Rhode Island Department
of Environmental Management
Division of Fish and Wildlife

Wild Rhode Island

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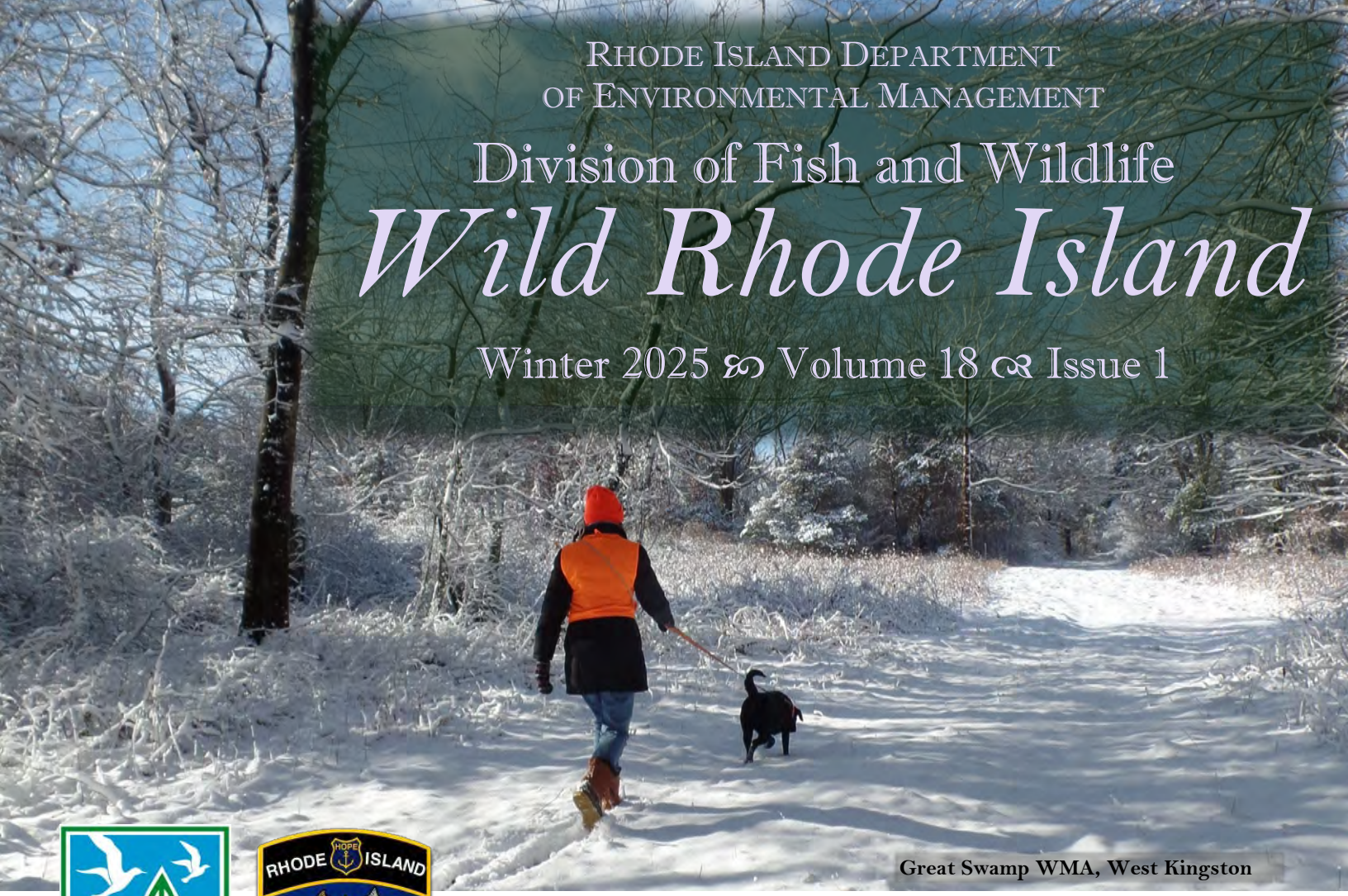

Great Swamp WMA, West Kingston

Inside This Issue:

DFW Book Signing Success!.....5
Wildlife Action Plan Revision Underway.....6
Beaver River Trout Habitat.....7
DFW Publications Sale.....9

DFW Wild Turkey Banding 2024

By Lizzi Bonczek, Upland Game Bird Biologist, DFW

The wild turkey restoration effort is considered one of America's greatest wildlife conservation success stories. Loss of habitat coupled with overharvest resulted in the steep decline of turkeys, and even extirpation in some regions, across their range by the late 1800s. Following success in other states, the reintroduction of turkeys to Rhode Island in 1980 and the mid-90s resulted in the population we see today. According to state turkey surveys, it appears the Rhode Island turkey

Left: DFW Biologist, Lizzi Bonczek, with a banded wild turkey ready for release.

