

Northern Virginia's Occoquan River, near the village of Occoquan and the town of Woodbridge, is about 20 river miles south of Washington, D.C. This tidal tributary of the Potomac River and the Prince William County town on the south bank were named after a Native American village called *Aquoconde*, which means "the end of the water" in the Algonkian language.

The course of this short tidal river is interrupted by the dam above the town where once there were falls. Behind the dam is the Occoquan Reservoir, owned by Fairfax County Water and a great fishing

hole in its own right. But that's another story. There are only about three miles of river from the bays on the main river to the dam, and it's all a no-wake zone.

The center-console outboard droned as Bill Garber steered it toward the historic part of Occoquan from the Occoquan Harbour Marina. The river was chocolate brown from the recent heavy rains, and debris (both natural and man-made) was everywhere. Bill's family owned a large hog farm outside of Woodbridge that since has been converted to a large boat and recreational vehicle center, Holly Acres Marine. He grew up with

many of the old, established families of the area and has seen Occoquan and environs grow from a sleepy, rural community to a bustling suburb of the Northern Virginia/Washington, D.C. mega-complex that keeps moving outward. Occoquan, however, through strict zoning codes, maintains much of its old historical charm.

#### Natural and Human History

The historic community of Occoquan, now a center for arts and crafts, was a boom town in the early 19th century with tobacco warehouses, and flour and cotton mills. The small port of Occoquan was a base of

# OCCOQUAN

## The End of the Water

Story & Photos  
by  
King Montgomery



The historic section of Occoquan is home to more than 100 arts and crafts stores, as well as other shops and some fine restaurants.



supply for both the Union and Confederate sides during the Civil War, and was the site of several skirmishes. The river was navigable then, but now it is heavily silted and only small boats can navigate the narrow channel at idle speed.

The mouth of the Occoquan River is flanked by Occoquan Bay to the southwest and Belmont Bay to the northeast. The Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge and Mason Neck State Park are on the main Potomac River and Belmont Bay. These wildlands, along with the Pohick Bay Regional Park just to the north of Occoquan, which is administered by the

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, form the Mason Neck Cooperative Management Area, dedicated to the preservation of an ecosystem that supports aquatic, avian, and terrestrial animals and plants of all descriptions. The area is home to American bald eagles, great blue herons, ospreys, numerous songbirds, and other endemic and migratory birds, including waterfowl.

### **The Fishery**

Both Occoquan Bay and Belmont Bay can be good fishing grounds for large-mouth bass, panfish, and catfish. These fish

will congregate where there is aquatic vegetation, brushpiles and trees that wash in with storms, and where dropoffs are present. At the narrower part of the river, the fish-catching patterns include the pilings at the numerous boat docks and marinas, the abutments to the road and rail bridges that cross the river, and the blowdowns and rocks that line the shores.

The Occoquan River is home to a constant stream of pleasure boats, particularly during the summer, and they tend to stay in the channel, which fortunately is a no-wake zone. Except for a near-constant gentle rocking caused by the boat traffic,



The Occoquan Harbour Marina just upriver from Highway 1 and railway bridges over the Occoquan River

New condos are being built along the waterfront.



the profusion of pleasure boaters won't bother the serious or casual angler.

Kanes Creek is a short, fragile tributary of Belmont Bay. It is surrounded by the Mason Neck preserve/park complex mentioned above. It is best fished from a canoe or kayak, particularly at low tide when larger boats can go aground. It presents a spatterdock and fallen wood pattern, and is a great place for topwater lures and flies early and late in the day. There is canoe rental and access at Mason Neck State Park.

### Manmade Structure

The Ocoquan is spanned by the U.S. Highway 1 bridge, the U.S. Interstate

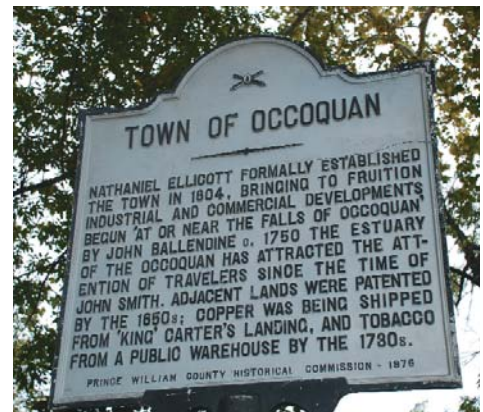
95 bridges, the Highway 123 bridge and the Richmond-Fredericksburg-Potomac rail bridge. Most of the pilings and abutments that support and protect the bridges are good places to fish. Bait fish hold tight to the concrete abutments for protection, and to graze on the plants and algae that grow there. Bass and stripers hunt the bait and use the bridge structures as ambush points. They will stage on the downcurrent side of the abutments facing into the moving tide. Cast crankbaits upcurrent and bring them back close to the abutments, varying the speed of the lure. Or work a jig'n'pig or Texas-rigged plastic worm along the structure. The bridge supports close to deeper water are usually the most productive.

The sunfish also hang out around the bridge structures, and small tube lures, spinners, or grubs can quickly fill your creel for dinner. Bluegill and crappie are found all along the river wherever natural or manmade structure is found, while the larger yellow and white perch tend to stay nearer to the channel in midstream. In the spring, stripers move into the river to spawn. They hang out around the bridge pilings and in the river channel. During the week, when boat traffic is light, trolled crankbaits and spoons will score on striped bass. Juvenile stripers stay in the river all year and are often caught incidentally while fishing for largemouth.

