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## Winter Waterfowl Research in Rhode Island

By Jennifer Kilburn, Waterfowl Biologist, DFW

As the air gets crisp and the first snowflakes begin to fall, my crew gears up for a long two months of trapping and banding ducks along the coastal salt ponds and the Narragansett Bay. Alarm clocks are set for 2:00 am, sleep schedules get altered and most of our workday happens before the sun comes up. The goal of this effort varies from year to year but typically aims to fill gaps in our knowledge of waterfowl population dynamics. We work these crazy hours for the ducks!

Waterfowl are migratory, and each fall millions fly south to warmer regions in search of food and habitat. When people think of heading south for the

Photo left: Captured duck has biological information recorded, is fitted with a tracker and released. Photo: J. Kilburn

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## The Division of Fish and Wildlife Mission Statement

Our mission is to ensure that the freshwater, wildlife, and marine resources of the state of Rhode Island will be conserved and managed for equitable and sustainable use.



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Featured State Land:

## Camp Nokewa Wildlife Management Area

By John Veale, Habitat Biologist, DFW

The Camp Nokewa Wildlife Management Area is located in North Kingstown along Gilbert Stuart Rd. Coming in at 126 acres, this parcel may not be large when compared to other state lands elsewhere, but it is well located to provide plenty of hunting and fishing opportunities along the shore of Carr Pond at the northern end of the Narrow River.

In its previous life, this parcel was a Girl Scout camp and still retains the name of that camp. The original 82 acre parcel was acquired by the Division of Fish and Wildlife in 2010. Despite more than a decade long ownership of this parcel, it has gone relatively unnoticed and still remains one of the less utilized parcels in the area. In 2021, an adjacent parcel abutting the western boundary was added. That second parcel is 64 acres, bringing the total available land within this Wildlife Management Area to 126 contiguous acres. Visitors can access the property from Gilbert Stuart Road where there is a small parking area maintained by the Division.

The upland portions of the property are primarily hardwood forest of mixed oak and hickory, with mature beech trees scattered throughout. The topography of the property slopes gradually down from Gilbert Stuart Road to the pond. Hunting on the property is allowed for all legal species (deer, turkey, small game, migratory birds, waterfowl), and all legal methods of take as defined in regulations for those species are allowed. It falls within Deer Management Zone 1 and most users of Camp Nokewa during the hunting season are there to pursue deer, but don't overlook turkey or small game opportunities. All of these species frequent the property to take advantage of the plentiful mast-producing trees.

In addition to its upland forests, a big draw for this site is its access to Carr Pond and the upper Narrow River. Over three quarters of a mile of shoreline are accessible along the pond and river now, providing plenty of fishing and waterfowl hunting opportunities. The importance of this water source to the greater Narrow River watershed made an acquisition like this valuable in addition to its recreational opportunities, permanently protecting water quality into the future. This watershed is home to a well-known and very productive herring run that has been maintained by the Division since the 1960s and the river supports striped bass that overwinter within the river system as well.

For more information and maps visit: <a href="https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/wkgbur861/files/programs/maps/mapfile/huntingatlas/39.pdf">https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/wkgbur861/files/programs/maps/mapfile/huntingatlas/39.pdf</a>.

Or email DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov.

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## SAFETY IN THE OUTDOORS

#### By: Dana Kopec, Technical Assistant for Outdoor Education, DFW

Safety is a topic that isn't as fun as the activity you will be partaking in, but it should be a priority. Included in all the next-step hunting classes that the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) Hunter Education Team offers, safety is always the most important factor covered. While there is a myriad of outdoor activities, there are several common safety considerations before heading out.

#### A PRE - PLAN:

If you are going out for an all-day trip or extended trip it is important to leave a pre-plan with a trusted family member or friend. This plan should include details of where you are going, directions or GPS coordinates, your cell phone numbers and anyone in your party, license plate(s) and vehicle descriptions, descriptions of your height/weight/clothing and everyone in your party, estimated time of return, details that may help first responders if you become lost, sick, or injured.



#### **WEATHER FORECAST:**

Is it safe to be on the water? Will you be out of the woods and back to your vehicle before the afternoon storm hits? Did you dress properly? Paying attention to weather forecasts is crucial, and can save you a lot of headaches down the road.

#### CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT:

Along with the topic of weather, it is important to dress in layers for all temperature conditions. In cold weather, starting with a moisture-wicking base followed by an insulating layer and topped with water and wind resistant/proof materials will give you the best protection. Bringing extra dry socks and a hat is good practice.

For hot weather, again, start with a layer of moisture-wicking clothing followed by a water/wind resistant/proof layer. As the day wears on and you become warmer you can shed layers to keep cool.

Consider carrying a backpack on even short outdoor activities for your extra layers, food, water, first aid kit, cell phone, *etc.* This is important if you are hiking and may need your hands to keep balance or to keep yourself from falling. Smaller backpacks for short activities come in handy.

#### **NAVIGATION:**

While electronic GPS units are in abundance and cell phones have mapping tools, it is important to remember that electronics can fail and knowing how to use a map and compass can save you during an emergency. Obtaining a topographic map of the area you plan to be in coupled with a compass can help you plan your course and get you out of trouble. Without a map, a compass can only help you travel in a straight line, but with the map, you can choose a

specific destination, see different terrain features and elevations, and avoid obstacles.

The DFW Hunter Education Team offers a comprehensive **Land Navigation Class** a couple of times a year. This course covers basic map and compass, pace count, how to find and follow a bearing, and team field exercises. If you want to learn new skills or brush up on some old ones while going on some adventures in the deep woods of western Rhode Island, this is the class for you!

#### **BASIC FIRST AID:**

The number one environmental medical concern is hypothermia – a condition in which the body loses heat faster than it can produce it. This is typical in wet and/or cold conditions.

Conversely, when conditions are hot there are three major concerns, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and finally, the most severe, hyperthermia (heat stroke). Knowing what signs and symptoms to be aware of can potentially save a life.

Receiving some basic training will help you to think about what steps should be taken. A working knowledge of scene safety, basic bleeding control, splinting, and the basic "dos and don'ts" is imperative, especially when out in the wilderness.

The DFW Hunter Education Team offers a two-hour virtual **Wilderness First-Aid Class** taught by a 22-year veteran Emergency Medical Technician. This class covers rescuer safety and a plethora of medical and trauma emergencies while taking the outdoors into account.

#### **BASIC SURVIVAL:**

Shelter, fire, and signal are the three priorities that anyone who needs to unexpectedly camp out should have. Shelter to protect you from the elements, fire to keep you warm, assist you with boiling water and cooking food, and finally signal to try to get help.

The international sign for distress is three of anything, three blasts of a whistle, or three gun shots for example. You can also make an X on the ground with sticks, rocks, or any materials you can find, large enough for a plane to see. Smoke signals also work but should be used only when you hear aircraft coming closer. If you start the smoke signal too soon it will dissipate, and rescuers will not be able to pinpoint your location as easily.

While it is important to stay hydrated and keep your digestive system working, to help prevent many medical problems, it is not among the top three priorities. The average adult human can go several days without water and about two weeks without food. While they may not feel well (we all know how we get when we skip a meal) this is just the bare minimum for survival.

If you take away anything from this article, let it be that a fair amount of thought, planning, and research should go into any trips to the outdoors. If things go south, at least you will have some knowledge to fall back on to give yourself the best chance at survival.

All these topics and more are covered in the Hunter and Bowhunter Safety Education Certification Courses, and more specific information is taught in depth in the next-step hunter education classes. Sign up is always free and the most current listing of classes can be found on the RIDEM website: <a href="https://dem.ri.gov/natural-resources-bureau/fish-wildlife/outreach-education/hunter-education/events-course-schedules">https://dem.ri.gov/natural-resources-bureau/fish-wildlife/outreach-education/hunter-education/events-course-schedules</a>.



## Winter Waterfowl Research in Rhode Island continued from pg. 1

winter, we think of places like Florida. However, for ducks, winter in Rhode Island is tropical compared to their northerly breeding grounds and food and habitat are plentiful. Through banding, biologists uncovered corridors that ducks and geese fly during migration. These corridors are referred to as flyways and are now how biologists manage ducks and geese in North America. Rhode Island is part of the Atlantic Flyway, which encompasses the states of Connecticut, Florida. Georgia, Maine, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia; the Canadian territory of Nunavut and provinces of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec; plus, the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands. Twice a year, biologists from the states, provinces and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) get together to discuss things like waterfowl research, banding needs, and hunting regulations. Biologists are responsible for collecting the data needed to inform the models that help us estimate population sizes of waterfowl species across the flyway, which in turn guides our hunting regulations each year. Sometimes, additional information is needed, beyond banding data, to better understand what is happening in a population

#### **Mallards**

Mallards (Anas platyrhynchos) in eastern North America have varied in population size since European settlers arrived. Historically, a limited number of mallards bred in the eastern United States. In the 1900's game commissions and private citizens began releasing farm-raised mallards to supplement the migratory population. Over the next 70 years mallards became the most popular and common migratory game bird in the Atlantic Flyway. While populations reached their peak in the mid- 1990's, approximately 1.4 million breeding birds, their numbers have been declining ever since. Breeding mallards in the northeastern US declined rapidly (-36% over the past 20 years), while sub-populations breeding in eastern Canada remain relatively stable. Biologists now want to understand what's contributing to these declines and why we are noticing them in eastern US breeding mallards as opposed to eastern Canada breeding mallards.



Waterfowl biologist Jenny Kilburn (left) and technicians Megan Gray (center) and Shannon Wesson (right) with a female mallard sporting a GSM/GPS backpack transmitter.



PhD candidate Tori Mezebish attaches a GSM/GPS transmitter to an American black duck. Photo: J. Kilburn

To better understand these declines biologists across the flyway are placing small GSM/GPS units on the backs of female mallards. These transmitters communicate location data through the cell phone network and recharge via small solar panels. Long gone are the days of going into the field to track down marked animals. These units allow biologists to

get location and acceleration data, which can be used to determine what a bird is doing at that moment (flying, feeding, swimming, diving, etc.), from the comfort of their computer. The goal of collecting this data is to compare nesting behavior, survival rates, and habitat use between eastern US mallards and eastern Canada mallards and to try and address the observed declines.

During the winter of 2022 biologists in Rhode Island deployed 20 GSM/GPS transmitters on female mallards. During this time staff captured and banded a total of 177 ducks: 88 American black ducks, 145 mallards, 14 black duck/mallard hybrids, one American green-winged teal and one American widgeon/mallard hybrid. Biologists used rocket nets to capture most ducks during this field season. Flyway-wide, biologists deployed a total of 218 transmitters on female mallards from South Carolina to eastern Canada. That's A LOT of data! Biologists are excited to see what this information can tell us about mallard breeding ecology.

## American Black Ducks & Atlantic Brant

In addition to participating in flyway wide research projects, Island also works to answer local questions. Human disturbance along Rhode Island's coastline due to development and human activities such as increasing aquaculture operations have the potential to impact wintering waterfowl. The Narragansett Bay and coastal salt ponds provide food and habitat to many ducks. Working collaboratively with the University of Rhode Island, researchers are hoping to understand how our winter waterfowl are coping with increased levels of disturbance. To do so, biologists plan to mark three species, representing the three major groups of waterfowl found in Rhode Island during the winter months. American black ducks will represent the dabbling ducks, Atlantic Brant will represent geese and the red-breasted merganser will represent the diving ducks. Biologists once again will rely on the GSM/GPS transmitters to collect important movement data on these species.

During the winter of 2021, staff captured and marked 30 American black ducks and 30 Atlantic brant with transmitters. In total, biologists trapped and banded 204 ducks and geese during the 2021 winter field season. Atlantic brant are a small herbivorous (plant-eating) goose, that frequently comes up on land to feed on grass during the winter months. In addition to lawns, these birds feed on eel grass and green algae exposed at



Typical morning out attempting to capture Atlantic brant using a rocket net and decoys. Real brant are to the right of the decoys. Credit: G. DeMeillon

low tide. Rocket nets, decoys and speakers playing brant calls aided in the capture of these birds on lawns used as feeding areas.

Rocket nets and corn on salt marshes allowed biologists to capture black ducks. Their cautious nature means biologists spend a great deal of time concealing the net on the marsh in the pre-dawn hours. If done correctly, ducks will stampede up the marsh to feed on the corn, unaware that biologists wait nearby, ready to deploy the net when the time is right.

Capture work will continue into 2023, after which, PhD candidate Tori Mezebish will analyze the data, looking for information that might help us understand how our winter waterfowl are coping with the changing Rhode Island coastline.

### **Upcoming Capture Efforts**

As the 2023 winter duck trapping season approaches, staff are preparing to deploy another 20 GSM/GPS transmitters, in addition to 30 geolocators, on female mallards as part of the flyway-wide research project. These efforts will continue into 2024. Geolocators are small devices that detect changes in light, and are the newest addition to our field efforts. They allow biologists to determine when a female is on a nest (low light detection) or still exhibiting normal daily movements (higher light detection).

While the thought of waking up at 2:00am excites no one, we are all counting down the days till we can hit the frozen marshes, ducks and banding pliers in hand!

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# RIDEM DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE WELCOMES NEW STAFF!

#### ELIZABETH "LIZZI" BONCZEK - UPLAND GAMEBIRD BIOLOGIST

Lizzi Bonczek joined the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife in mid-September 2022 as the new Upland Gamebird biologist. She grew up in Massachusetts and after obtaining her B.S. at the University of Maryland spent 5 years traveling the country working with gamebirds, even as far north as the arctic, before completing her Ph.D. at Louisiana State University. Her dissertation examined the breeding ecology of mottled ducks in southwestern Louisiana.

Lizzi entered the wildlife management field in a unique way as she grew up in a non-hunting home. She fell in love with wildlife as a kid, but it wasn't until undergrad that she learned about the positive role that hunting has on wildlife populations and their habitats. She uses that experience to be able to connect and educate wildlife enthusiasts from all backgrounds. Lizzi looks forward to using science-based results to inform management decisions with an end goal of benefitting wildlife, hunters, and recreators alike. Outside of work Lizzi enjoys hunting, training, and competing with her two bird dogs exploring all that New England has to offer.



Lizzi and her dog after a successful competition. Photo: E. Bonczek

#### Morgan Lucot - Furbearer Biologist



Morgan and an anesthetized black bear in Florida. Data was collected and the bear released. Photo: M. Lucot.

Morgan Lucot has recently joined the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife as the new Furbearer Biologist. She will be responsible for providing expertise and assistance to the public, assessing and managing wildlife populations, supporting research, and facilitating wildlife recreation all relating to Rhode Island furbearers.

Morgan started her career assisting in animal behavior research, specializing in Spotted Hyenas in Maasai Mara, Kenya. In particular she assessed distribution of hyena clan members across the landscape and analyzed vocalization data. Morgan first gained experience in wildlife conflict mitigation and public outreach working in Belize to conserve American and Morelet's crocodiles. Most recently she spent several years working as the central Florida bear biologist working to minimize bear conflict in the region. Morgan is excited to bring her experience in wildlife

conflict and population management to Rhode Island. She will be based at the Great Swamp Field Headquarters.

## Winter Blues? Learn Something New! with the RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife

Winter is upon us and so is a new lineup of fun, educational programs from the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife! Connect with the outdoors and learn some new skills this winter; from fishing days to hunter education classes to guided walks, there's something for everyone. Join the <u>Division's Aquatic Resource Education Program, Hunter Education</u>

Program, and Wildlife Outreach and Volunteer Program staff to learn, explore, and enjoy!

All of the programs being offered this season are free of charge and family-friendly. A list of programs and registration information are listed below. For a complete list of up-to-date programs, you can also visit

http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/fish-wildlife/.

#### AQUATIC RESOURCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Introduction to Freshwater Fishing, Fly Tying, and Casting Lesson (Ages: 10+, parent/guardian required to be in attendance for participants under 18)

Date: March 21, 2023

Time: Two sessions to choose from: 1:00 pm or 5:00 pm (3 hour sessions)

Location: 1B Camp E Hun Tee Place, Exeter, RI 02822

Description: From lures, to flies, tackle, storage, safety, types of rods, and more, learn all the basics to get you started in becoming a successful angler. This comprehensive presentation will be instructed by one of RIDEM's angler instructors and will include casting lessons and fly tying.

Cost: Free. Registration: https://forms.gle/BhjxnvyYAA5aG6F66



#### **Hunter Education Certification Class**

Date: January 14 and 15, 2023 (must attend both dates) Cost: Free

*Time:* 9:00 am - 3:00 pm

Location: 1B Camp E Hun Tee Place, Exeter, RI 02822

Description: This is the certification class that you need if you plan to hunt with firearms in the State of Rhode Island. Open to participants from all states, this course will provide you with a foundation for firearm safety, basic hunting techniques, basic survival and first-aid, ethics, conservation, and more. A state written exam will be administered at the end of class on day two. This national curriculum has reciprocity with all 50 states.

Cost: Free. Registration: <a href="https://forms.gle/gWawP3aVRez11bBg6">https://forms.gle/gWawP3aVRez11bBg6</a>

### Land Navigation (Ages: 10+, parent/guardian required to be in attendance for participants under 18)

Date: February 18 and 19, 2023 (must attend both dates)

*Time:* 9:00 am - 5:00 pm

Location: 1B Camp E Hun Tee Place, Exeter, RI 02822

Description: This two-day course will begin with classroom learning on the topics of maps and compass, how to find a bearing and follow it. Day two will consist of using your newfound skills to solve field problems and navigate your way through the woods of Arcadia Management Area. Terrain will be moderate to difficult at times, appropriate hiking gear for the forecasted weather will

be necessary to be successful.

Cost: Free. Registration: https://forms.gle/CaxiDcaxpEuRNdSFA



#### **Bow Hunter Education Certification Class**

Date: March 11, 2023 Time: 9:00 am – 3:00 pm

Location: 1B Camp E Hun Tee Place, Exeter, RI, 02822

This is the certification class that you need if you plan to hunt with archery in the State of Rhode Island. Open to participants from all states, this course will provide you with a foundation for archery safety, basic hunting techniques, basic survival and first-aid, ethics, conservation, and more. A state written exam will be administered at the end of class on day two. This national curriculum

has reciprocity with all 50 states.

Cost: Free. Registration: <a href="https://forms.gle/Kin3iVNzbVdGcGsu5">https://forms.gle/Kin3iVNzbVdGcGsu5</a>



### Junior Hunter Education Certification Class (Ages: 17 and under, parent/guardian required to be in attendance for participants under 18)

Date: March 18, 2023 Time: 9:00 am – 6:00 pm

Location: 1B Camp E Hun Tee Place, Exeter, RI 02822

Junior Hunter Education is for ages 17 and under, with lots of hands-on activities, visual aids, and easy to understand lessons. This is the certification class that you need if you plan to hunt with firearms in the State of Rhode Island. Open to juniors from all states, this course will provide you with a foundation for firearm safety, basic hunting techniques, basic survival and first-aid, ethics, conservation, and more. A state written exam will be administered at the end of class on day two. This national curriculum has reciprocity with all 50 states. Please note: Course content and state exam is written to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level and you must be at least 12 years old to obtain a RI hunting license.

Cost: Free. Registration: https://forms.gle/Jk2PMqM2LwPnmfis8



### Learn to Hunt (Ages: 10+, parent/guardian required to be in attendance for participants under 18)

Date: March 25, 2023 Time: 9:00 am - 5:00 pm

Location: 1B Camp E Hun Tee Place, Exeter, RI, 02822

Participate in all of the hands-on activities that are a part of the Hunter Education Certification Program. We will cover general safety, safe firearm handling, tree stands, ground blinds, basic hunting techniques, wilderness first-aid, and land navigation.

Cost: Free. Registration: https://forms.gle/xfJRoZDRMK9oa8dBA



#### WILDLIFE OUTREACH PROGRAMS

#### Wildlife Solutions: Nocturnal Nuisances (Ages: Adults)

*Date:* January 31, 2023 *Time:* 6:30 – 8:00 pm

Location: HYBRID – In-person at the Louttit Library, West Greenwich OR via Zoom Description: COYOTES, FOXES and FISHERS: Nocturnal mammals are greatly misunderstood but these critters can become a nuisance when they begin to den under decks and dine out of chicken coops. This session will help you identify what is attracting these animals to your yard, and how to make your property less hospitable. This will be a HYBRID program in partnership with the Louttit Library. Join us in-person at the library or tune in from the comfort of your own home! This program is FREE, but registration is required so that we prepare materials and send Zoom links for those attending online.

Cost: Free. Register here: https://forms.gle/9X6TnP1FHNwvfJLV8



#### Come Birding with Me! (Families and children of all ages welcome!)

*Date:* February 24, 2023 *Time:* 10:00 – 11:30 am

Location: East Bay Bike Path (Watchemoket Cove), East Providence

Looking for a fun February vacation activity? Join us for a family-friendly birdwatching adventure on the shoreline this winter! Learn about the beautiful migratory birds that spend their winter along RI's coastline each year and how RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife and our research partners are studying their populations. Binoculars and spotting scopes will be available to borrow, so everyone can get a close look at these unique birds! This program is FREE to attend, but registration is required.

Cost: Free. Register here: https://forms.gle/5qNuZ95wP2ogupwE8



#### Come Birding with Me! (Adults)

Date: February 25, 2023 Time: 10:00 – 11:30 am

Location: Beavertail State Park, Jamestown

Description: Join us for a birdwatching adventure on the shoreline this winter! Learn about the beautiful migratory birds that spend their winter along RI's coastline each year and how RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife and our research partners are studying their populations. Binoculars and spotting scopes will be available to borrow, so everyone can get a close look at these unique birds! This program is FREE to attend, but registration is required.

Cost: Free. Register here: <a href="https://forms.gle/M8vjyWoirEPxMReM6">https://forms.gle/M8vjyWoirEPxMReM6</a>



#### **VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS**

#### Rhode Island Bumblebee Survey

RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife is looking for volunteers to conduct bee surveys for the 2023 season of the Rhode Island Bumblebee Survey (RIBS)! If you enjoy spending time outdoors, have a curiosity for plants and insects, and would like to help Rhode Island biologists learn more about these fuzzy pollinators in our state, click here: <a href="https://forms.office.com/g/6XUxyP3rGc">https://forms.office.com/g/6XUxyP3rGc</a>



#### **Annual Herring Count Surveys**

RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife is always looking for new volunteers for our long-standing herring count survey! Volunteers count herring for 10-minute intervals at select sites across the state as these interesting fish complete their annual spring migration upstream. This is a great opportunity for families with children! Sign-up information will be available in March. For timely updates sent right to your email, subscribe to our monthly email list at



For more information about DEM divisions and programs, visit www.dem.ri.gov. Follow us on Facebook at <a href="https://www.facebook.com/RhodeIslandDEM">www.facebook.com/RhodeIslandDEM</a> or on Twitter (@RhodeIslandDEM) for timely updates.

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dem.ri.gov/fishwildlife





Photo by M. Stultz at Durfee Hill Wildlife Management Area, Glocester, RI



