

ISSUE 21 | FALL 2023

WILD RHODE ISLAND EXPLORER



**MEET THE
MARBLED
SALAMANDER!**



DEM
RHODE ISLAND



DID YOU KNOW?



We do a lot of work to protect, conserve, and learn about Rhode Island's wild creatures and the places they call home. None of this work would be possible without the help of people who hunt and fish in our state.

Hunters and anglers buy a license each year. This license means that they promise to follow all the rules of hunting and fishing in Rhode Island. These rules exist to protect our important natural resources and make sure that people can enjoy hunting and fishing in our state forever. Also, the money from these licenses goes towards important conservation work in Rhode Island.

There's another really cool way that hunters, anglers, and also target shooters (people who may not hunt, but practice their aim with firearms or archery at a range) help with conservation all across the United States. The businesses that make firearms, ammunition, archery equipment, and fishing equipment pay a tax on these items. This raises millions of dollars, which is split up and given to each state by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

What do we do with all this money? We use it to help our state's fish and wildlife! This money helps to buy more land for our management areas, which means more habitats will be protected in our state forever. We also use the money to do important research to learn more about our fish and wildlife, and what we can do better to help them.

Much of our work wouldn't be possible without the help of our hunters, anglers, and target shooters. By participating in these types of outdoor activities in a responsible and safe way, you can help support fish and wildlife conservation in Rhode Island too!

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about RI's fish and wildlife?

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Rhode Island Department of
Environmental Management



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HABITAT CHAT

Life on the Forest Floor



Did you know that there's a secret world right below your feet? The forest floor is bursting with life! The thing is, most of the creatures are tucked away and hidden from sight. Below the fallen leaves, thousands of insects and other bugs are hustling and bustling in search of food. Ants, beetles, worms, slugs, snails, spiders, centipedes, and millipedes creep quietly in the darkness of the leaf litter. Many of these creatures are **detritivores**. This means they eat dead stuff and help turn it into soil. They are nature's recyclers! Fallen leaves, dead trees, and the remains of larger animals are all broken down and added to the rich soil on the forest floor. These little recyclers are also food for lots of other animals, from salamanders and snakes, toads and box turtles, to skunks and wild turkeys. Carefully take a look beneath a fallen log or under a rock. You may be amazed at how many tiny critters you find!



The forest floor is an important part of the web of life that connects all living creatures. Everyone needs to eat! Plants need good nutrients in the soil to grow. **Herbivores** need lots of plants to eat. **Carnivores** need lots of other animals to eat. And when anything in nature reaches the end of its life, it needs to be broken down to help start the cycle again!

Protecting our forests is very important so that nature has the space to work. In Rhode Island, we have protected many acres of forest habitat in our State Wildlife Management Areas. These are places where forests will always stay protected. YOU can help protect forests too! There's a lot of small patches of forest around our state. When visiting a forest or natural area, be respectful of the creatures that live there. That means staying on the walking path, making sure no trash is left behind, and watching wildlife from a safe distance.



MADDIE'S OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Meet an EPO!

There are a lot of laws and rules in place to protect our wildlife. Our State Environmental Police Officers (EPOs) are responsible for helping to keep people and wildlife safe by making sure people are following the rules. To learn more, I chatted with one of Rhode Island's newest EPOs, Jake Meleski!



What interested you in becoming an environmental officer?

Growing up, I wasn't sure if I wanted to become a police officer or pursue a job in environmental science. I knew I wanted to help people, but I also wanted to have a job that allowed me to be out in the woods. I spent most of my childhood out in the woods and

developed a serious love and respect for our natural resources. Once I discovered that I could become an EPO, I knew that I had found a career that was perfect for both of my interests.

What are your duties?

My day-to-day duties change with the seasons. Each season brings new activities that people enjoy doing on state beaches, parks and management areas. My job is to enforce all hunting, boating, and fishing laws while keeping everyone safe. I interact with a different group of people every day, including hunters, fisherman, shell fisherman or people just going for a boat ride.