The numerous boat docks,



Madigan's Waterfront Restaurant (left) has a nice atmosphere and good food.



marinas, old pier pilings, rip-rap, and seawalls provide more manmade cover and structure that attract and hold fish. Run jerkbaits and spinnerbaits along the pilings; shallow-running crankbaits like Mann's 1-Minus or Baby 1-Minus, and Norman's Little N also work well. Flip jigs and plastic baits to the base of pilings. Fly-rodgers can catch fish on Clouser deep minnows and bendbacks on a floating or sinking-tip line, depending on water depth. Cast lures and flies along the seawalls, particularly the one at the Occoquan Regional Park, which is also the best boat launch facility on the river. Don't neglect the ramp's pier pilings, but always be careful of hitting others' boats with lures.

Upriver from the bridge abutments, the marinas, the seawalls, the fallen trees along the north shore, and other great fishing spots, you will near the dam falls and the effluent from a water-treatment facility. This area can provide good fishing because the plunging water has scoured deep holes, the water is well oxygenated, and the treatment plant's discharge warms and fertilizes the water. Add the tidal surge and you have a mixing bowl of nutrients and baitfish that sometimes draws the larger game fish to the area. There are some large submerged rocks and ledges in this area, so be careful of your trolling motor and lower unit.

### **The End of the Water**

There are several good restaurants in Occoquan where you can pull in, tie up your boat, and have a nice meal; I like Madigan's Waterfront for its location on the water, atmosphere and good food. Another spot with a view is the restaurant at the Occoquan Harbour and Marina. Derek Lynn, whose family has owned businesses in Occoquan and Woodbridge for generations, says the marina/restaurant is a beautiful area and very peaceful. The Occoquan Inn on Mill Street offers lunch and dinner and is reputed to have the ghost of a Dogue Indian visit from time to time.

And the Blue Arbor Café offers specialty sandwiches, soups and salads in a pleasant setting. Add a couple of coffee shops and wine/cheese places and you have it all. You won't go hungry in Occoquan.

If shopping is your wont, there are more than 100 shops that include antiques, art and framing, clothes and fashion, jewelry, home, interior and garden accessories, spas, crafts, books, and many other specialty establishments. Fortunately, Occoquan maintains its rustic and historical perspective while keeping up with the times.

Barry Dean at the Occoquan River Communities (ORC) is proud of the work the organization does to promote the community while not developing it into a concrete-and-brick jungle. ORC activities, he says, "will include, but not be limited to, sharing information on and coordinating events associated with the Occoquan River, sponsoring river-related educational activities, pursuing river transportation linkages among the various communities along the river, and generally promoting the area as a preferred destination for shopping, dining, working, living, and recreating in a manner that fosters responsible stewardship of the Occoquan watershed." Contact the ORC for a listing of all the fun activities that take place in Occoquan throughout the year.

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King Montgomery is a frequent contributor to *The Virginia Sportsman* and an avid fly angler and bird hunter. He is a board member of Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, Inc., a nonprofit group that teaches wounded and disabled veterans to tie flies and fly fish. See [www.projecthealingwaters.com](http://www.projecthealingwaters.com). Contact him at [kingangler1@aol.com](mailto:kingangler1@aol.com).

## **Occoquan River Information**

### **Maps**

GMCO Tidal Potomac River map, (888) 420-6277. DeLorme's Virginia Atlas & Gazetteer, page 76. (207) 846-7000 or [www.delorme.com](http://www.delorme.com)

### **Launch Facilities**

Occoquan Region Park (703) 690-2121  
Pohick Bay Regional Park (703) 339-6104.  
Leesylvania State Park, Woodbridge  
(703) 670-0372 or [www.dcr.virginia.gov](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov)

### **US Coast Guard Licensed Guides**

Ken Penrod's Life Outdoors Unlimited,  
(301) 937-0010. [www.penrodsguides.com](http://www.penrodsguides.com)  
Indian Head Charters (301) 203-0961

### **Reference Books**

Ken Penrod's *Tidal Potomac River Fishing Bible* and *Fishing the Tidal Potomac River*.  
(301) 937-0010. [www.penrodsguides.com](http://www.penrodsguides.com)

### **Occoquan River Communities**

ORC is a not-for-profit, grassroots organization, whose mission is to create a preferred destination along the Occoquan River and to foster responsible development, promotion, and stewardship of the Occoquan Watershed. Sponsors Occoquan River Festival  
[www.occoquanrivercommunities.com](http://www.occoquanrivercommunities.com).

### **Historic Occoquan, Inc.**

The Occoquan Historical Society is dedicated to the research, restoration and preservation of our heritage. (703) 491-7525 or [www.historicoccoquan.com](http://www.historicoccoquan.com)

### **Prince William County/Manassas**

#### **Convention & Visitors Bureau**

[www.visitpwc.com](http://www.visitpwc.com)

### **Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries**

You will need a Virginia freshwater fishing license or a Maryland Tidal Fishing License to fish in the Occoquan River. (804) 367-1000 or [www.dgif.virginia.gov](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov)