



## SIGNALS FROM T•A•R•S•U•S

August 2004

This is the Summer 2004 issue of *Signals from TARSUS*, and it accompanies *Signals* (including *Ship's Log*), and *The Outlaw*. In this issue we have the fourth “namesake animals” article from Molly McGinnis and the third installment of the Kenya series from Des Kelsall, plus the first installment of a new column, “Exploring in *Elbereth*,” by Claire Barnett. We’ve also got our regular column from Mary Wessel Walker, and Ransome Readers Recommend, and finally, the TARSUS map for 2004. Due to space constraints I have had to delay the next TARS Canada Quiz until our next issue, which might be sad but in fact is wonderful as it means we have lots of content!

### Welcome

A warm welcome to Jan Bailey (WA); Susan Collicott (WA); Niko Harrison (NM); Leslie Jenkins (MO); Elizabeth, Helen, Matthew & Will Jolley (OR); Rev. Mark Mazza (CA); Pati McGahern (VA); Zoe Savage (IL); Bill Wakeman (CA); Karen Young (ID).

And Welcome Back to the Bauer family, Leah Mickens, and Simon Tucker.

### Special Thanks

Once again I would like to thank the contributors to *Signals from TARSUS* for their support. Nothing gladdens the heart of any newsletter editor as much as noticing that the “articles pending” folder is not empty!

Three Million Cheers for the contributors!

And “without further ado,” on with the newsletter.

### Feature Column: Ransome Readers Recommend

*Jim Davis: A High Sea Adventure* by John Masefield

Reviewed by Pam Adams

*Jim Davis* is a book that would be very popular on Wild Cat Island, and very well could have been read there. My suggestion is that it should be read out loud- around the campfire to prevent squabbles as to who gets it first.

Our hero Jim, was born in 1800, and after the death of his parents, is sent to live with an uncle in Devon – a short mile from the sea. Devon, of course, was a smuggling coast, and it doesn't take Jim long to become acquainted with a few of the local smugglers, especially one smuggler, Marah Gorsuch. Things take a turn for the worse when the local coastguard tries to capture the smugglers. Jim tries to keep his friends from getting caught and keep them from killing the preventive agents. While he's successful in saving the agents, the smugglers decide that he knows too much for their good. Their solution – kidnap Jim and take him along on a few voyages, making he as guilty as they. While the first voyage is successful, the second falls prey to ambush. Many of the smugglers are wounded or killed, and Jim manages to escape in the confusion. However, he has now been identified as a smuggler, and this makes the trip home quite difficult. After many adventures, including a brush with gypsies, Jim finally returns home, as does his friend Marah.

*Jim Davis* is an enjoyable book. Yes, the author is that John Masefield. It's a good illustration of life in the Napoleonic era, and how people lived with the smugglers, pretending not to know what went on. (“Watch the wall, my darling, as the

Gentlemen go by') There's plenty of information on ships and smuggling, enough for any number of Amazon pirates. For Peter Duck fans, there's even a tale of lost treasure. I recommend it highly.

Originally published in 1911, it was republished in 2002 by The Chicken House, a division of Scholastic Books, both UK and USA.

*The Founding Fish* by John McPhee  
Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2002

Reviewed by Sam & Molly McGinnis

We don't see how anyone who enjoys the fishing parts of Ransome's books could resist this one! The "Founding Fish" is the American Shad, and it makes you wish that Ransome could have read it. McPhee tells about his lifetime affair with the shad, the country's off-and-on passion for the shad, and it's full of fishing stories, McPhee's and other shad fishermen's stories. There's only one place you're likely to bring in a shad in California now (oh, yes, he tells the story of the man who brought shad to the West, too), and much of what we learned about the epic of the shad was new to us.

