Tis the season

DAVID STILL II PHOTO

NATURAL AND WILD – Wild cranberries are ready for harvest by those who may happen by the Sandy Neck swales they populate. A cut phragmites shaft can be seen in the background, one of thousands cut on the Neck in an attempt to limit the invasive plant's numbers, which threaten to overtake native species. (See story, Page 3)

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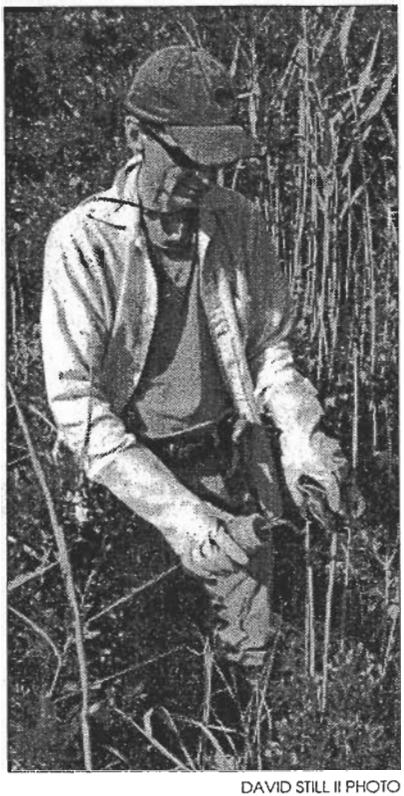
Ridding the Neck of phragmites TNC's goal



DAVID STILL II PHOTO

CUT AND DRIP – Stan Zamachaj applies a dose of herbicide to a clipped phragmites shaft as part of an ongoing program to reduce the population of the invasive plant on Sandy Neck.

Invasive species threatening native plants, ecosystem

By David Still II
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The ubiquitous phragmites, that tall reed with the bushy top, is so much a part of the Cape's seaside landscape that it seems that it's always been there.

Well, it hasn't.

Phragmites are considered an invasive species.

Like most invasive species, it is fast moving and prolific, overtaking large areas while elbowing out native plants.

That's the threat the reeds pose on Sandy Neck and that's why the nature conservancy has undertaken a program to control phragmites along the numerous swales of the barrier beach.

Serving as a solid base map for TNC crews is the field work done by now Park manager Nina Coleman, who mapped many of the swales on Sandy Neck while still in school.

Phragmites first appeared on Sandy Neck in the 1950s, but it wasn't until Hurricane Bob in 1991 that it became a largescale problem. The strong southerly winds deposited phragmites fragments and seeds throughout the barrier beaches many vegetated swales. Slowly and then more steadily, the invasion took root.

Karen Lombard, assistant director of conservation science for TNC's Massachusetts Chapter, oversees the work. She said that it's not that the predominant plant species within the swales are rare, though there are some rare gentians in the mix, but rather the combination of species and the small ecosystems that they support.

That the Greek root for phragmites means a fence or screen is no accident. These prolific grasses can for dense walls of plants. It is the combination of height and density that poses significant threat to native species as they compete and win the fight for nutrients and sunlight. Eventually, low-lying plants simply stop trying.

TNC's work on Sandy Neck was funded at $60,000 over two years, through grants from the Massachusetts Environmental Trust (the Cape & Islands License plate fund) and the National Resource Conservation Service, formally the U.S. Soil Conservation district.

The money is enough to fund a four-person crew for two years.

The treatment is not difficult in theory. A snip with pruning shears followed by an application of the herbicide Rodeo down the cut short. The biggest problem is accessing the stands of Phragmites, which can be in thickets of bayberry and almost always laced with poison ivy.

Eradication is not the goal, though it would be nice. The project is aimed at controlling the population, trimming it back sufficiently so that native plants can repopulate areas. In some areas treated just a year ago, there is green under foot. And that's what Lombard and Neck management want to see.