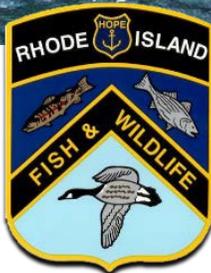


# Wild Rhode Island

Winter 2021 ∞ Volume 14 ∞ Issue 1



Harlequin duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) Photo: Richard Leach



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## Trees for Trout

By: Corey Pelletier, Fisheries Biologist, Division of Fish & Wildlife

When standing on a riverbank admiring the tranquility of the flowing water, many see it for just that. Anglers stand streamside contemplating where to make the next cast. A good angler reads the water, looking for habitat that is most likely to produce a trout. Seasoned anglers know and remember the spots they have caught fish in the past, down to the rock or bank where the fish hid. However, to most, the change in a river over generations goes unnoticed.

Rivers are dynamic and constantly changing, but unfortunately, many of the changes we see today are a result of human influence. These changes are most often negative and caused by poor land use practices. Dams create barriers and discharge warm water to the otherwise cold stream below. Cattle trample stream banks causing instability, sedimentation and high nutrient run off.

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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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# GEORGE WASHINGTON MANAGEMENT AREA

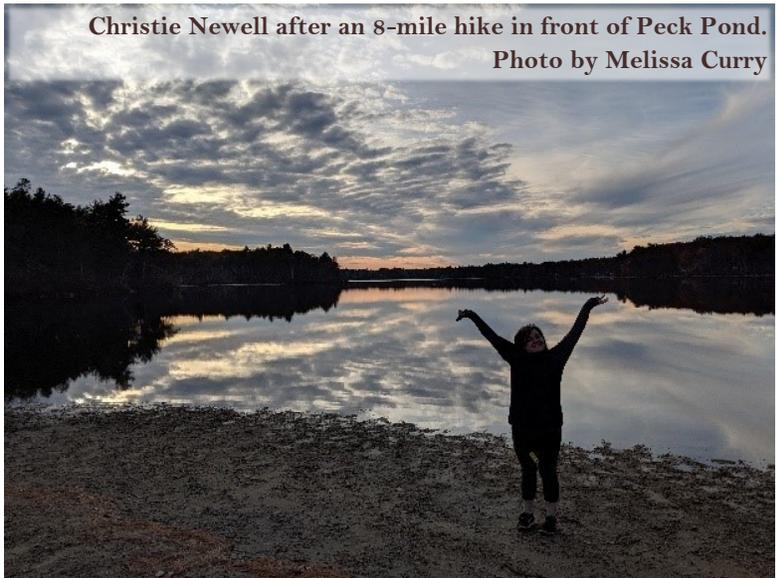
## FEATURED STATE LAND: DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE

BY: MELISSA CURRY, SEASONAL TECHNICAL SUPPORT, DFW

Rhode Island provides some of the best seasons for all outdoor activities. Whether you're into winter sports, summer activities, or hopefully both, Rhode Island is one of the best places to enjoy the great outdoors. As an avid day-hiker from Rhode Island, I've hiked in several areas across New England. Exploring the wilderness of the Northeast is something you can do during all year round, so I always take advantage of it. I didn't want to let the travel restrictions in 2020 stop me from continuing to explore the beautiful landscapes of the Northeast so I used this opportunity to explore more of the hiking areas in my home state. It was not surprising that I had taken Rhode Island for granted. It's full of stunning scenic trails with a lot to offer from the forests all throughout, to the scenic beach trails of South County. We even have trails right on the outskirts of Providence which is perfect for the folks who want to hike but don't want to be out in the deep woods alone. You can feel safe surrounded by local people and neighborhoods while also experiencing what nature has to offer.

Despite all my explorations this year, the area I have always been most impressed by is the George Washington State Management Area in Glocester RI. It's the second largest state management area in Rhode Island, next to the Arcadia State Management area, with 4,000 acres of land, the 226-acre freshwater Bowdish Reservoir, Clarkeville Pond and Wilbur Pond, 100-acre camping area with 45 well-spaced gravel sites, 10 miles of hiking trails, and so much more. What stands out about this management area is that there's ample space for everyone to enjoy their different activities without having to worry about interacting with other park goers. Usually when I go to George Washington State Management area, there are several cars parked in their 30-space parking lot but when you start walking on the trails, you'll rarely run into anyone. As this is a public hunting area, the presence of hunters is apparent during the hunting season, but you rarely run into them. Just make sure you meet the orange requirements: 200 square inches from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday in September to the last day in February, and 500 square inches in December. Some of the activities enjoyed by visitors to George Washington State Management area are hunting, hiking, fishing, swimming, camping, mountain biking, bird watching, wildlife observation, hunting, horseback riding, and many more.

The trails at George Washington Management Area are well maintained. They are always generally well-marked but it's still wise to have a trail map with you to make sure you're sticking to the trail that you want. It can be easy to accidentally take a



longer route than what you planned because of how large George Washing Management Area is, so I like to use the All Trails app to help guide me on the correct trails. One of my favorite things about hiking here is that there is a variety of how many miles you can hike. There are 3 main trails and each one is a loop. If you wanted to do a short hike, you can just follow the blue trail loop, 1.6 miles, and if you wanted to do an 8 mile hike, you could do the whole loop which includes the Red, Orange and Blue trails and goes around the whole management area. This hike takes about 4-5 hours depending on your speed and its moderate difficulty, so you'll certainly be getting a lot of exercise. You will come across a few steep hills and multiple surface types including rocks and roots while hiking on these trails, but they are wide and well maintained. Great for social distance hiking!

Bowdish Reservoir is located right in the middle of the Management Area along the Blue trail. It's a 100-acre freshwater reservoir accessible to anyone in the management area for fishing. There is also a concrete boat ramp for hand-carried light crafts or boats without motors in excess of 10 horsepower. Access may be limited during camping season. It can be accessed from the Angell and Blue loop trails, as well as Bowdish Camping Road. Unfortunately, I haven't had the chance to get out there on a kayak or canoe, but I can only imagine it's a great place to spend a summer or fall afternoon whether you're fishing or just taking in the amazing views.

For more information about this and all of Rhode Island's Wildlife Management Areas, please visit [www.dem.ri.gov](http://www.dem.ri.gov), or contact the Division of Fish & Wildlife at 401-789-0281 or by emailing [DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov](mailto:DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov)

# The Life History of Rhode Island's Freshwater Mussels

By: Branton Elleman, Seasonal Fisheries Biotechnician, Division of Fish & Wildlife

Ask a Rhode Islander what they know about mussels and you're likely to get a recipe containing tomato, chorizo, and wine for our saltwater variety. But further inland, in the rivers, streams, and ponds throughout the state, are a whole assortment of freshwater mussel species. Not nearly as tasty to humans, they none the less serve as a key food source for local wildlife and important part of the underwater ecosystem.

A freshwater mussel begins its life after fertilization as a mere speck, being cast into the water column to drift in a larval form called glochidia. If these larvae come into contact with a suitable fish host, they attach themselves to gills or fins and ride along as an essentially harmless parasite. Once they reach a certain size, the now miniature mussel will release itself from the fish and settle into the substrate to grow further. The conditions that a young mussel will tolerate depend on the species. Some may need to find themselves in pristine flowing waters with loose sand or gravel to survive, while others can survive in still water with a silty bottom.



Photos: Corey Pelletier

Each species has subtle differences in morphology, including shape, color, patterning, and thickness. Their shells are generally dark, but older specimens often show heavy abrasion on the buried side that reveals lighter shades of brown or even white. A mussel has a left and right valve (shells), connected by a hinge and flanked by its "beak," or umbo. Often the hinge is aided by two types of "teeth." These teeth help align the valves together when closed. Lateral teeth appear as long ridges parallel to the hinge and pseudo-cardinal teeth resemble little knuckles near the beak. Both usually come in odd-even arrangements that nest together when closed. But their exact number, placement, or even absence is a vital clue to determining the species of mussel. As in the field, outward appearance may not be enough to make a positive identification.

