

ISSUE 22 | WINTER 2024

WILD RHODE ISLAND EXPLORER



**MEET THE
BUFFLEHEAD!**



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!

CONTACT US

RI DFW FIELD HEADQUARTERS
277 GREAT NECK ROAD, WEST KINGSTON, RI 02892
401-789-0281 | DEM.DFW@DEM.RI.GOV

RI DFW EDUCATION CENTER
1B CAMP E-HUN-TEE, EXETER, RI 02822
401-539-0019

DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT
24HR VIOLATION LINE: (401) 222-3070

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Want to learn even more
about RI's fish and wildlife?

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Rhode Island Department of
Environmental Management



The Wild Rhode Island Explorer | Winter 2024

Writer/Editor: Mary Gannon

Cover photo: Andy Reago & Chrissy McClarren

Contributors: Madison Proulx, Abby Clark, Jenny Kilburn, Harper Nelson

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HABITAT CHAT

Coastal Ponds

Rhode Island's southern coast is home to some very special bodies of water—coastal ponds! A coastal pond (also called a salt pond) is where fresh and saltwater mix together. They are very old, over 25,000 years old! A long, long time ago, Rhode Island was covered by a glacier. As the glacier started to melt, it left behind rocks and sand, which created our coastline of beaches. Some of these beaches formed in front of the ponds which separated them from the ocean. These are called barrier beaches. In big storms, ocean waves would crash over the beach and flood into the pond. Other coastal ponds are connected to the ocean by openings in the barrier beaches. These are called breachways.

Coastal ponds are beautiful places to visit in the summer and are usually jam packed with people enjoying the summer sun! But if you visit a coastal pond in the winter, you'll be amazed to see that a different crowd has moved in... winter waterfowl! Coastal ponds are very important for RI's ducks and geese because they don't fully freeze. That's because the water is salty. Lots of different ducks find shelter and food along our coastline in the winter. Rhode Island might be cold, but it's not as cold as Canada! This is where many of our sea ducks breed in the summer.

What are the names of Rhode Island's coastal ponds?

- Point Judith Pond
- Potter's Pond
- Card's Pond
- Truston Pond
- Green Hill Pond
- Ninigret Pond
- Quonochontaug Pond
- Winnapaug Pond
- Maschaug Pond
- Little Maschaug Pond

It's very important to care for our coastal ponds so that there's healthy habitat for winter waterfowl, other wildlife, fish and marine creatures of all shapes and sizes. Read on to learn more about how biologists study waterfowl during the winter in Rhode Island, and to meet one of our sea duck visitors!



MADDIE'S OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

This December was my second time mentoring students at the University of Rhode Island on a super cool waterfowl hunt. I was able to meet with students each week all semester! Wildlife biology students were first led through the Internal Hunter Education Association approved Hunter Safety course. This course is required for all new hunters in RI and other states. It teaches new hunters all the safety and ethics information they need to know.



At the end of the class, students were given the opportunity to go on a mentored waterfowl hunt supported by the Delta Waterfowl University Hunt Program. Students are paired with a mentor sort of like a teacher during the waterfowl hunt. Harvesting an animal was not required, but all participating students gained a better understanding of the process. They also learned how hunting plays a huge role in wildlife conservation. Following the hunt, all were invited to our Outdoor Education Office to talk about their experience and share a meal cooked with the ducks they harvested.

Mentoring two ladies on this hunt was super important to me. Not growing up in a hunting family, I heavily relied on mentors to take me out in the field and teach me how to be a safe and ethical hunter. Now, being able to share my passion with others means the world to me! Can't wait for next year!



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 Ganoë.

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!



"Well, I guess I'll just hang out here til spring!" White-tailed deer take it slow in the winter. They rely on their thick winter coat and the fat they stored up from acorns in the fall to survive the cold winter months.



Incoming! A tufted titmouse zooms towards the camera. These cute little gray and white birds stay in RI all winter. They're common visitors to backyard bird feeders. On quiet winter days, listen for their cheerful *peter-peter-peter* whistling call.



A fisher's eyes glow in the dark as it checks out the camera. Many nocturnal animals have a special adaptation called the tapetum (ta-PEA-tum). This is a part of their eye that works like a mirror to reflect light, which helps the animal see in the dark. People don't have a tapetum, so our eyes don't glow in the dark. Our night vision isn't that great either!



Hi buddy! A raccoon stops to pose, showing off his beautiful winter fur.