McPhee writes almost as well as Ransome sometimes, and he packs an incredible amount of shadology into his pages and keeps you coming for more. Did the shad save our troops at Valley Forge? Maybe – as an anti-historiologist Molly especially enjoyed the many tales of the shad and Washington's troops. Sam, the ichthyologist, especially enjoyed the stories of the lives and times of the shad rivers and the shad fisheries. A bit of sport, a lot of history, an amazing amount of shad science – and at the last, McPhee's own shad cookery with contributions from friends and – again – history. (It just happened that as we got to the mouth-watering appendix of recipes, we got our hands on a shad's worth of shad roe – instant success, and we've been trying to cook shad roe for years. Susan would have loved the McPhee method of slow steaming over a bed of bacon. We think it might work on eels or catfish, too.)

Any bookstore or library should have this one. Our trade (oversize) paperback cost about \$14.

*The Eleanor Estes books*

Reviewed by Ben Burwell

Eleanor Estes! Her books about the Pyes and the Moffats have been loved for generations on end! They include *The Moffats*, *The Middle Moffat*, *The Moffat Museum*, *Ginger Pye* and *Pinkey Pye*. Recommended for young readers especially. Look at the library for her books under: Est/JU-FIC. Did Estes read AR's books? There seems to be a connection between PP and *Ginger Pye* because of ... why, Squashy Hat!



## **Namesake Animals from the Swallows & Amazons Books**

Molly McGinnis  
**The Case for the Coot**

**Coot** CC, BS, SW, etc.

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*; American Coot, *Fulica americana*

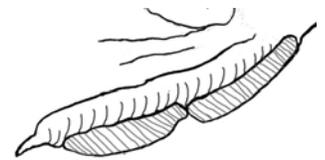
Most Ransome readers have seen coots paddling, dabbling, and fighting on lakes, ponds, marshes, canals, and quiet ocean shorelines. Except for the chalky white bill, a coot looks rather like a small, sooty-black duck, but coots are more closely related to cranes and moorhens than to ducks.

Ransome's coot – and the Coot Club's – is the Eurasian Coot, and you could see a coot just like it (except for the white feather!) almost anywhere in the Old World – all of Britain, almost anywhere in Europe, and in most of the rest of the world, even Australia. Similar species fill in the gaps worldwide. The American Coot looks like the European, except for the head. Our coot has a red “shield” above the bill and all-black head feathers, but the Eurasian Coot's head is literally “flashier.” The white bill leads to a white shield that blends with strip of white forehead feathers, so the dark head flashes white when it turns toward the observer.

One American or European coot looks just like any other coot – shades of black and gray for males and females alike. A coot with a white wing feather like the one in the book might seem a rather far-fetched idea, but it's not really at all unlikely that a coot would show a white wing feather. If you could take a coot in hand and lift the top (primary) feathers, you would see that each feather in the second layer is generously rimmed with white. All it would take is for one feather to be broken or twisted or pulled out in a fight (and coots fight a lot before the flocks split up to breed).

And there is another reason for the coot to be a good mascot. Why have a mascot you never see? Coots aren't much disturbed by human presence, and could be seen in fair numbers where other marsh birds disappeared into the reeds or simply disappeared into oblivion as marshes were drained, reeds cut, and pressures on increasingly rare eggs grew worse. They could maintain a population longer than other marsh birds because they are generalist and opportunistic feeders that eat anything that comes to hand (or rather, beak), and they have terrific reproductive success. They lay 4 to 6 eggs and hatch most of them, and if the nest is destroyed they will re-nest up to four times, though they raise only one set of young in a season even if the first nesting is successful. Both parents build nests, incubate eggs, and care for the young. When coot populations begin to decline – and the Broads coots had declined by the Coot Club's time – you know that the whole biome is in big trouble! (Compare the Great Northern: 2 eggs, one nesting, or often none if the nesting birds are disturbed, and they MUST have just the right nursery pond with lots of small fish to train their babies on.)

