

Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

Division of Fish and Wildlife

Annual Wildlife Report 2019



*Northern diamondback terrapin
(Liam Corcoran)*

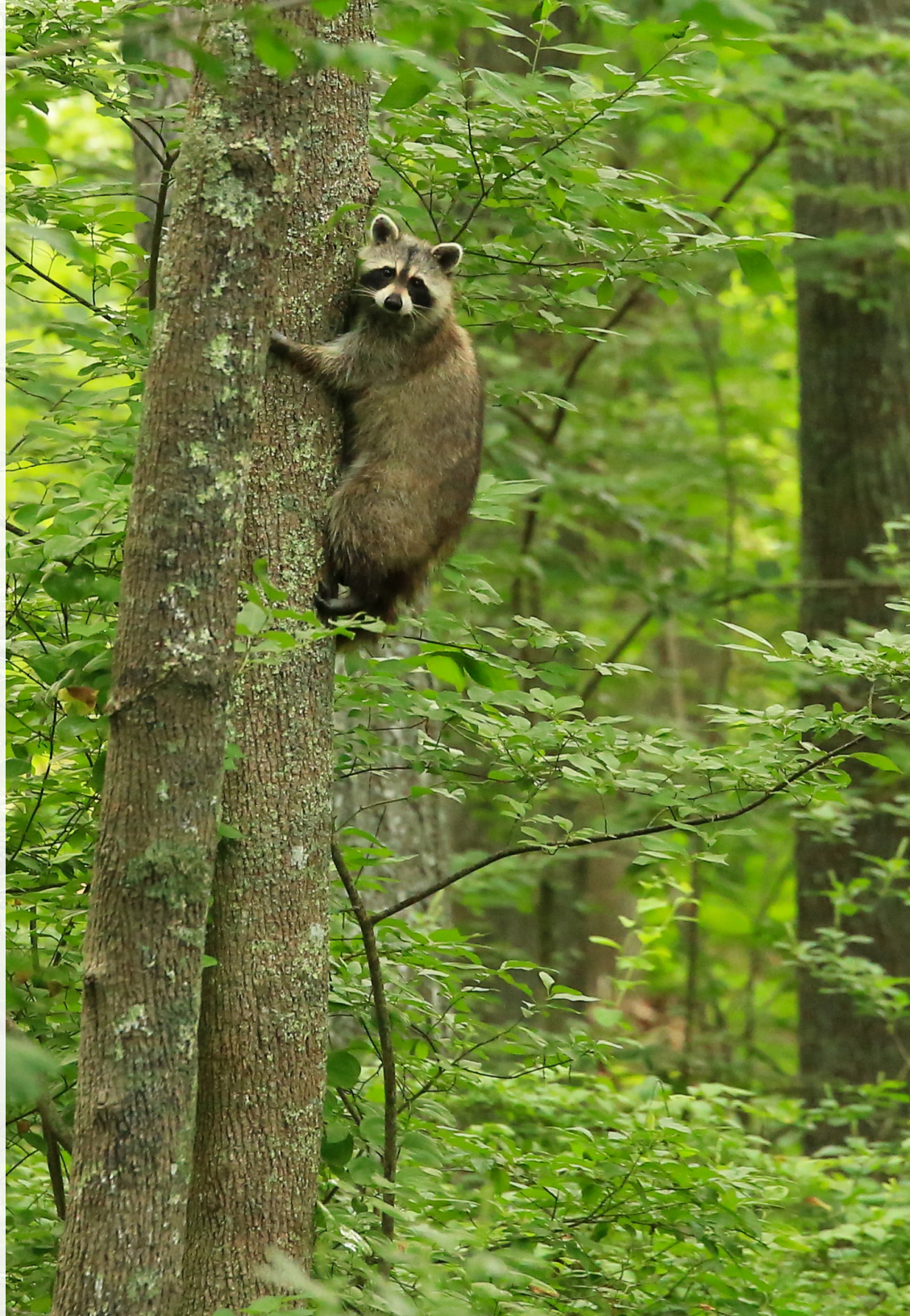
Protect | Restore | Manage

The Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) serves as a resource for hunters, anglers, hikers, mountain bikers, wildlife watchers, municipalities, legislators and the public as a whole.

The DFW protects, restores and manages the wildlife resources of the state. Sharing management responsibility of more than 60,000 acres of land with the Division of Forest Environment, we are responsible for thousands of wildlife species. In addition to our other duties (e.g., research and management), we are responsible for the State's public hunter education programs and overseeing all hunting and trapping, which is an integral component to our revenue stream.

The DFW is primarily funded through the Federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, which is administered through the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. This program uses taxes placed on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment to help fund fish and wildlife research and conservation programs, habitat acquisition, and outreach and education programs.

*Raccoon
(Dean Birch)*



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

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Deputy Chief's Letter

Over the past year, the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife has had the opportunity to form and strengthen partnerships, leading to more resilient and effective conservation efforts. Our state may be small, but this only further encourages us to unite in protecting, conserving and sharing our natural resources.

Several beneficial and exciting projects have come to fruition in 2019, including the release of *Amphibians of Rhode Island* and the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement between RIDEM and the University of Rhode Island. Our outreach program has expanded to reach new audiences and to engage younger generations to participate in wildlife-related activities. We hope sharing our efforts to conserve Rhode Island's wildlife will inspire both current and future generations to join us in maintaining and improving our diverse natural resources.

So much has been accomplished this year thanks to our dedicated staff, partners and volunteers. These devoted individuals have helped to achieve the projects highlighted in this report, which make a big difference in our small state.

We will forever continue our efforts to protect, conserve and restore the amazing natural resources that all Rhode Islanders cherish.

Sincerely,
Jay Osenkowski
Deputy Chief, Wildlife Section



*Buck Hill Management Area
(Amanda Cugno)*

*Our mission is to ensure that the
Freshwater, Marine, and Wildlife
Resources of the State of Rhode Island
will be conserved and managed for
equitable and sustainable use.*



RI DEM - URI Collaborative Memorandum of Agreement

Building Partnerships Towards Wildlife Conservation

In November of 2019, DEM Director Janet Coit and Dean John Kirby of URI's College of Environment and Life Sciences officially signed a Memorandum of Agreement, celebrating existing and initiating future collaborative conservation research projects between RI Division of Fish and Wildlife and URI's Natural Resource Science Department.

The DFW has worked with URI biologists on many projects over the course of recent years, including bobcats, bears, New England cottontail, sea ducks, American woodcock, and the Rhode Island Bird Atlas 2.0. We are very excited to continue working together over the next decade to fulfill our common goal of science-grounded wildlife conservation and management!

Harlequin ducks (Richard Leach)



From left to right: Professor Scott McWilliams (URI Natural Resources Science Dept.), Dean John Kirby (URI), Director Janet Coit (RI DEM), Jay Osenkowski (Wildlife Deputy Chief, RI DEM)

On the Lookout for Chronic Wasting Disease

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a devastating neurological disease that affects deer, moose, and elk across North America. Monitoring and preventing the spread of CWD has become a major priority for deer biologists across the nation. Though CWD has not yet occurred in Rhode Island, the DFW continues to monitor the health of our deer population to ensure early detection, should it appear. Biological samples (lymph nodes) are tested from road killed and hunter-harvested deer each year. A collaboration with the Division of Law Enforcement (DLE), meat processors, taxidermists, and hunters has enabled us to receive and process a large number of samples. A CWD prevention and response plan is being created in order to safeguard our deer population, hunting culture, and future of wildlife management in Rhode Island.

In 2019, we collected 150 samples from hunter-harvested deer at our deer check stations and 149 samples from local butchers. The DLE collected 3 samples from roadkill deer, and 3 from deer that had been reported as sick or unhealthy. All of the samples have tested negative for CWD. Thank you to all who have helped in this effort to keep RI's deer population healthy!

White-tailed deer (Dean Birch)



Hopping with Excitement: *Amphibians of Rhode Island* has been published!

We are proud to announce the publication of *Amphibians of Rhode Island*! Written by longtime DEM Natural Heritage Biologist, Christopher Raithel, this book spotlights the 18 species of amphibians native to Rhode Island. The book provides meticulous accounts of the state's native frogs, toads, and salamanders and their respective habitats. Vivid photography depicts amphibian life stages and morphology.

More than just a field guide, it combines an exhaustive search of the historical record and four decades of Raithel's intense personal study to present complete information on the statewide distribution, demography, seasonal movement, reproduction and development, research needs, and conservation status of each species. One chapter is devoted entirely to conservation, detailing the threats faced by amphibians and the actions needed to safeguard them.

All revenue generated by the sale of this book will be directed toward wildlife conservation via the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife. Books are being sold for \$20 each, including tax. To purchase, visit: <http://www.dem.ri.gov/bookorder>.

Spotted salamander (Christopher Raithel)



About the Author

Christopher Raithel enjoyed a distinguished, 40-year career in DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife before retiring in 2018. While at DEM, he served as the state Endangered Species Biologist, Herpetologist, and Non-Game Bird Biologist. He was a major contributor to the state's first-ever RI Wildlife Action Plan and its 2015 update, and prepared numerous species accounts for the more than 450 Species of Greatest Conservation Need. He has personally documented individual turtles and their movements and life history for over 30 years, and is a nationally recognized expert in the management and monitoring of the American burying beetle.