Once mature, a mussel may move about to find a more favorable spot. We've seen mussels crawl along the streambed during surveys, pushing and pulling themselves along with the help of a muscular foot they can slip out of their shell. You'd never call them fast, but at roughly a snail's pace they'll leave enough of a trail in the sand to notice. After settling on a location, either isolated or in large

colonies, most mussels tend to burrow into the bottom and orient themselves vertically. They will then crack open their valves (the term for the two shell halves) and expose their gills to the flowing water to filter feed.

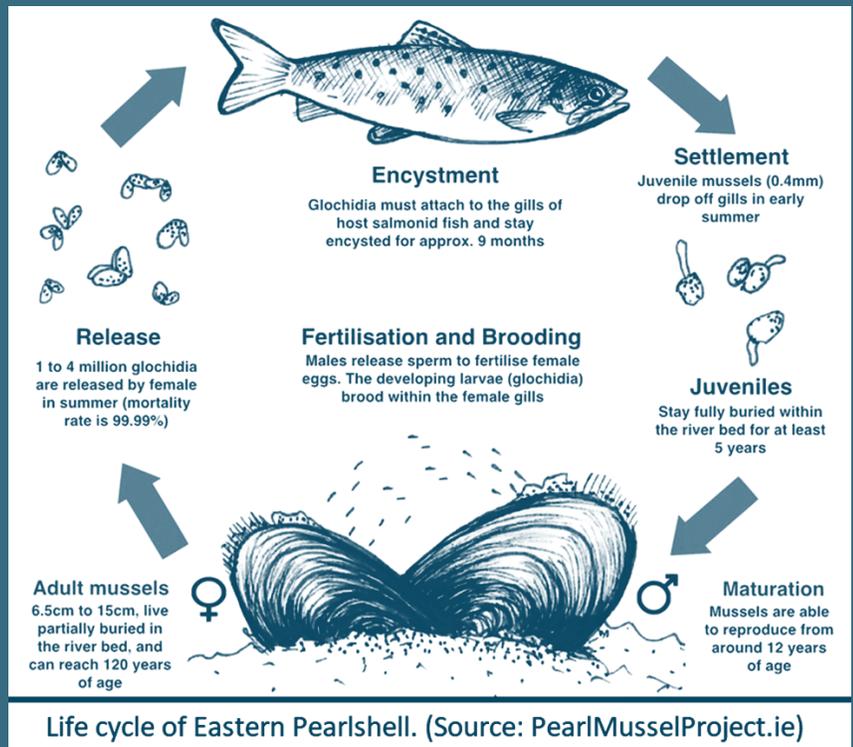
Here they demonstrate perhaps their most valuable ecological service: filtration. As a mussel pulls water through its gills and internal organs, it absorbs nutrients on which to feed. Many pollutants or harmful organisms will also be filtered out, either being stored in body tissue or expelled out in a harmless state. This feeding trait means freshwater mussels serve as an important indicator species. Their presence, or absence, can be a valuable clue as to the local water quality. Certain RI species, such as the Eastern Pearlshell, are especially sensitive

to water quality and have seen significant decline as their cold-water habitats degrade. This species, among others, are listed as a species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) in Rhode Island. This classification further highlights their importance to watersheds and a need for targeted recovery efforts.

Rhode Island has 8 total documented species, but populations have seen decline throughout the 20th century. Historically rich and diverse populations have dwindled due to the combined effects of pollution, habitat degradation, invasive species, and host species decline (such as river herring and trout). To better assess current population health and diversity, the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife has begun conducting mussel surveys. A small team of 2-3 researchers will wade sections of rivers and streams, visually searching the bottom for mussels with viewing boxes (called bathyscopes). When mussels are encountered, they are identified by species, measured for length and counted. With this data, biologists can track populations and species distributions in order to monitor for population decline and potential restoration opportunities.