*The Birder's Handbook* says that coots “appear neither comical, vulnerable, nor inspirational,” but they are almost as versatile as monkeys or people and if you're near a park with a water feature you can take a sack of old bread to a bank or bridge and spend a pleasant time in the company of coots. Watch them swim and dive. You might think that such expert maneuverers would have webbed feet like a duck or a Diver, but coots have a much more interesting and unusual foot\*. The toes are separate, with wide, flat lobes out to the sides of the toes – think of an oar or a canoe paddle, which can be “feathered” this way or that for maximum drag on the propelling stroke and minimum on the recovery. The foot is not just a swim aid – it can help an overheated coot cool down, like a seal's flipper. And partly because of its versatile foot, coots are quite capable on land and often “graze” waterside lawns and meadows, where they pick grass and gobble small invertebrates like snails, slugs, and sowbugs (woodlice to the British and some U. S. easterners). In water, they eat vegetation and the same kinds of “meat animals” and not only snap up titbits dropped by other waterbirds but snatch greenery from the very beaks of ducks and even swans.



A Coot's Toe

Surprisingly, coot relatives include some of the rarest birds, and some of the most secretive. There are several endangered or threatened cranes, rails and gallinules, and all are in the same order with coots: *Gruiformes*. Rails, gallinules and moorhens (waterhens in Britain) are the closest relatives, in the same family (*Rallidae*). Rails are thin as rails seen from back or front (zoologists say “laterally compressed”) and all but invisible when hiding among reeds. “Gallinula” is the Latin word for a domestic chicken hen, and suggests that moorhens and gallinules were once considered good eating – you might think better than the bitterns Old Harry the eeler talks of shooting in *The Big Six*. Gallinules and moorhens look like large, flashy-colored coots, though they actually smaller (but longer legged). Gallinules are solitary and secretive and seldom seen, like rails, but the Common Moorhen of North America can be seen in the kinds of places coots like.

The rest of the story? The Coot Club mascot fades quietly out of the story fairly early on – and that's what coots do. While they're laying eggs and sitting on them they are quite nonchalant, but once the chicks hatch, they are experts at vanishing. Each parent takes part of the family to forage near an edge of the water where there are reeds or cattails or other tallish inshore plants. If one parent senses something disturbing there is one call and presto! Each set of birds disappears into the reeds in a flash. In fall large flocks form, with gangs of boisterous young hooligans on the outskirts. Coots on water squabble and fight and in spring try to intimidate or attract other coots by fanning their tails to show their white rumps. Paintings in bird books show the white feathers under the tail, but you would never know they were there

when you watch a sedately foraging nesting coot in early summer!

\*Feet are as important to a water bird as to a raptor, and no one who's read T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* will forget Wart's ordeal with the hawks and the three questions, each answered by "the foot!"

Endangered and threatened Gruiformes: in the U. S., we all know about the Whooping Crane. Several species of rail are endangered. In Hawaii, the endemic moorhen and coot are both endangered. To find out more, check <http://www.earthlife.net/birds/iucn-gruiforme.html> (a lovely site for information on many kinds of wildlife).

Good Reading: *The Birder's Handbook*, by Erlich, Dobkin, and Wheye. Fireside, 1988. All 720 pages in stock at Amazon for only \$14. All the details about nesting and lifestyle and lovely little essays too.



### **A Fisheries Officer on Lake Victoria (3)**

Des. Kelsall

The time came to take *Heron* up to the Railways & Harbours dockyard at Kisumu, Kenya, to have her slipped for cleaning and painting her bottom. With my wife, Joan, in company, we set out on the three-day voyage from Mwanza at the south end of the Lake. The evening of the second day found us anchored under the 7000-foot mountains near the entrance to the Kavirondo Gulf, at the head of which Kisumu lay, only a morning's run away. (As Lake Victoria lies at roughly 4000 feet above sea level, these mountains were effectively about 3000 feet above Lake level.)

The following morning when we were ready to get under way I called down to Omari the Engineer (who rejoiced in the title of "Bwana Chifu") telling him to start up. The starter ground, the engine turned over, then....BANG!!

Inspection revealed that the drive to the plunger-type engine cooling water pump, a 3" brass rod, had fractured. Even an emergency repair was out of the question and the engine could not operate without cooling water. I had a conference with Omari and Sadiki the Cox'n. We were well off the route followed by the Lake steamers and the rough mountain country ashore, plus the distance involved, precluded a journey on foot to seek help from Kisumu.

It was Sadiki, with his experience of native dhows, who came up with an idea. Could we not rig up a sail from the old tarpaulin which was stowed in the hold? We went to work at once to see what might be done in this direction. Fortunately we had on board a stout pole, used for punting the boat in confined spaces. By lacing one side of the old tarpaulin to this to act as a yard and bracing the corners of the other side back with ropes we achieved what looked like a workable rig, though clearly only with the wind right aft. This raised a problem. We had anchored in a stretch of water between Rusinga Island and the mainland, intending to take a shortcut through a narrow, shallow, dog-legged passage ahead, to reach the entrance to the Kavirondo Gulf. We could not now "back out", so to speak, against the prevailing wind, in order to go round the south side of Rusinga Island to enter the Gulf. Equally impossible was to sail the 45-foot craft on her jury rig through the dog-leg passage ahead. It was Omari who cracked this problem. He suggested that, if he removed the cooling water gallery pipe running along the cylinder head he would be able to fill up the engine's water jacket by hand and then replace the pipe. He reckoned that, running at a tick-over, the engine could be used for some time before it heated up. It was a desperate solution but the only one open to us.

I had our dinghy lowered and put two men in it, one of them with a sounding pole. The depth in the channel was only 6½ feet, *Heron's* draught being 5½ feet, so we could obtain continuous soundings to guide the vessel through, as she proceeded with the engine just ticking over. The anchor was raised before the engine was started and we headed into the channel with me at the wheel. The dog-leg was reached and successfully rounded and almost before we realised it we were through to the far side of the passage, where, with a sigh of relief, I dropped anchor and hoisted the dinghy. By then the engine was sizzling a bit and steam was coming out of the cooling water outlet in a jet, but it appeared that no harm had been done. We were now in a position to bear away into the Gulf before the afternoon wind which had begun to blow quite strongly. Our makeshift rig was hoisted on the mast and by dint of rotating it towards the beam we managed to get

*Heron* before the wind and moving towards distant Kisumu. She picked up speed until I estimated (by the time-honoured method of dropping a floating marker over the bow and timing its passage to the stern) that she was doing about three knots. As the wind strengthened during the afternoon the speed crept up a little and a rumbling noise became audible which I realised was the propeller being rotated by the boat's movement through the water. Around 4 o'clock the wind began to die and steerage way was quickly lost, so that we had to anchor for the night, not far off the shore, in order to be out of the way of any Lake steamer which might come our way.

The following day we were able to get under way a little earlier, being on our intended track. The tarpaulin sail was not beautiful but it worked. Joan sat on deck under the awning with her sewing. Presently, looking up at the sail, she suggested that the cabin carpet might usefully be hoisted below the tarpaulin as an additional sail. This was done, using one of the dinghy's oars as a yard, and the coir matting bellied out in the wind, though I don't think it greatly increased the boat's speed. Again, we headed inshore for the night.

This was the pattern for the next few days, each one taking us a little closer to Kisumu. Joan did a big wash one day and it was hung out in the rigging to dry, so that *Heron* looked a real rag-bag, between the sails and the washing. I think Arthur Ransome would have hooted if he could have seen us!

On the fifth day a new problem arose. We had almost used up our supply of foodstuffs, not expecting to be so long on the way. We had a basket of ripe mangoes which we were taking as a present to friends in Kisumu and we had to broach these to top off our dry bread. That night we set several nets near the boat, hoping to catch something to make a meal of the following day. This we were lucky enough to do.

