

## **RANDOM HEARTS AT PATUXENT**

by Matthew C. Perry

In the spring of 1998, the Patuxent Research Refuge received a unique telephone call. The call was from the Columbia Pictures movie production company that wanted to film part of a movie at Patuxent. After more details, the refuge manager (Ms. Susan McMahon) invited them to visit Patuxent. The movie producers made it clear that their interest was with renting the log cabin, an historic refuge building predominantly located on a hill along route #197. After viewing the site, they decided it was not appropriate, but they were still interested in locating the filming at the refuge. They then began an exhaustive tour of the 13,000-acre refuge until they came upon the area on the North Tract used by the boy scouts as a camp site that overlooks the Little Patuxent River. The producers thought it was perfect. There was one problem, however, as there was no log cabin. This was no problem for Hollywood, they would just build a log cabin and remove it after filming. Thus began the negotiation for filming on Patuxent property the movie "Random Hearts" directed by Sydney Pollack and starring Harrison Ford and Kristin Scott Thomas.



Harrison Ford and Kristin Scott Thomas at the cabin along the Little Patuxent River

Ms. McMahon made it clear that approval for filming would need to be authorized by the regional office in Massachusetts. The administrators for the region were not supportive of doing the film on a refuge. After all, the proposed movie was not about wildlife, but an "R-Rated" love story with a unique mystery plot. However, they agreed to let Patuxent refuge staff make the final decision. The refuge staff thought there might be some benefits, like a possible donation to the Friends of Patuxent and a Public Service Announcement about Patuxent by Harrison Ford.

The refuge also thought they might end up with a new building along the river for environmental education purposes. After more negotiation concerning security and other bureaucratic details, the producer received permission to film. The producer said all of the scenes proposed to be at the log cabin would be filmed at Patuxent with the exception of the inside love scenes! These scenes were allegedly filmed elsewhere, but the recreated setting was clearly the log cabin. The scene with the stars walking in the woods was actually filmed 10 miles south of the cabin at Patuxent River Park, where the river is much wider.

Harrison flew his personal helicopter to the refuge each day from Washington, DC, and landed near the North Tract Contact Station at a meadow site that had been mowed very low to reduce the chance of a grass fire. Refuge biologist, Mr. Holliday (Holly) Obrecht, selected the site, which once had been part of a meadow management study. Holly stated that several eye witness accounts from staff members described Harrison Ford's landings as "a bit rocky," as he was new to flying helicopters at that time.

Holly remembers that some of the staff members were invited to visit the stage set after hours or during lunch time breaks. He visited the movie set one day at lunch and met Harrison Ford and director Sydney Pollack. Holly mentioned that he was a pilot and they both, Ford and Pollack, stopped what they were doing and traded flying stories with Holly for about a half an hour. Sydney Pollock was also a pilot, and they talked about other Hollywood pilots such as Tom Cruise, who had just acquired a World War II P-51 Mustang. Holly cherishes the memories and remembers that Harrison was very soft spoken and low keyed.

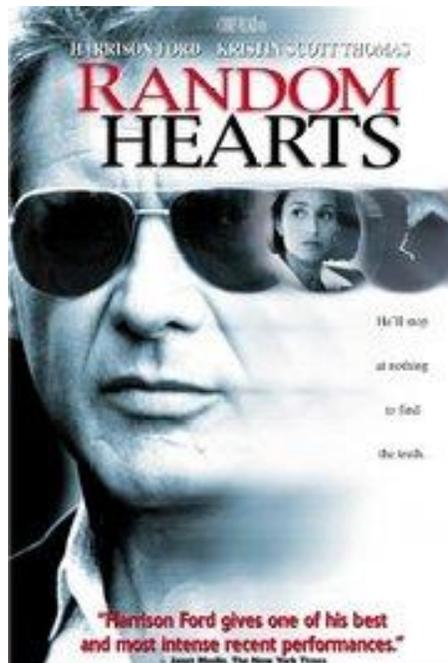


Harrison Ford on borrowed motorcycle with borrowed Fish and Wildlife hat for picture with John Sauer.

Sue McMahon also remembers that Harrison was very friendly, and signed autographs and took pictures with the staff. His costar Kristin Scott Thomas was more reserved, but Sue was able to give her a pamphlet about Patuxent and talk about the mission of the refuge. Harrison also prepared a Public Service Announcement (PSA) about Patuxent and the National Wildlife Refuge System. Public Affairs Officer, Nell Baldacchino, and Sue worked on the script. Nell recalls one problem with the PSA was that Harrison was used to a teleprompter. Nell had to write the text on paper or cardboard and hold it in front of him. He was very nice about doing it, but they had to work it in between filming scenes and it resulted in a rushed job. Unfortunately, the PSA was never finalized and is marked “Draft Copy Only – Not For Release.”

The staging area according to Nell was kind of like a “circus.” Nell, Sue, and I once visited the site under the BGE electric powerlines, which was just a short distance from the cabin. There were several house trailers parked there that were used for dressing and rest areas for the stars. I also remember that Harrison Ford obtained a motorcycle on loan from a local motorcycle company, but then had a spill with it and got it scratched from the gravel. The motorcycle is seen parked near the cabin in the movie. The movie crew was amazing with the detail they put into the temporary cabin and landscaping. They removed all traces of the cabin as it was not built to code, but left the native vegetation they had planted, which improved the appearance of the site and reduced soil erosion to the river.

A large group of refuge employees went to a theater in Bowie to view the film when it first came out in late 1999. One minor flaw according to biologist Holly Obrecht was that the production staff sound-tracked spring peepers singing near the cabin by the river, but the scene was actually filmed in the fall!! I recently tried to view the film from several rental online outlets, but failed. I finally purchased a copy from Amazon and enjoyed watching it as the memories of almost 20 years ago came back. If you like romance mixed with a mystery plot you might like this film. The film is 133 minutes long, but only about 15 minutes are filmed at Patuxent. Unfortunately, a copy of the film is hard to find, so why don't we arrange a film night at the Visitor Center. I'll provide the movie DVD, the PSA tape, and also the popcorn.



Cover of DVD of movie Random Hearts.