So the next time you're wading or swimming in one of the state's rivers or ponds, keep an eye out for freshwater mussels. You may find a lone mollusk hidden amongst the rocks or come across beds thick enough so as to coat entire sections of the bottom. Try to tread lightly to protect living mussel colonies but feel free to examine empty shells left behind by predators. The Connecticut DEEP website even has a handy guide to freshwater mussels that conveniently includes all of our species.

For more information go to [www.dem.ri.gov](http://www.dem.ri.gov) or email [DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov](mailto:DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov)



Life cycle of Eastern Pearlshell. (Source: PearlMusselProject.ie)



# Shedding Light on Antlers

By: Gabby DeMeillon, Outreach Technical Assistant, Division of Fish & Wildlife

There is much more happening within the velvety confines of antlers than their simple appearance suggests. Every year, deer grow a set of antlers from spring through summer, transform them into bone and then cast them to the forest floor. Growing at a rate of almost an inch a day, this living tissue could hold the secret to rapid organ development in humans. Deer are the only mammals with the ability to re-grow an entire appendage, and they do this not only once, but every single year in an endless cycle of growth and loss.

White-tailed deer, Rhode Island's local species, have distinctive antlers. A pair of thick bases curve forward from the top of the head and sprout upward into individual tines, like branches from a trunk. Not all antlers are alike, with some appearing wide and palmate like in moose (*Alces sp.*) which have the largest antlers (weighing up to 40 lbs.) or are unbranched, like the pudu (*Pudu pudu*), which have the smallest antlers of any deer, at only about 2 to 3 inches long.

Many people use the terms “antler” and “horn” interchangeably, but their composition is quite different, despite their similar appearance. Horns are sported by members of the Bovine family (Bovidae), like sheep and bison, whereas antlers are found only in the deer family (Cervidae). Horns can be found on both sexes, but antlers are typically only grown by males, with the exception of the reindeer and caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*). The biggest distinction is that horns are made of keratin (like human hair and nails) with a bone core and are kept for life. Antlers are comprised of nerves, blood vessels, fibrous tissue, cartilage and bone and are replaced each year.

Male deer, called bucks, will develop antlers at about 10 months old. The antlers erupt from silver-dollar sized circles on the top of the head, called pedicles. This tissue is very unique and acts as the permanent base from which the antlers re-grow each year.

The pedicle is the most bizarre and intriguing part of the antler. If a portion is removed from the pedicle and transplanted onto another part of the deer, it will grow a “mini antler” in the new location. Scientists even grafted pedicle tissue onto the head of a mouse and created a “uni-mouse”, with an antler stub growing from its forehead. This crucial piece of tissue is the key to antler growth.

Longer daylight hours between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, along with a drop in hormones, trigger antler growth. Antlers lengthen from the branching tips as they grow, developing slowly in the first month but increasing rapidly in the following two months. Antler growth is achieved through intramembranous ossification around the trunk and endochondral ossification in the extending tines, two different forms of bone development.



Photo: Dean Birch



Photo: Danaher, USFWS



Photo: S. Riley



Photo: USFWS

The massive amount of nutrients needed for antler growth is almost equivalent to that of childbearing. Unable to consume enough food to support the rapid growth, a buck's body will rob nutrients from other places. This process, called cyclical reversible osteoporosis, typically targets non-weight bearing parts of the body, such as the ribs.

The size that a deer's antlers will grow depends on age, nutritional status and food availability. Typically, bucks will grow their largest antlers between 5 and 7 years, after which they will decrease in size. Of course, this is all dependent on habitat as well. Studies have shown that young or early successional landscapes, lead to healthier body conditions, in turn, producing larger antlers, while pine forests provide less nutritional value. Even an older buck will only produce spikes if resources are lacking.