"SMELLS FISHY" NEWS

Many people love ice skating, playing ice hockey, and skiing in wintertime, but some wait until winter every year for ice fishing season! Ice fishing is popular here in New England, especially for cold water fishes like trout or salmon. When it starts getting cold out, most fish naturally start to slow down. Trout, however, love cooler waters. Trout are very sensitive and need water with a lot of oxygen in it. Cold water holds more oxygen than warmer water, so cold water fishes like trout and salmon have an easier time breathing through their gills. This means that while other fish slow down, trout typically become more active when the water gets colder. Because trout become active in colder water, it's an easy choice for anglers who want some fun action on the ice. Or if an angler enjoys fishing for trout, time on the ice can be one of the best times of year.

There are many ways to catch fish through the ice, but here's a couple of tips and tricks for ice fishing for trout. Trout in colder water love to move from place to place. The higher oxygen levels help them breathe and swim easier. This allows them to chase down their prey with ease. The main diet of trout in the winter months is typically small baitfish but crayfish, leeches, and other aquatic insects aren't off the menu. One of the most common ways of catching trout ice fishing is by using minnows. When fishing, drop your baitfish about halfway between the bottom of the pond and the top of ice. Trout often move

from top to bottom, and they have a better chance of seeing your bait when it's in the middle of the water column. But don't be shy of trying out different depths. Many people use tip-ups or ice traps to set multiple minnows out at once. The limit in Rhode Island is 5 lines. The tip up works by dropping the bait down with a spool of line, set at a certain depth. When the line moves, it pulls a lever, and a flag goes up. This allows you to watch and wait for fish to bite your lines.

Here in Rhode Island we have three species of trout for ice fishing; brook trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout. Brook trout historically are the only trout naturally from New England. RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife stocks all three trout species and Atlantic salmon to various waters here in Rhode Island. Places such as Barber Pond in South Kingstown, Wallum Lake in Burrillville, Carbuncle Pond in Coventry, or Beach Pond in Exeter are common spots for trout ice fishing in Rhode Island. It is important to know that ice is only safe at six inches thick or greater. Do not walk on ice that is less than six inches, or on ice that has visible cracks, holes, or has a different color or clarity to ice around it. Ice fishing itself is a lot of fun, but trout fishing through the ice can be some of the most fun in the wintertime!



About the Author

My name is Harper, and I love fish! I was born in Rhode Island, but I have lived all over from Pennsylvania to Maine. Fishing has taken me many places, from the spruce highlands of Nova Scotia to the stunning peaks of the rolling Wasatch Mountains in Utah. My passion has led me to study marine science at the University of Maine, and upcoming fisheries and aquaculture at the University of Rhode Island. I love being able to connect with a world that I otherwise would not be able to see, and traveling has brought me many amazing experiences and memories.

OUR WILD NEIGHBORS

BUFFLEHEAD

HABITAT

Buffleheads spend the summer near ponds and lakes in Canada and Alaska. They migrate to the coast to spend the winter. They like habitat in coves, harbors, and coastal ponds. They can also be spotted in freshwater ponds or lakes in the winter.

FOOD

Buffleheads are diving ducks. This means they go fully underwater to find their food. They squeeze all the air out of their feathers by keeping them close to the body, do a little jump, and dive down! They use their feet to swim underwater. They stay underwater less than 30 seconds, then pop back up to the surface. They like to eat aquatic insects, shrimp, crabs, snails, fish eggs, shellfish, and plants.

BREEDING

Buffleheads like to build their nests in tree cavities. They especially like to use holes that have been made in tree trunks by Northern flickers or pileated woodpeckers. Females build a nest of cozy, downy feathers that they pluck from their chest. Buffleheads can lay up to 17 eggs in one nest!

DID YOU KNOW?

Rhode Island's coast is an important habitat for buffleheads and other diving ducks. Turn the page to learn more about how we're keeping track of Rhode Island's waterfowl. That's the word we use when talking about ducks and geese!



OUT IN THE FIELD

Wonderful Winter Waterfowl



Hi everyone, it's me, Mary! I'm here with Waterfowl Biologist Jenny Kilburn to search the Rhode Island coast for some beautiful birds this winter. We'll also learn about her unique job, and why it's important to keep an eye on our state's ducks and geese.

Mary: Hi Jenny! Thanks for letting me tag along. Can you tell everybody what you do as our state's Waterfowl Biologist?

Jenny: My job is to manage the populations of ducks and geese that reside in the state and care for their habitat. I work collaboratively with biologists along the Atlantic coasts to set the waterfowl hunting seasons based on data we collect throughout the year.

Mary: What are some ways that you keep track of RI's ducks and geese? It seems like it would be hard to count all of them because they fly around!

