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COLUMNS

Amy Russo tests the waters with a kayak trip on RI's 'wild and scenic' Wood River



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Kassi Donnelly knew around age 16 who she wanted to be.

Walking her dog through Richmond's Arcadia Management Area, a 14,000-acre swath of dirt paths and dense forest, she stumbled onto what she describes as an "aha moment."

"I saw a decomposing tree and realized that a tree is providing to the Earth no matter what stage of life it is in, and I want more people to enjoy and care for their natural areas," Donnelly recalled, while sitting in a kayak on the Wood River.

For comparison, at age 16, I was having my "aha moment" every other day, thinking maybe I'd make my living with a guitar or a paintbrush. I had command over neither, and suffered a deep-seated fear of the outdoors.

It only took a few moments with Donnelly to become a bit more acquainted with our natural environment, save for the deer fly that pursued me as we paddled.

What's a BioBlitz?: Amy Russo joins volunteers recording abundant life in ordinary places

Amy's Rhode: As Providence's Graduate hotel turns 100, Amy Russo checks into all those spooky rumors

Donnelly works with the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association, which oversees — you guessed it — the Wood and Pawcatuck rivers, two waterways of 226 in the country that have received a "wild and scenic" designation. That's a fancy way of saying they're part of a preservation network established by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968, which was designed to safeguard the areas for future generations.

Alaska boasts the most, with more than 3,000 miles of protected water. For its size, Rhode Island is no slouch, holding 110 miles. Based on a back-of-the-envelope calculation by me — someone who nearly failed high school math — taking into account the square mileage of each state, little Rhody has more than 20 times the protected waters of Alaska. But then again, we are also home to

the most doughnuts per capita in the country. When it comes to stats, sometimes it helps to be small.

Amy's Rhode: Which famous figures have visited RI's Kingston Village? Amy Russo follows their footsteps

Amy's Rhode: What's new with RI's rugelach maven? Amy Russo hears plans for expanded food truck menu

So why revel in Rhode Island's rivers when you could revel in doughnuts? For one, if you're looking to get back to nature, there is no easier way. That joke that nothing in Rhode Island is more than an hour away holds true when it comes to the Wood River, which I paddled with Donnelly last week. No matter where you are in the state, it's never more than a 60-minute drive. And you might mistake the scenery for the wilds of Vermont or New Hampshire.

Within minutes, we spotted a painted turtle perched on a log, a great blue heron and two red-winged blackbirds, which, coincidentally, were chasing off the heron, perhaps in a territorial tussle.

Amy's Rhode: Amy Russo gets a wall-to-wall RI history lesson at a Colonial farmstead in Lincoln

Amy's Rhode: RI's Touro Synagogue, icon of religious liberty, has a lot to teach you during tours

If you're looking to see the rivers for yourself, you're in luck. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Stewardship Council, which Donnelly coordinates, is holding its inaugural 7 Rivers Festival on June 25 and 26, with activities stretching from Connecticut to Rhode Island. That includes free kayak rentals, mushroom hunting, a wild plant walk, freshwater fly-tying, free treats from Knead Doughnuts, and more.

I'll do just about anything for a free doughnut.

For more on the festival and a schedule of events, click here.

Providence Journal staff writer Amy Russo, a transplanted New Yorker, is looking for new ways to experience her adopted state. If you have suggestions for this column, email her at amrusso@providencejournal.com.