Continued on page 3

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

American mink (*Neogale vision*). Photo: R. Leach

This Issue Features:

DFW Wild Turkey Banding Project.....1

DFW has partnered with other states to study Rhode Island's wild turkey population for more insight into their habitat needs.

First Ever DFW Book Signing Event.....5

DFW held a book signing for five publications where attendees could get their books signed by the authors.

Wildlife Action Plan Revision Underway.....6

DFW is currently in the process of revising the State's Wildlife Action Plan as part of the 10 year cycle.

Big Changes in the Beaver River.....7

Natural ecological changes in the Beaver River have improved habitat for RI's native brook trout.

Connect with DFW on Social Media.....10

RI Fish & Wildlife posts information on wildlife and fish, program announcements, employment ofpportunities and more!

Check out the latest issue of *Wild Rhode Island Explorer!*

Page 2

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Wild Turkey Banding continued from page 1

population is stable. However, these data reflect turkey population trends, or the general direction of change rather than exact numbers.

To better understand turkey population changes and what drives these fluctuations, the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife initiated an annual turkey banding program in spring 2024 with a goal of capturing turkeys throughout the state to collect scientific information. We capture turkeys on both public and private land using rocket nets, which are propelled out over the flock, containing them in place. Once captured, we collect biological data, affix them with a metal leg band marked with a unique identifying number, and release them back in the location where they are captured. The leg bands used on turkeys are similar to those deployed on migratory birds, such as waterfowl and mourning doves.

Madison Proulx prepares a captured turkey for banding.

Hunter Education staff, Madison Proulx and Jim Tappero, were all smiles getting to band their first turkeys!

The public can encounter these banded individuals in a variety of ways, and all banded turkey encounters are important to biologists. Encounters can occur by harvesting a banded turkey or finding a dead banded turkey, but can also occur by observing a live banded turkey, also called a "re-sight." Additionally, biologists may re-capture banded individuals in subsequent years during turkey banding operations. The mix of encounters allows biologists to estimate harvest and survival, and gain insight into local movements.

Following our first year of banding, hunters reported harvesting 8 banded turkeys. One of these individuals traveled a minimum of 6 miles from the banding location to where he was harvested. Movements like that are likely due to following or looking for hens during the breeding season. We hope to continue turkey research in the future to explore topics such as nest survival, nest site selection, brood survival, and movements to gain a deeper insight into the drivers of our local turkey population dynamics.

Because turkeys are non-migratory, they are managed on a state-level as opposed to a federal level and therefore band recoveries are reported differently. We ask that anyone who encounters a banded turkey report it to Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife by either calling the Great Swamp Headquarters at (401)789-0281 or reporting the band online in our Survey123 form at https://arcg.is/XTHjW0. Information we request when reporting a band includes the band number, date of encounter, location of encounter (general area at the minimum, exact location if possible), and age/sex if known.

RI Fish and Wildlife Hosts First Book Signing Event

By Melissa Curry, Administrative Assistant, DFW

On a beautiful September evening, the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) hosted our inaugural book signing event at the charming Louttit Library in West Greenwich. This event celebrated the latest addition to the DFW collection, *Reptiles of Rhode Island*, bringing together local authors, wildlife enthusiasts, and community members for a night filled with conversation, connection, and desserts!

The library's community room, decorated with colorful bouquets of flowers from our Wildlife Outreach team's home gardens, buzzed with excitement as attendees had the opportunity to meet and interact with several authors from DFW's publications.

Among the featured guests was Christopher Rathiel, the author of both *Amphibians of Rhode Island* and the newly released *Reptiles of Rhode Island*. His presence drew many local wildlife lovers eager to learn more about his work and the fascinating herpetofauna of the Ocean State.