During the hunting season, I patrol the state speaking with hunters to check their hunting licenses. I also constantly find myself on a boat, speaking with other

boaters on the water to check their safety equipment. A large majority of my time is also spent checking fishing licenses and measuring fish to ensure they are the correct size. Being an EPO means protecting the resources of Rhode Island so everyone can continue to do all the things they enjoy.

What is your favorite part of your job?

My favorite part of the job is meeting new people while they are doing activities they love. Most people who are fishing, hunting or going for a boat ride are doing so because it makes them happy. I enjoy meeting new people and making great connections in the community. Speaking to someone who is grateful for all the work that we do makes the job feel so important.

Do you have any hobbies outside of work?

My hobbies outside of work include freshwater fishing, kayaking, snowboarding and playing golf. Even when I'm not working, I still find myself outdoors as much as possible. In the future, I would like to start spear fishing and waterfowl hunting as well.

What is your favorite wild animal and why?

My favorite wild animal has to be the bobcat. Bobcat sightings aren't a common occurrence in Rhode Island, however that doesn't mean they aren't here. Bobcats are quick and powerful hunters that have black ears, white spots and short tails. Although they are often confused with regular house cats, they can grow much larger than a regular cat. I think it's super unique to see one in the wild.



About the Author

Hi everyone! My name is Maddie. I am the administrative assistant at the Outdoor Education office. I have the best job ever because I encourage people to go explore the great outdoors! I love to practice archery, learn about wild game animals (turkeys are my favorite), go fishing, and cook up seafood with my family! I did not grow up in a hunting family, so I relied on RIDEM Hunter Education programs to learn and to connect me with awesome mentors who helped me get to where I am today. I am still learning and growing, and now I am here to help you do the same!

CRITTER CAM

About our trail camera study:

A trail camera is a small, waterproof camera that can be strapped to a tree. It takes photos when it senses something moving in front of the lens. In this issue, we'd like to highlight some photos from our research partner Laken Ganoe.

Laken is a URI student studying Rhode Island's fisher population for her PhD project. She uses a trail camera to figure out where fishers are in the state. She also puts tracking collars on them to see what habitats they are using and how much they travel around. If you'd like to learn more about Laken's project and fishers, check out our Winter 2022 issue at www.dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach.

Laken's cameras capture some pretty awesome photos of fishers and other critters too!



A red fox seems to like the smell of this fallen tree! Oftentimes, biologists will spray scent lures in front of trail cameras so that animals will come to check out the stinky smell and get their picture taken.



A coyote pack pauses to investigate a good smell. Coyote packs usually have 3-7 adults and 2-5 puppies.



"Hey guys, did you hear a clicking sound come from that tree?" A flock of wild turkeys is curious about the trail cam!



A beautiful fisher taking a stroll in the autumn forest. Hopefully, Laken was able to get a GPS collar on this fisher to learn more about its territory and movements!

"SMELLS FISHY" NEWS

Kids Only Fishing Areas

Did you know that there are a handful of freshwater fishing areas in Rhode Island that are just for kids?

The following areas are only for use by those age 14 and younger:

- Frosty Hollow Pond, Exeter
- Lapham Pond, Burrillville
- Scott Evans Memorial Pond, Biscuit City, South Kingstown
- Seidel's Pond, Cranston
- Silvy's Pond, Cumberland
- Lloyd Keeney Pond, Hopkinton

The following freshwater areas are for use by those age 14 and younger only during the first two days of the fishing season in April:

- Cass Pond, Woonsocket
- Geneva Pond and Brook, North Providence
- Slater Park, Pawtucket
- Ponderosa Park Pond, Little Compton

During the rest of the fishing season, all ages can fish from these areas.

Some important things to know:

- For Rhode Island Freshwater Fishing Licenses, you only need one if you are 15 and older.
- For Rhode Island Saltwater Fishing Licenses, you only need one if you are 16 and older.
- Parents who help their children by holding fishing rods with line in the water need their own license.



About the Author

My name is Dana, and I am the Technical Assistant at the Division of Fish and Wildlife Outdoor Education Office. I love fishing, mainly fly fishing, and fly tying. A big part of my job is helping people learn to fish. My favorite part is when someone catches a fish, especially if it's their first!

OUR WILD NEIGHBORS

MARBLED SALAMANDER

HABITAT

Marbled salamanders spend most of their time hiding under logs, in small burrows, or under leaves on the forest floor. During the breeding season, they can be found in swamps, vernal pools, and seasonal wetlands with grasses, sedges, and sphagnum (peat) moss. The key is habitat that is wet part of the year. They don't like places with lots of deep water, like ponds.

BREEDING

Most RI amphibians lay their eggs in spring, but the marbled salamander lays its eggs in the fall. Marbled salamanders migrate to their breeding wetlands on rainy and humid nights. Females lay eggs in a small nest and sit on top of the eggs for a few days, or until the wetland begins to fill with water. She then migrates back into the forest. As rain falls and water collects in the vernal pool or wetland throughout fall and winter, the eggs hatch. If you wait quietly by a vernal pool in winter, you may see them swimming under the ice! Baby salamanders, called **larvae**, have tails and feathery gills. They spend the winter underwater and go through metamorphosis in June, losing their gills and growing legs. After that, they find a home in the forest, and return to the pond where they hatched when they've grown up and are ready to lay their own eggs.



FOOD

Marbled salamander larvae eat aquatic insects and even the eggs and tadpoles of other salamanders and frogs! Adults eat worms, insects, centipedes, and slugs.

DID YOU KNOW?

Marbled salamanders are listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Rhode Island Wildlife Action Plan. This plan is updated every 10 years and helps us identify which species need our help and the actions we are planning to take to help them. It's like our conservation roadmap for the state of Rhode Island. We're currently working on the first steps to update this plan for 2025!



OUT IN THE FIELD

Chatting with the Deputy Chief



Hi everyone, Mary here! Did you know that there's around 20,000 animal species that call Rhode Island home? That includes big animals, like whales and black bears, all the way down to teensy weensy creatures like ants and spiders. And the Division of Fish and Wildlife is responsible for taking care of them all. That sounds like a LOT of work! How do we do it?! It takes a lot of careful planning and some creativity. To learn more about that, let's talk to Jay Osenkowski, Deputy Chief of Wildlife (aka, my boss!).

Mary: Hi Jay, thanks for taking the time to chat with me! Can you explain to our readers a little bit about your job? What does a Deputy Chief do?

Jay: Sure, the role of the Deputy Chief is to oversee all sides of the Division of Fish and Wildlife. I am responsible for guiding the direction of our Wildlife section and how we spend our funding on different projects. This also includes helping to create new projects, like our Wildlife Outreach Program, Volunteer Program, and reptile and amphibian project.

I work with our Division Chief and other supervisors to figure out our needs, write new job descriptions and hire folks to work with us, work on laws, and a bunch of other requests and needs that happen daily. The topics tend to be unpredictable! I also help to plan larger projects with other organizations related to wildlife, climate change, and outdoor activities. I also get to represent Rhode Island at regional and national meetings.


Mary: What's the biggest goal for the Division of Fish and Wildlife?

Jay: Our goal is to conserve and manage Rhode Island's fish and wildlife species so that all Rhode Islanders can enjoy them now and in the future.

Mary: Let's talk about those 20,000 species. How the heck can we possibly keep track of all these things and care for them? It seems pretty difficult!

Jay: It would be impossible to give attention to all species that live or pass through Rhode Island! Also, we receive very little to no funding for the vast majority of species. Almost all of our funding comes from what's called the Pittman-Robertson grant. This money comes from taxes placed on firearms, archery, and ammunition sales. The US Fish and Wildlife Service gives this money to each state. We can only use this fund on mammals, birds, and their habitats. That said, we are still able to do a lot of work on behalf of the many other species through protecting and maintaining diverse habitats that fit their needs.