During growth, antlers are soft and are comprised of a complex matrix of cartilage, nerves, arteries and blood vessels. The antlers appear fuzzy during this period, giving them their colloquial name, "velvet". If an antler were to be injured during this time, it would appear deformed or twisted, when fully formed.

When the daylight hours decrease, testosterone production increases, triggering the hardening, or mineralization, of the antlers. Minerals are deposited into the cartilage matrix by capillaries, turning the soft tissue into bone. Antlers harden from the base to the tip and after about a month, around late August, the mineralization is complete. Once hardened, an injury to an antler would appear broken, not bent.

These hardened antlers and testosterone boost coincide with the deer breeding season, called the "rut". Deer will rub their antlers on trees to leave scent, simultaneously removing the remaining outer velvet layer and revealing the new solid bone beneath. Bucks display their striking new set of antlers, called a rack, likely in hopes to impress females and use them as a weapon to fight off, or box, other males.



*Other wildlife will consume antler sheds as a source of calcium*

Antlers are cast, or shed, earlier in the north and later in the south, between late winter or early spring, when hormone levels drop after the rut. The time of shed depends on natural variance and nutrition. Though most bucks in an area will shed within a month of each other, individual bucks have their own unique antler cycle, most likely based on when they were born.

Just before the antler is ready to fall, the skin around the pedicle becomes shiny and swollen as the bone is re-absorbed by osteoclasts. The base of the antler becomes severely weakened and the antler breaks off almost immediately. Both antlers are typically cast within a day of each other. Once cast, the deer is left with a concave pedicle which rapidly fills with blood. Eventually the surface will scab over, become smooth and reform the bone of the pedicle that was lost.

Directly following the shed, deer begin re-growth. Within the pedicle new tines are being developed, tissue is growing, and the cycle begins once more. This amazing adaptation to re-grow an entire appendage yearly is unique within the Mammalian order and deer lay claim to the fastest growing organs in the animal kingdom. This bizarre and exceptional ability is still being studied in hopes to employ this rapid tissue growth for medical use.

There are a number of theories on how this strange adaptation came to be. It seems like a lot of effort to simply toss an entire appendage aside, but replacing antlers each year can be advantageous. Any breaks or damage to an antler will be made full and new the following year. Since



antlers are used to battle, injury is not uncommon. Another benefit of shedding antlers, is the ability for continued growth. Antlers only grow for a few months and then stop, if not replaced, deer would have yearling-sized antlers throughout their lives.

Looking for deer antler sheds is a rewarding pastime during the long winter months. To find an antler shed, it's most practical to look where deer spend most of their time. You are more likely to find a shed in places where deer bed down, travel and feed. Grassy fields, conifer thickets and sunny slopes, where deer rest, are great places to start. Carefully comb over the area, looking for the points, rather than the entire antler. Also keep an eye out on deer trails and around crop fields or other sources of food, such as trees bearing acorns and nuts. On your search, be mindful that deer are

often in their poorest body condition post-rut and need space and rest to recuperate for the next year.

Even though deer are plentiful throughout Rhode Island, it's unlikely to find antlers in copious amounts. Mice and other animals consume the bone as a source of calcium. So, if you find a sub-par shed, throw it back and know it will be much appreciated by some other creature.

Whether you value antlers for their impressive development, collect them as treasures or turn them into crafts, chandeliers or rings, there is no denying antlers are amazing and versatile organs. As much as we have learned about antlers, our knowledge barely scratches the velvet off of what they have to offer human-kind.