In addition to Rathiel, the evening welcomed notable figures in the realm of wildlife literature, including Virginia A. Brown and illustrator Nina Briggs, who collaborated on the book *Dragonflies and Damselflies of Rhode Island*. Long-time DFW fisheries biologist Alan Libby, author of our first publication, *Inland Fishes of Rhode Island*, also joined the gathering, making it a remarkable occasion for book signings and discussions.

Left to right: Christopher Raithel, Virginia Brown, Alan Libby, Nina Briggs and Jason Osenkowski with their publications.

Authors and DFW staff pose for group photo at first ever book signing event.

Deputy Chief of Wildlife Jay Osenkowski, and University of Rhode Island professor Dr. Peter Paton chatted with attendees about the large collaborative publication: *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Rhode Island.*

With several copies of each publication available for purchase, the event offered a perfect opportunity for attendees to enhance their personal collections and engage in meaningful conversations about Rhode Island's unique biodiversity. As guests savored delicious desserts and coffee, they mingled with like-minded individuals, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and shared interest.

The turnout and enthusiasm for the event were overwhelming, leading to numerous inquiries about future book signings. While initially planned as a one-time affair, the positive response has inspired the DFW to consider organizing another event in the near future. Our staff sincerely enjoyed organizing this delightful gathering for our amazing authors and community!

2025 State Wildlife Action Plan Revision Underway

By: Amanda Freitas, RI Wildlife Action Plan Community Liaison

Rhode Island's Wildlife Action Plan (RIWAP) is set for its next update by October 2025! First published in 2005 and revised in 2015, this comprehensive strategy identifies Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and their Key Habitats, evaluates the threats to both, and identifies conservation actions to address those threats. The Plan is a critical tool for conserving the state's fish and wildlife and their habitats. It also enables RI to secure State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (SWG) funding. This program is vital because DEM relies on SWG to fund direct conservation actions for more than half of Rhode Island's SGCN.

While the RIWAP Community Liaison is coordinating the revision effort, it truly is all hands on deck! As with the 2015 revision, DEM is relying on The Nature Conservancy, RI Natural History Survey (RINHS), University of Rhode Island, and other conservation partners to lend substantial technical assistance and staff expertise to the project. A Core Team provides decision-making support. Technical Teams for Birds, Fish, Herptiles, Invertebrates, Mammals, and Plants, each led by one or more DFW, Division of Marine Fisheries, and/or RINHS staff and collectively composed of over 50 experts from across the state and region, are beginning to review and update the 2015 data.

Once there is enough information assembled, DEM will convene a Mapping Team as well as a Scientific Review Team (over 100 individuals in 2015) to review the work of the Technical Teams. Partner outreach will continue to expand as information comes online, and an Outreach Team is strategizing the best ways to provide interested parties with diverse opportunities to participate in advance of the eventual public comment period by the summer of 2025.

The revised plan and vetting process will update our blueprint for safeguarding Rhode Island's fish and wildlife heritage and allow us to improve communicating this information to Rhode Islanders for the next ten years.

Saltmarsh sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*)
Photo: Christopher Powell

Big Changes in the Beaver River:
Sometimes Mother Nature is on Our Side!

By Corey Pelletier, Freshwater Fisheries Biologist, DFW

In 2021, RIDEM Fish and Wildlife changed the regulations for the Beaver River, designating the river as catch-and-release only and removing it from the list of trout stocked waters. These changes were implemented to further protect the wild Brook Trout population, addressing added pressures from competition with stocked trout for food and habitat resources, and angler harvest. Despite these protections, wild Brook Trout in the system still experience natural stressors that influence their growth and survival. Being a cold water-dependent species, they typically inhabit streams that have significant groundwater contribution, which help to maintain cold water temperatures. This is, in part, the case in the Beaver River, but because the river's origins begin as a series of ponds, water temperatures become very warm during summer months.

Ponds act as thermal sinks, or large areas of surface water that collect solar radiation, which heat water much more than a flowing stream channel. Therefore, groundwater contribution in a stream channel is often not sufficient to mitigate the effects of warm pondwater outflow on a hot summer day. Summer water temperatures often become well above the tolerable threshold of wild Brook Trout, forcing them to move and find suitable habitat. The Beaver River is no exception to this.