Mary: What are some creative things we've done at Fish and Wildlife to help conserve as many species as we can?



Jay: I would start with the most impactful action we take, which is protecting land. We regularly participate in the State Lands Acquisition Committee. My job there is to look at available land for its value in wildlife conservation and access for hunting and fishing. The biggest goal is to help wildlife, but also to give people places where they can hunt and fish. This also is great for folks who don't hunt or fish, because they also get open space to hike, birdwatch, walk their dog, and just enjoy nature.

Mary: What do you see as the most important thing for wildlife conservation in Rhode Island as we look to the future?

Jay: Human disturbance and habitat fragmentation from neighborhoods, new buildings, roads, and large solar farms in rural forested areas are likely the biggest issues for conservation in Rhode Island. Many species are sensitive to these impacts and will not do well in smaller fragmented areas with poor habitat, more predators, and the presence of humans. My concern is that in a small state with a lot of people, we may also be seeing overuse from all of the outdoor activities on some of our state lands.

Mary: Do you have advice for any of our readers who may be interested in working in wildlife conservation when they grow up?

Jay: In this day and age, my main bit of advice would be put down the

phone and go outside to play and explore! You can learn more from being in silence in nature than you would on your phone. This will spark your curiosity and imagination and strengthen your mind and soul.

Mary: What's your favorite thing about your job?


Jay: The diversity in my work, programs, and staff. I am very fortunate to work in a field that I love and with amazing, passionate people who love fish and wildlife, the outdoors, and their jobs. I often feel the most impactful and rewarding thing we do is land protection, because that ensures our critters will have the necessary space to thrive in the future. That said, by far the MOST enjoyable part of my job is any opportunity I get to do field work and be out with our staff!

Mary: And lastly, what is your favorite wild Rhode Island critter?

Jay: Ooooh, I really don't have one, but I love Black-throated Blue Warblers! I spent a lot of time in the White Mountains chasing them while working for Dartmouth College. Even cooler, they are part of the beautiful artwork in our new book, *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Rhode Island*.