Finally, after a week under sail, we arrived off Head Office at the old BOAC dock, opposite Kisumu town and, in order to get alongside the landing stage, employed the same dodge of filling up the engine's water jacket by hand and then running at a tick-over until we were able to tie up. We soon found that we were considered long overdue and a search operation was about to be mounted. The view among the officers of the Railways and Harbours ships was that we had done very well to get the boat to her destination under her jury rig and I think that the crew was justly proud of themselves.



## **Exploring in *Elbereth***

Claire Barnett

Since this is the beginning of a new column, it is only fair to introduce ourselves – me and my boat. My name is Claire, and when I was growing up, my family had a cottage on a small lake in Northern Wisconsin. There was a wonderful island with tall pine trees visible across the water that I longed to camp on. Alas, my parents were not as trusting as the Walker and Blackett parents, so I did not get to do that until many many years later. But I too had a lake with an island in the north to dream about, before I ever read Arthur Ransome. When I found him, I found friends in his characters, as well as fellow explorers and pirates with an imagination like my own.

Hugh Brogan wrote in his *Life of Arthur Ransome* that children will learn "...as they read and reread the books, ... a vision of nature and society which may color their outlook for the rest of their lives." That description could have been written of me. When I go new places, (and not just on the water), I do so with an expectant air of adventure, of new discoveries to be made. I don't think I can get in a boat, large or small, to go somewhere without feeling very much like the Swallows did in those first chapters of *Swallows and Amazons*.

*Elbereth* is a 22' C-Dory cruiser, made near Seattle, Washington, USA. She has a classic work boat design, and looks a lot like the fishing boats I used to see when I lived for a time in Southeast Alaska. She has an inside helm, and 6' 2" of headroom, so I can stand up inside her easily. (I'm a tall girl)! She has a galley with a fresh water tank, sink, and alcohol stove. Last fall I installed a Force 10 Cozy Cabin heater in her, so I can take her out in the spring and fall and stay warm. She has a V-Berth and porta-potti, and is wonderful to sleep aboard.



Her high dory style bow makes her a rough water boat, while her flat bottom and shallow draft also make her perfect for shallow water too. She is fiberglass and light enough to easily trailer, so our explorations are not confined to one place. She was equipped for Lake Superior, that big inland sea to my north, and had radar, a Loran Receiver and a marine radio, all of which are not installed on her right now while I use her on inland waterways. I do use the fathometer and marine compass and dual engines though. I also had a cockpit camper enclosure made for her.

She is named for Elbereth, the Goddess in the Tolkien books who created the stars and moon. I am her second Captain, and while she still had her awful former name, I spent a magical night on board her under a full moon, in a small lake inside of an island in a huge body of water that surpasses

Secret Water for size, confusing channels, and hazards. It was a night that changed my life, and I named my little ship in honor of it.

When I changed her name, I remembered that traditionally, one should put a ha'penny under the mast to avoid the bad luck associated with name changing.. Well, the smallest British coin I had from my trip there, was a two pence piece. I thought that was appropriate, allowing for inflation over the years, so I attached it to the underside of the radar plank, which is as close to a mast as I have.

Now if you are thinking non-sailboat / cruiser = Hullabaloo and *Margoletta*, I must remind you of the two very nice unnamed cruiser skippers of the *Cachalot* in *The Big Six*, and the *Bonnka* in *Coots in the North*. They had snug little ships too! But I am more like my favorite Ransome character, and still sometimes fancy myself as Claire "Raven" Morgan, Terror of the Seas! The Red Raven silhouette on Elbereth is one of my symbols.



In the coming months, we will take you to a lake near my home port that resembles Ransome's lake in the north, as well as along a river channel, and perhaps a return to the special place that gave *Elbereth* her name. And although we can't go there because it is too far away, in the winter when *Elbereth* is laid up, I will also tell you of a real island I once was on that closely resembles the Wildcat Island in the stories. This island really exists, rather than being parts of the two islands that Arthur Ransome used for his fictional island.