2019 Mentored Youth Waterfowl Hunt

The RI Youth Waterfowl Hunt training day took place on September 26th, 2019, with 10 youth hunters. Volunteers, state Wildlife Biologists Dylan Ferreira and Jenny Kilburn, and Environmental Police Officer Josh Beuth covered the rules and regulations, safety in the field, equipment needed for waterfowl hunting, basic waterfowl identification and techniques for hunting with a dog. Students sharpened their skills at the Great Swamp shooting range while shooting clay targets provided by the RI DEM hunter education program in preparation for the hunt. Students and mentors were treated to food and beverages provided by a generous donation from the Federated Rhode Island Sportsman Club.

The mentored hunt took place during the Youth Waterfowl Weekend, October 26th, and students were accompanied by experienced mentors on both duck and goose hunts. All students were successful in harvesting birds, with some harvesting their very first! Hunting stories and waterfowl food prep tips were shared over muffins, orange juice, and plenty of laughter back at a post hunt rendezvous.

Youth hunters and mentors (Sarah Petrarca)



A Bird's Eye View: Using Drones for Habitat Assessment & Turtle Research

In early 2019, Herpetologist Scott Buchanan and Habitat Biologist Tanner Steeves tested for and earned their FA Unmanned Aerial System Remote Pilot (drone) licences. The DFW then purchased a DJI Phantom 4 Pro quadcopter with a 4k video camera to use for habitat assessments and turtle surveys.

The diamondback terrapin is the only state endangered reptile in Rhode Island, and is our only turtle species found in salt marsh habitat. It can be difficult to survey for these elusive creatures, but drone imagery can help improve sampling success. This year, Buchanan developed a sampling protocol, and intends to systematically survey for terrapins in 2020. He hopes that the surveys will enhance our understanding of terrapin populations in the state and identify any trends.

We are very concerned about the long-term prospects of diamondback terrapins in Rhode Island. Terrapins face several threats, but above all, sea-level rise threatens to destroy critically important salt marsh habitat. A data-driven understanding of how terrapins are impacted over time will allow the DFW and partners to make informed decisions for their management and long-term well-being.



Stewarding Our Coastal Habitats

In late 2019, we worked in cooperation with the City of Warwick and Save The Bay to complete another coastal adaptation project at the Longmeadow Fishing Access Site. Located in Warwick on the shore of Narragansett Bay, this site is supervised and managed by the Division of Fish and Wildlife to provide coastal access, shoreline fishing access, and car-top boating access. Situated at the end of Samuel Gorton Avenue, the site has experienced over 100 feet of shoreline erosion over the past 75 years. The parking lot and entrance road flood regularly during moon and storm tides, limiting public access and compromising infrastructure. Vehicle traffic over beach and intertidal habitats had also destroyed coastal vegetation and caused erosion.

This project required the removal of a section of asphalt that extended into the tidal area, removing illegally dumped bulky waste along the shoreline, defining an organized parking area, and grading and improving the parking surface. Native shrubs and beach grass were also planted to help restore valuable dune and salt marsh habitat. We hope that the changes at this site will enhance coastal resiliency in the face of sea level rise, improve coastal habitats for wildlife, enhance public access, and help protect water quality in Narragansett Bay. Our thanks to Coastal Resources Management Council's Coastal and Estuarine Habitat Restoration Trust Fund for partnering with us on this project to protect our state's coastal habitats for the future!

*Newly established parking area and protected shoreline at Longmeadow
(Tanner Steeves)*



We're now on Instagram!

In July 2019, we expanded our social media reach to Instagram to coordinate with our existing digital outreach outlets. Each week, we post information about upcoming outreach events, hunting seasons, wildlife trivia, trail camera photos, current conservation projects, and more. In just 6 months, we gained over 1,000 followers, and look forward to further communicating with Rhode Islanders through this form of outreach!

Follow us!
@RI.FishandWildlife

One of our popular "Trail Camera Tuesday" posts



Partner with a Payer

In September, we hosted representatives from Smith & Wesson, SIG Sauer, National Shooting Sports Foundation, the University of Rhode Island, RI state legislators, and USFWS staff at the Great Swamp Wildlife Management Area for our first ever “Partner with a Payer” field day. This event, along with others across the country, was held to help strengthen partnerships between state wildlife agencies and the firearms industry.

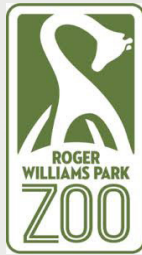
Firearm and ammunition manufacturers pay an excise tax on product sales, which contributes millions of dollars to state wildlife agencies each year. This partnership has been fueling wildlife conservation in America for over 80 years, since the enactment of the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937.

During the event, participants, including DEM Director Janet Coit, were invited to try out our newly remodeled firearms range and also took a tour around Great Swamp to learn about ongoing habitat, wetland enhancement, and research projects. Some folks even got to try out our wildlife net gun! We were very happy to provide an insight into the world of wildlife conservation and management to our partners in the firearms industry, and to show our appreciation on behalf of our wildlife!

*Testing out the wildlife net gun on a duck decoy at the shotgun range
(Sarah Petrarca)*



Our Partners



Red fox (Michael Schipritt)