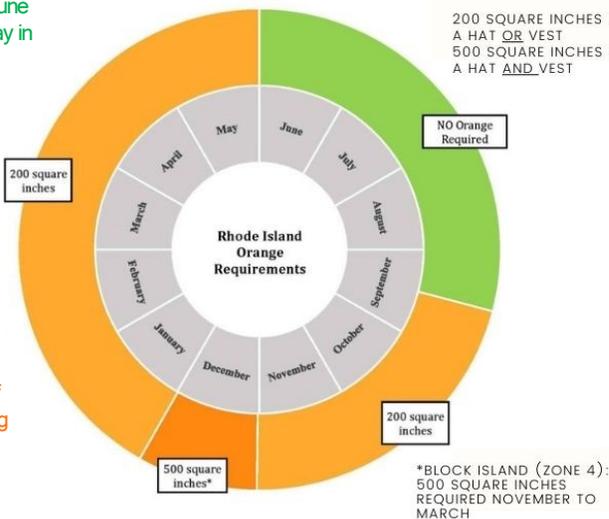


# FLUORESCENT ORANGE REQUIRED IN STATE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS DURING HUNTING SEASON

No orange required June to the second Saturday in September

200 square inches required the 2nd Saturday in September to the last day of February, and the 3rd Saturday in April to the last day in May

500 square inches of orange required during shotgun season



All users of state wildlife management areas and undeveloped state parks are required to wear at least 200 square inches of solid fluorescent orange during the hunting season.

It MUST be: solid, fluorescent (safety) orange, worn above the waist. This is to make you visible to others using the management area and to keep everyone safe.

For more detailed information visit: <http://www.eregulations.com>

\*Exceptions apply to some hunters, for more information, see the link above, or email [DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov](mailto:DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov)

For emergencies, contact the Environmental Police: 401-222-3070.



## *Trees for Trout* continued from page 1

Clearcutting removes trees and brush which otherwise filter water before reaching a stream. And the list goes on.

Streams and rivers in Rhode Island have suffered from such practices, leaving impacted and reduced habitat for the inhabiting fish. Human influences on river habitat and water quality in Rhode Island has negatively impacted wild brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) among other native fish species. We owe it to ourselves and the freshwater ecosystems that surround us to improve and mitigate these negative influences before it is too late.

That is exactly what the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and the Rhode Island Chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU) are doing. *Trees for Trout* is a program started by TU in 2018, in order to restore fish habitat in the flowing freshwaters of Rhode Island. This program asks volunteers in the community to simply drop off their holiday tree after the new year. The trees are stored outside until the following summer where they are strategically used to build “conifer revetments.”

A conifer revetment is built using several Christmas trees or conifers, to protect and armor stream banks. Grouping several trees together (typically 30-80 trees), they are held in place using wooden stakes and biodegradable twine. These revetments are installed along the banks of rivers and streams

extending out into the channel. The group of trees acts to slow the flow of water along the bank which causes sediment to be deposited within the revetment structure. Over time, the trees will fill in with sands and organic materials until they become filled, forming a new section of riverbank.

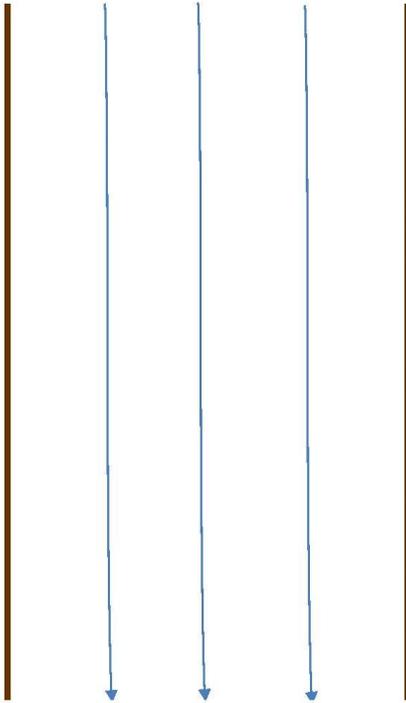
You may ask how this is supposed to help. In impaired stretches of river, channels often become wider than they should be and are absent of necessary habitat to support aquatic life. In these areas, banks are often eroded which further widens river channels. When banks erode, sediment is carried away by flows which fill in pools downstream. Conifer revetments act to stabilize eroding banks by slowing the flow of water and accumulating sediments. In excessively wide stream channels, during periods of low water, depth is usually shallow and consistent across a river channel, which leaves little habitat for fish. Modification is often needed to restore the natural processes of a river that has been impaired. Conifer revetments help to narrow the river channel and confine the flow so that during low flows, there is deeper water, thereby creating more habitat for fish.