ABOUT JAY

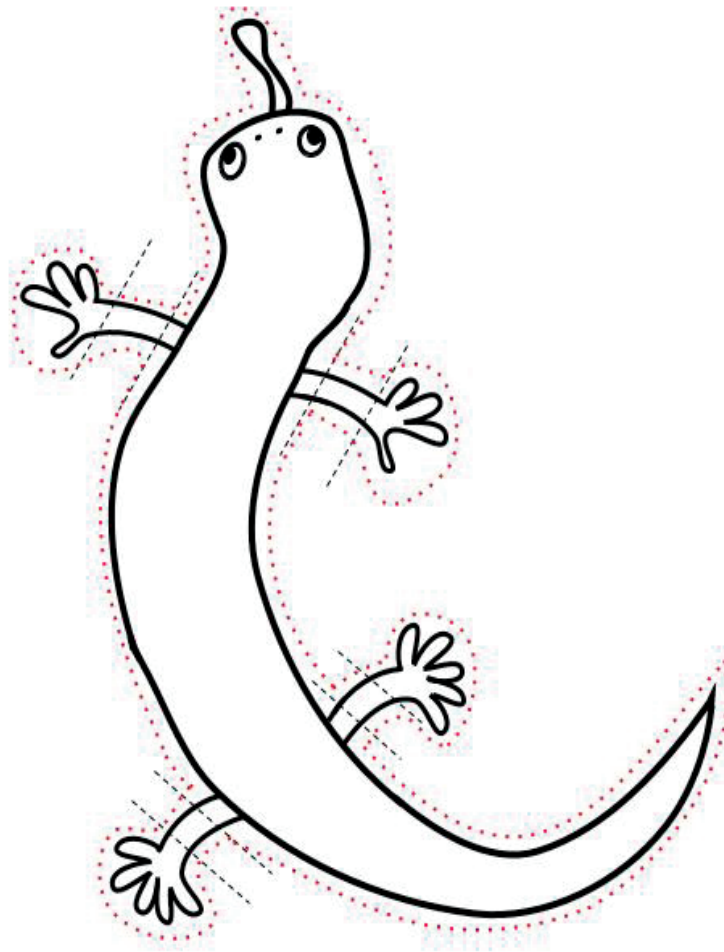


Jay is a native Rhode Islander who grew up on a small livestock farm. Jay was fortunate to live in a rural area bordered by forest and surrounded by farm animals, and suspects that is what sparked his love for nature and the outdoors. He spent several years after college working in the White Mountains of New Hampshire monitoring migratory birds before leaving for Hawai'i where he worked with Hawaiian Hawks. These were all great and fun experiences, but Jay's lifelong family and friends were in Rhode Island. Shortly upon returning to Rhode Island, Jay started working for RIDEM and completed his master's degree looking at population trends of migratory birds in Rhode Island. Since then, he has focused on making as much of a positive impact in his various roles with RIDEM as he can.

WILD QUEST

Make your own marbled salamander!

1. Cut out the salamander along the red dotted line.
2. Color your salamander with a beautiful black and white pattern.
3. Fold legs twice along the black dashed lines. Fold the line close to the body down. Fold the line close to the foot the opposite way. This will create flat feet so your salamander can stand!
4. You can get extra creative and draw a habitat for your salamander too!



CRITTER CARDS

Rhode Island is home to many different wild animals. Some are very common and easy to spot. Others are rare and hard to find. Some are doing great and have healthy populations, while other species are threatened or endangered. At the Division of Fish and Wildlife, we've created a list of Species of Greatest Conservation Need (marked as SGCN on the cards). We focus a lot of our work on helping these species. We do this by studying their populations, protecting special habitats, and spreading the word about these cool critters.

Cut out and collect these Critter Cards to learn about Rhode Island's wildlife species!



Fold in half



MARBLED SALAMANDER (SGCN)

5



Peter Paplanaus

I am one of RI's biggest salamanders! You can find me hiding under logs in the forest most of the time. During the early fall, I come out on rainy nights to find a mate and lay my eggs in dry vernal pools before the water starts to fill in.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Please help me by protecting vernal pools and the habitat that surrounds them. Also, please watch out for me on the road on rainy nights!

GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER (SGCN)

12



Andy Reago/Clarissa McClarren

I am a beautiful songbird that nests across eastern North America. In the winter, I fly south to Central and South America. I like to eat insects and nest in tree cavities. I like mixed habitat and open areas on the edges of forests. I love to eat lots of different insects and some fruit!

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Developing open space for new buildings can cause problems for me. Keeping natural areas open and creating healthy habitat for me would be helpful. Also, because I like to nest in tree cavities, I might use a nest box if you'd like to build one for me!

HARBOR SEAL (SGCN)

11



I am a year-round resident in Rhode Island. Look for me resting on rocks. I also like to poke my head out of the water and bob in the waves. You might spot me next time you're at the beach, even in the winter!

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

If you happen to see me resting on a beach, please give me plenty of space, keep dogs away from me, and don't touch me! It really stresses me out. I need peace and quiet, please! Also, you can help keep trash out of the ocean by picking up litter and lessening the amount of single-use plastic things you use.

SCARLET-WINGED LICHEN MOTH (SGCN)

7



Andy Reago/Clarissa McClarren

I am a pretty little moth that likes to live in grassland and shrubland habitats. As a caterpillar, I like to eat lichens on trees. I overwinter on the ground in a small cocoon.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Conservation of grassland and shrubland habitat will be super helpful to me! Also, when people spray pesticides for mosquitoes and other bugs, I may end up being harmed as well. Please avoid using chemicals and pesticides in your yard and garden!



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Dean Birch