Jenny: We monitor the ducks and geese of RI through a few field projects. During January, February, August, and September we trap and band ducks with unique numbered leg bands. This is like a small bracelet on the bird's leg. Banding data tells us about where the birds are breeding and spending the winter, migration

pathways, how long they live, and how many baby birds are joining the population. We do breeding waterfowl surveys in the spring to help figure out spring population size. This helps predict how many birds are out there leading up to the hunting season. During the winter we count birds on the ground and from a helicopter! We're especially looking at Atlantic brant and learning more about the wintering waterfowl in RI.

Mary: It's pretty cold out right now. Wouldn't it be better to wait until spring and summer to count the ducks?

Jenny: Winter field work is important because counts of Atlantic Brant during the winter months are used to set the hunting season for this species. We also count our wintering waterfowl on a state level. This helps us track changes over time. It's also possible to use our state data with other states to tell the story of our wintering birds and what we might be seeing across New England and beyond!



Mary: It's so cool that some birds are only here in RI for the winter! How far do they migrate to get here?

Jenny: It really depends on the species. Some might shift south from other more northern New England states. Some, like greater scaup, might make it to Rhode Island from places like Alaska!

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

Jenny: I love working together with biologists from all across the US and Canada, collecting data that can be used to help wildlife into the future. I also really enjoy mentoring new wildlife technicians in college and watching them continue in their careers as future wildlife conservationists.

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

Jenny: A part of my job involves creating and managing waterfowl habitat. Beavers do this naturally and are one of my favorite wild Rhode Island critters! Their ability to change the landscape and create wetlands is super impressive for such a small animal. Even the humblest critters can make big changes!



Dean Birch

ABOUT JENNY

Jenny grew up fishing and hunting with her family. These outdoor experiences inspired her to become a passionate conservationist. Jenny has lots of experience from working at the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, where she worked for several years on animals like wild turkeys, waterfowl, black bears, bobcats, and rabbits. In the spring of 2018, Jenny completed her Master's degree from the University of Connecticut in Natural Resources with a focus on Wildlife Management.



WILD QUEST

Waterfowl Word Scramble

Waterfowl is the word we use to describe ducks, geese, and swans. These 5 waterfowl species spend their winter along Rhode Island's coast, just like the bufflehead. Can you unscramble the letters to match their names?



BRANT



SCAUP



HARLEQUIN



EIDER



GOLDENEYE

1. IRDEE

2. IUQNRHLE

3. APSCU

4. NRTBA

5. EOLEYNEGD

Answers: 1. Eider 2. Harlequin 3. Scaup 4. Brant 5. Goldeneye

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



6

I am a dark brown or gray salamander, and my "cheeks" are rather large. I am fairly uncommon in Rhode Island, however if you see me I am most likely seen in the western part of the state. While I am known to hide in leaf litter, sometimes I live in the burrows of other animals!

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Try not to use pesticides on your lawn as rainwater can wash them into my habitat and they can harm me.

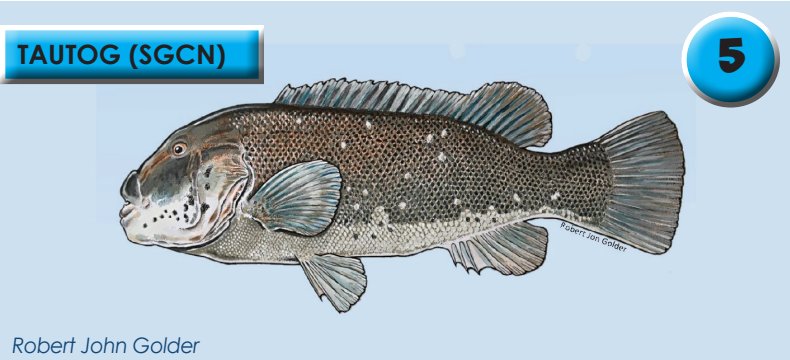


13

I am one of the smallest ducks you will see in Rhode Island. As a male, I have handsome white and black feathers, however if you look close around my eyes the feathers are tones of green, blue and even purple!

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

I nest in tree cavities, so by helping to protect the forests that I nest in, you are helping to keep me safe.



5

I love to live in the rocky coastline that surrounds our state. I am mainly dark brown/black and olive in color with large canine teeth. My sharp teeth help me to eat my favorite foods: crustaceans, mussels, and clams.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Because I grow slowly it is best to follow the most up to date fishing regulations so that overfishing does not cause the tautog population to shrink.



8

I am a large beetle about the size of a paperclip, and I like to live near ponds and lakes. I make my home near these areas so that I can eat insects and even tadpoles living in freshwater! While I can live throughout North America, in New England, I have only been documented on Block Island!

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

By preventing pollution to my pond and lake home, you are helping to keep my habitat healthy for me.



RI Department of Environmental Management
DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE
Great Swamp Field Headquarters
277 Great Neck Road
West Kingston, RI 02892