately, we'd like to see RiverQuest used more for educational trips," Mark says. "We'll use Adventure for higher-end, more elegant charters in



**A ramp under the bow can be pulled out when the boat is beached, allowing passengers to easily board and depart the boat.**

the Sound. Maybe we'll do wine trips to places in New York like Montauk or Greenport. We'll have to see. This is going to be the next step for us."

In the meantime, Mark says he's looking forward to finishing the remainder of the season.

"Going dead slow in the water, the 4-strokes on this boat are so quiet you can hear the birds singing. I like that," he says. "I really enjoy being out on the water, telling people stories about the land, the river and its history and answering people's questions. I wouldn't have it any other way." [www.ctriverexpeditions.org](http://www.ctriverexpeditions.org) ■

# CT RIVER COVE MAY GET DREDGE FUNDING

By Jason Fell

STAFF WRITER

The town of Old Saybrook, Conn., recently received some good news from U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman, who says he's hopeful that a request for \$3 million to dredge the silted-in North Cove will be approved.

In 2003 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed to dredge about 250,000 cubic yards of predominantly silt/clay material from the 11-foot-deep entrance channel, 11-foot-deep outer anchorage and 6-foot-deep inner anchorage. The cove has been silting so badly over the past decade, a news report says, that a number of boats, including those owned by mooring holders, cannot get into the cove.

North Cove is home to the North Cove Yacht Club as well as town water access facilities including a dock, boat ramp and landing. Maintenance dredging has not been performed there since 1992 when more than 150,000 cubic yards of silt material were removed from the channel and anchorage areas.

"There's a definite problem in North Cove," says Frank Vincierra, commodore of the North Cove Yacht Club. "We have more sailboats than powerboats here, and the deep-keeled boats

have problems getting in and out. If the cove isn't dredged and keeps getting siltier and siltier, what happens to our boats then?"

U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, had previously secured \$1.5 million for the project but town officials apparently heard that only half that amount is available now, the news report says. All the permits for the project have been granted and, pending the funds, the project is on the Army Corps of Engineers' priority list.

Silting is also a problem in South Cove, located between Saybrook Point and the borough of Fenwick. Steve Lockett, the town's water pollution control authority coordinator, has said that at the rate in which the cove is filling in it will soon become a swamp and eventually turn into a meadow. At this time, it's unclear if the Army Corps of Engineers will go ahead with dredging South Cove.

Mike Pace, Old Saybrook's first selectman, has said that dredging North Cove isn't a permanent solution to the problem. According to the news report, Pace says the town is considering a number of long-term options as well as purchasing its own dredging machinery. ■