This brings us to one location in Richmond, RI, where the Beaver River runs through—the Beaver River Preserve—owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy. Within this approximately 270-acre preserve, a pond existed by means of an earthen dam—until 2023. During a high precipitation storm event in December of 2023, high flows burst through the dam at the Beaver River Preserve, eliminating the storage of water in the ponded area. This allowed the Beaver River to return to its natural channel,

Impoundment in December 2023, within a week after the dam had breached.

leaving mud flats with the exposed rhizomes of aquatic vegetation.

After some review of historical aerial imagery, the story of the pond at the Beaver River Preserve was not as it seemed. From the earliest available imagery of the area (1939 Aerial Photographs, RIDEM Environmental Resource Map), there was no pond at the site despite the presence of the earthen dam. This indicated that the dam had likely been built in the previous century and used as a source of power generation for a mill, like the history of many other Rhode Island dams. But sometime prior to 1938, the dam was

breached either by human hands or naturally. In the following years of imagery, no pond can be seen. That is until the early 1980s when the first stages of a pond began to form again. From the 1980s through 2020, imagery indicates the pond continued to grow. Interestingly, the return of the pond coincided with the recolonization of beavers in the 1980s. The section of dam that blew out in 2023 consisted of 40+ years of material from Mother Nature's engineer, the beaver!

In the broader picture, this natural process completed the work for conservation organizations working to restore cold water habitat, healthy fish populations, and clean water. Freshwater ponds and lakes are abundant throughout Rhode Island, most of which were created in the 19th and 20th centuries for mill power, flood retention, and recreation. Unfortunately, many of these human-created waterbodies negatively affect the ecosystems downstream by way of altering fish communities, introducing excessive nutrients, and promoting conditions that allow invasive species to flourish. Furthermore, dams act as barriers within stream and river networks, restricting upstream movement for fish and other aquatic animals. This can cause significant impacts to populations, limiting the ability of fish to access habitats necessary for spawning, feeding, and relief from high water temperatures and flood events. With that being said, the value of lakes and ponds across the state vary considerably. Natural resource managers and conservation groups are currently focused on identifying human-built dams which negatively impact cold water streams and serve little function in the way of property value, recreation and other ecosystem functions. This was the case with the pond on the Beaver River preserve. Based on years of monitoring conditions at this site, water temperatures became elevated throughout the summer months, negatively impacting the population of wild Brook Trout and other aquatic organisms downstream.

Now that the dam is gone, a perfect opportunity for monitoring the post-removal condition arises. RIDEM, The Nature Conservancy, and the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association began collecting a wide range of data on the

Impoundment in July of 2024, where you can see how new vegetation blankets the areas previously submerged.

fish community, water temperature, plant community, macro-invertebrates and more. We have also brought in help from URI's Freshwater Wetlands class to conduct a long-term study on the macro-invertebrate community. This will be important to assess how dam removal affects the community of underwater insects that serves as the primary source of food for fish and other animals in the river.

I may have left you wondering where the beavers went. Well, they are still there and have relocated their water storage engineering to the east, impounding a small tributary which flows into the river. This has allowed the Beaver River to remain free flowing. The topic of beavers can be a controversial one, given the problems that they can cause for roadway infrastructure, among other things. Beavers are native to the landscape and fulfill important roles in the ecosystem. As with many other species coexisting on the same landscape with us, we must carefully manage them when issues arise, but allow them to carry on with their natural functions on the landscape.

For now, this natural transformation of the Beaver River back to its free flowing, pre-settlement condition is a welcome change. Moreso, it provides us with a case study to better understand changes to a river when a dam is removed. As you can see from the photos, the mud flats don't last long and new terrestrial life takes over almost immediately, transitioning the drained area to a flourishing grass meadow within the first growing season. We are eager to continue our monitoring and see what happens next. Stay tuned for future updates and take a hike at this beautiful preserve to see the change yourself!

DFW Printed Publications Available for Purchase

Purchase at DFW Office, 277 Great Neck Road, West Kingston, RI

DEM Headquarters, Office of Boating & Licensing, 235 Promenade Street, Providence, RI

Or by mail, order form: https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/2024-07/fish-wildlife-book-order-form.pdf

Reptiles of Rhode Island

Amphibians of Rhode Island

Rhode Island Breeding Bird Atlas

Dragonflies and Damselflies of Rhode Island

Inland Fishes of Rhode Island

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Connect with us on social media!