Conifer revetments mimic natural habitat features in a river. In Rhode Island, much of the physical habitat that provides cover for fish is from trees falling into the river channel. In some cases, trees are removed or trimmed to

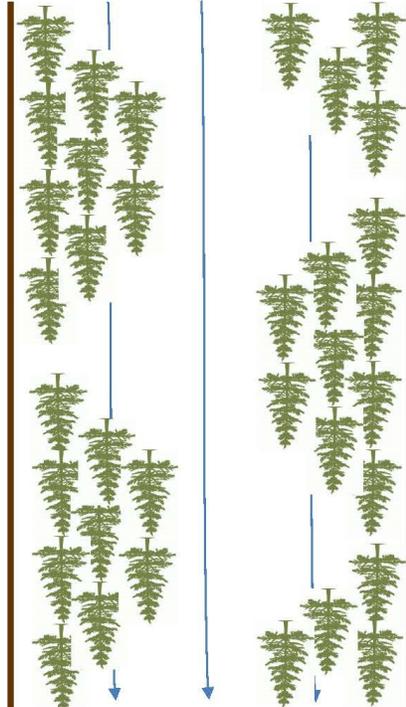


*DEM staff admiring the completion of a new conifer revetment on the Wood River*

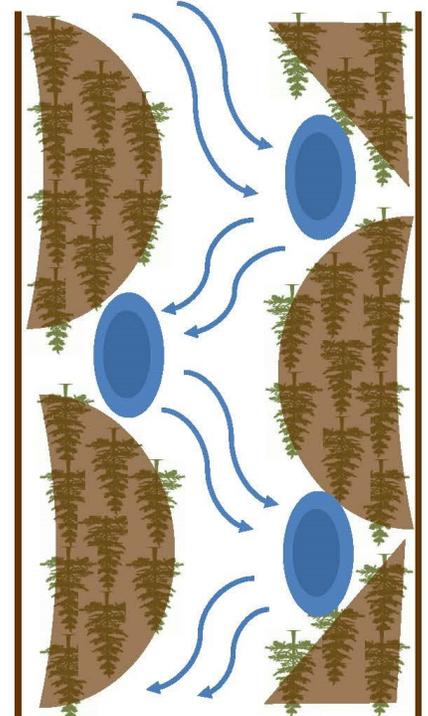
# HOW A CONIFER REVETMENT IMPROVES THE HEALTH OF A RIVER



DUE TO INCREASED FLOODING AND MORE SEVERE STORMS, LOCAL RIVERS HAVE SEEN INCREASED EROSION CREATING OVER-WIDE CHANNELS AND SLOW, SHALLOW FLOWS – DEGRADED HABITAT FOR TROUT AND OTHER AQUATIC LIFE. WHERE THE RIVER WAS ONCE 15-20 FEET WIDE AND 2-3 FEET DEEP, IT IS NOW 40-FOOT WIDE AND LESS THAN A FOOT DEEP



A CONIFER REVETMENT IS INSTALLED BY ANCHORING PINE TREES INTO THE ERODED RIVER CHANNEL IN CRESCENT PATTERNS. THICK BRANCHES SLOW THE CURRENT ALONG THE BANK AND TRAP AND COLLECT SEDIMENT AND DEBRIS. EVENTUALLY, THIS SEDIMENT BUILDS UP TO FORM NEW BANKS.