Adventure awaits!

*About the author. Claire Barnett is a semi retired pirate girl who likes to write and who has steadfastly refused to grow up in the way once expected of her. She lives in the Midwest United States.*



**From our 10-Gong Contributing Editor Mary Wessel Walker:**

### **Yet Another TARS Gathering in the Midwest**

Yes, I've now lost count of how many times, at irregular intervals, we've had a TARS sailing day in the Midwest. I think it's something like four or five. Every time we have a great time and this was no exception. Our gathering this year once again took place on Gun Lake, near Battle Creek, Michigan, on July 9. This year we were delighted to have a number of new people joining us.



Carla Searle, Noah Waters, Kate Walker on the *Wildcat*

My TARS friend Carla, about whom I've written many times in this column, was visiting my family from England. This was her first visit to the USA, and visiting Michigan was her first stop. In her honor, my dad, Jim Wessel Walker, organized this sailing day during her visit. He invited the Waters family of Indiana, who were able to come in spite of a last minute outbreak of plague in the ranks (i.e., Noah catching a summer cold). Noah Waters, 13, is an avid sailor who doesn't get much of an opportunity to sail because his parents, Victoria and Andy, don't sail themselves. We were also joined by my older sister Kate Walker who sails the *Ruthless* down in Austin, Texas, and her dog Taps, who would rather not sail at all, but doesn't get much choice in this family! My mom, Donna Wessel Walker, was also there, as was our boat, the *Wildcat*.

Gun Lake is a large lake with plenty of bays and islands for exploring. Sadly, there wasn't much wind that day. The wind only picked up as we were heading back to the dock at the end of the day. Nevertheless, we got several different sailing expeditions in, and everyone who wanted to got a chance to sail. Noah and Kate both did a lot of good sailing, despite the light winds. Carla, who hasn't sailed in a few years, got to take the tiller for a while, too. In the morning, during a calm time, Carla and I swam from the boat, which was the first time Carla had ever swum in a fresh water lake. Apparently, swimming in lakes is not encouraged in England. While we were swimming (wearing our life jackets), the wind suddenly picked up again, and we found ourselves left behind while the crew of the *Wildcat* got some unexpected Crew-Overboard (COB) practice.



Mary Wessel Walker, Noah Waters and Kate Walker on the *Wildcat*

As always, we had an excellent Ransome-themed picnic, complete with Oxford marmalade ("Better scholars at Camblidge, better marmalade at Oxford," according to Miss Lee). We also enjoyed home-baked bread from Kate's new breadmaker, as well as produce from the farm where I work and some Kvas, a kind of Russian beer which the Waters brought along in honor of Evgenia Ransome. After lunch, Noah showed us pictures from his Ransome holiday in England, which included many adventures sailing on the Broads with a fleet of TARS-y pirates! Kate and I also played some songs on the penny-whistle.