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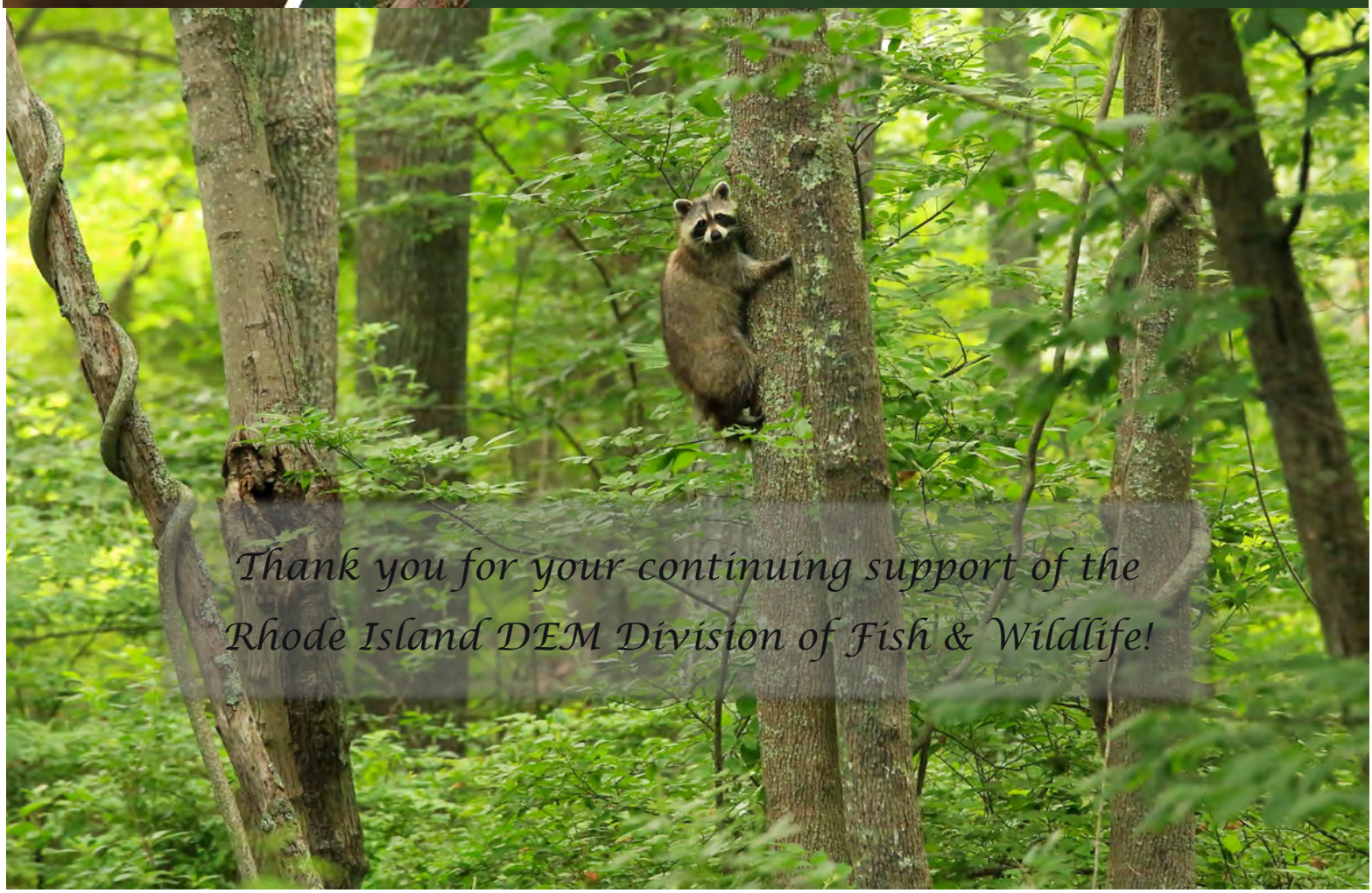
Photos by Dean Birch



Thank you for your continuing support of the Rhode Island DEM Division of Fish & Wildlife!