THE TREES COLLECT SEDIMENT AND DEBRIS, AND FORM A NEW CHANNEL THAT IS FASTER, DEEPER AND COLDER. THE RIVER HOLDS MORE BENDS, AND DEVELOPS BETTER HABITAT. THIS NEW CHANNEL IS ALSO MORE RESILIENT TO FLOODING AND IMPROVES THE RIVER'S ABILITY TO ACCESS THE FLOODPLAIN.

provide passage for paddle sports. By constructing these features with conifers, we can restore habitat and re-engage the natural processes of the river. One of the most beneficial aspects of *Trees for Trout* is that all the work can be completed with manual labor and without the use of machinery. Many river and habitat restoration projects require extensive engineering plans and restoration to fix the impacts from construction. This project focuses on a minimally invasive procedure that can provide numerous benefits to the health of the river and local fish species.

*Trees for Trout* provides a great opportunity for the public to learn about river health, water quality and habitat for aquatic species. If you have a Christmas tree that you are willing to drop off after the holidays, I welcome you to contribute and come learn more about the project. Please keep in mind that habitat improvement work must be left to the professionals. A considerable amount of work goes into deciding where and how to construct these features, and should not be done by individuals. Also, permitting is legally required to make modifications to any waterway



under the Freshwater Wetlands Act. Follow the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife Outdoor Education page on Facebook to stay informed with project updates and how you can contribute.

# Rhody Critter Kits Available Now

Over the past year, the RIDEM's Wildlife Outreach staff have been developing a series of educational resources for K-8 educators, organized thematically into learning kits. "Rhody Critter Kits" contain lesson plans, activities, videos, hands-on learning materials, and other resources curated by Wildlife Outreach staff, with special emphasis on Rhode Island's wildlife species, conservation work, and management practices. A total of five kits have been developed, three of which are now available for educators. Materials were developed and selected to correlate to the Next Generation Science Standards. Kit topics include bats, birds, reptiles and amphibians, wildlife habitat, and conservation through the careful management of wildlife. As a precaution to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Wildlife Outreach Program will not be lending out the hands-on kit containers for the 2020-21 school year, but all other materials will be accessible at [dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach](http://dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach).

The kits have been designed to connect students to the wildlife resources right in their own backyards and communities, as well as spread awareness about wildlife conservation work in the state. "We included video interviews with our biologists and fun virtual field trips to give kids a behind-the-scenes look at conservation work in action," said Gannon, DFW's Wildlife Outreach Coordinator. "We've also included resources and suggestions on how teachers and students can get involved and help wildlife right in their own schoolyards, backyards, and communities. Whether it's submitting an observation of a frog through the RIDEM HerpObserver app or planting

native plants in your school garden, there's lots of ways educators can create direct connections to our wildlife and contribute to conservation."

This winter, Wildlife Outreach staff will be presenting free educator training workshops for each kit, via Zoom. Although they will initially be virtual, the workshops are intended to support educators by providing in-depth background information, interactive learning experiences, the opportunity to ask questions, and to build community. To register for these workshops, visit [dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach](http://dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach).

These resources aren't just for classroom teachers. We encourage informal educators, homeschooling families, Scout groups, libraries, or anyone who is interested in Rhode Island's wildlife to check them out.

For more information on Rhode Island's wildlife, visit <http://www.dem.ri.gov/>. Follow the Division of Fish and Wildlife on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/RIfishwildlife](https://www.facebook.com/RIfishwildlife) and Instagram (@RI.FishandWildlife) for timely updates.





## Introducing InFAWmation Nation!

The Division of FISH AND WILDLIFE's new podcast!

Covering different topics each month, this podcast is a great way to listen and learn about what goes on from, Aquatic Education programs and Hunter Education to Wildlife outreach events and some behind the scenes moments of our biologists and enforcement officers!

Meet your hosts! Scott Travers, Maddie Proulx and Dana Kopec as they tell us all about the Hunter Education Program in Rhode Island. This podcast is perfect for new hunters out there as well as those who just need something to listen to with their morning coffee!

LISTEN HERE:

[https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/infawmationnation/episodes/2020-08-27T08\\_28\\_48-07\\_00](https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/infawmationnation/episodes/2020-08-27T08_28_48-07_00)

or check it out on YouTube!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VI8c1jS38FQ>

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A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION FROM THE  
RI DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT  
DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE



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