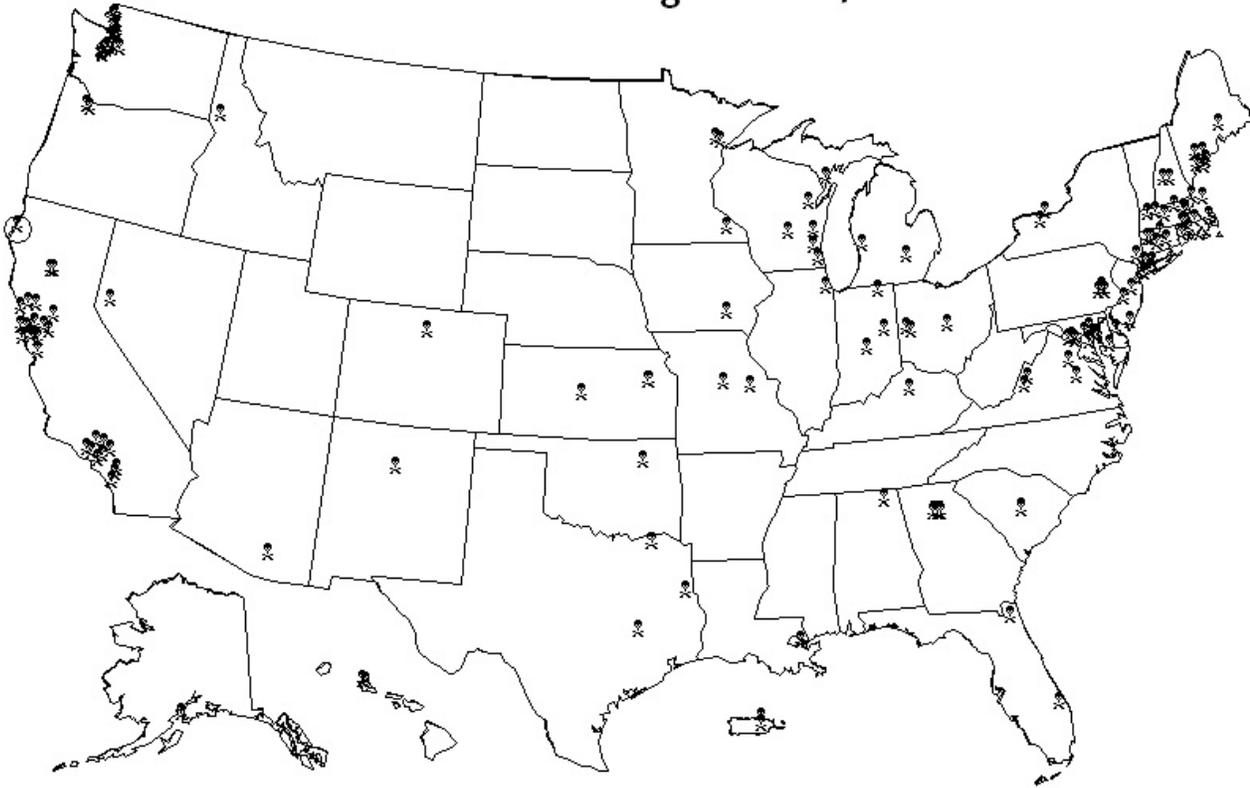
Kate Walker, Donna Wessel Walker, Mary Wessel Walker, Carla Searle, Jim Wessel Walker, and the *Wildcat*

The day ended early, as Noah was still recovering from his cold and our family had places we needed to be and planes we needed to catch. Nevertheless, we had an excellent final sail back to the launch ramp. Overall, it was a splendid day of sailing and other adventures. Anyone who is interested in joining us on a TARS expedition in the future should email Jim Wessel Walker at [jcgw@umich.edu](mailto:jcgw@umich.edu).

*About the Author: Mary Wessel Walker is entering her junior year at Bryn Mawr college this fall and is working this summer at an organic, community-supported agriculture (CSA) farm in Michigan.*



# TARS U.S. as of August 2004



AK-1	DC-1	IA-1	KY-1	MI-3	NM-1	PA-3	VA-6
AZ-1	DE-1	ID-1	LA-1	MN-3	NY-6	PR-1	WA-10
CA-26	FL-2	IL-1	MA-8	MO-2	OH-3	RI-5	WI-5
CO-1	GA-3	IN-3	MD-6	NH-2	OK-1	SC-1	
CT-4	HI-2	KS-2	ME-6	NJ-3	OR-2	TX-3	

TARSUS has 132 households distributed approximately as shown including Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico.  
 (Locations of Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico have been changed to fit them onto the map.)

Thanks again to all who contributed to this issue. If you sent me something which isn't here, it will hopefully appear next issue. If you haven't sent me something, please do so!

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