

ISSUE 1 | NOVEMBER 2018

WILD RHODE ISLAND EXPLORER

IN THIS EDITION...

**FIND OUT WHAT
WILD ANIMALS
EAT IN THE FALL**

**LEARN HOW FIRE
CAN SOMETIMES BE
GOOD FOR A FOREST**

**MEET THE
WILD
TURKEY!**



DEM
RHODE ISLAND



IN THIS EDITION

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The Wild Rhode Island Explorer
Fall 2018

RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife
277 Great Neck Road, West Kingston, RI 02892

Writer/Editor: Mary Grande, Wildlife Outreach Coordinator
Design: Emily Lynch, DEM Public Affairs
Photos by Mike Stultz, DEM Photographer

Cover photo: Paul Topham
Contributors: Tanner Steeves, Dylan Ferreira, Jim Lee

Big River Management Area



HABITAT CHAT

What do wild animals eat in the fall?



Winterberry. Photo: M. Grande

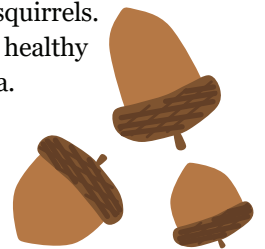
It's fall here in Rhode Island, and things are changing! Leaves are changing from green to yellow, orange, and red. The weather is getting chilly. And, animals are on the move! Many of our birds are beginning their yearly journey south. **Migration** is when an animal moves from one place to another during the change of seasons. Usually, animals migrate to find better food sources. For example, a bird that eats insects needs to migrate south for the winter. It would have a tough time finding bugs in the middle of January here in Rhode Island!

Fall is a feeding frenzy for all types of animals. Critters that migrate need to build up their strength for their long journey. Animals that stay here for the winter need to fatten up to survive the cold season when there is little to eat.

In November, humans might be thinking about turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, and other special foods our families like to make for Thanksgiving. Wild animals have a very different Thanksgiving menu! Some important fall foods for wildlife include acorns, berries, and seeds. Predators like to eat animals that rely on those acorns, berries, and seeds.

Mast is what we call fall and winter wildlife food. Our biologists work to create and care for habitat that produces good mast crops. Oak forests produce lots of acorns for deer, wild turkeys, and squirrels. **Shrublands** provide berries and seeds for birds and small mammals. Predators benefit from healthy prey populations. A **population** is the number of animals of a certain species living in an area.

As you can see, food is a very important part of healthy wildlife habitat. What wild eating habits have you observed this fall?



OUR WILD NEIGHBORS!

Wild Turkey

Scientific name: *Meleagris gallopavo*

Range: Wild turkeys are found in 49 states, southern Canada, and parts of Mexico.

Size: Wild turkeys can weigh between 5 and 24 pounds, and their wingspan (the length between the tip of one wing to the tip of the other wing) is about 4 feet wide. Wild turkeys can grow to almost 4 feet tall!

Habitat: In New England, wild turkeys like forests with oak, hickory, beech, cherry and ash trees. They are very good at living near humans. You can often see them in fields, neighborhoods, and even parts of Providence!

Predators: Wild turkeys are eaten by coyotes, bobcats, raccoons, great horned owls, and people. Skunks, gray foxes, raccoons, black rat snakes, other birds, and rodents will eat turkey eggs.

Food: Turkey food changes with the seasons. In fall and winter, turkeys search the forest floor for acorns, beech nuts, and hickory nuts. They also like wild cherries and seeds. When there is deep snow, they will eat tree buds and moss. In spring and summer, they look for grass seeds, and will also eat snails, salamanders, and insects.

Breeding: Female turkeys are called **hens**. They scratch a shallow hole in the ground to use as a nest. Hens hide their nests at the base of a tree, under fallen branches, or under some bushes. Hens can lay between 4 and 17 eggs!

DID YOU KNOW?

Male wild turkeys are called **toms**. Toms “gobble” in the spring to impress the hens. Baby turkeys are called **poults**. Just one day after hatching, they are ready to follow their mother around the forest. Mother hens with poults will stick together and travel in groups.

Photo: P. Topham





OUT IN THE FIELD

How Burning Forests Can Help Wildlife

By Mary Grande, Wildlife Outreach Coordinator



DEM Fish & Wildlife Biologist
Tanner Steeves

This fall, we visited the Nicholas Farm Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Coventry, Rhode Island. A **management area** is a large piece of land that has been protected for wildlife habitat, hunting, and fishing. People also visit management areas to hike, birdwatch, and walk their dogs. The Division of Fish and Wildlife doesn't just leave the habitat alone forever. We work to change the habitat to help wildlife. We also take actions to keep a habitat the way it is. It takes a lot of time outdoors, trimming, mowing, planting, and sometimes burning!

Why would we want to burn down a part of a forest? To answer that question, I took a walk with our habitat biologist, Tanner Steeves.

Mary: Tanner, can you tell our readers where we are standing?

Tanner: We are standing in a pitch pine-oak forest. We have changed the forest here by removing some trees. After that, we started a controlled fire to complete what is known as a **prescribed burn**.

Mary: How did you set the forest fire? Was it dangerous?

Tanner: The fire is set using **drip torches**, which are handheld cans filled with gas that drop small flames onto the ground. The natural **fuels** (grass and sticks) burn, and the fire spreads slowly across the ground. Safety is very important, a lot of planning happens before a fire and everyone involved has special training. During the fire, as long as everyone pays attention and works together, there is no immediate danger.

Mary: Why did you pick this spot to burn?

Tanner: This area is a type of habitat known as a **barren** that was burned by wildfires in the past. These sites have dry sandy soils. That soil grows a unique collection of plants. These plants have



The controlled burn in action

adapted to survive fire events. However, there hadn't been a fire here since the 1950s, and the plant community was beginning to change in a way that was not good for wildlife. White pine was becoming the most common tree, and there were no shorter plants or bushes growing beneath the trees. We call this type of plant growth **understory**. The understory is important habitat for lots of animals. This site needs periodic a fire every so often to maintain its unique collection of plants and wildlife.

Mary: What types of plants do you expect to grow here after the fire?

Tanner: Pitch pine, bear oak, chestnut oak, blueberry, switchgrass, and many others.

Mary: Why are pitch pine barrens so important for wildlife?

Tanner: Barrens create unique forest structure like a somewhat **open canopy** (a forest with a few tall trees) and thick shrub and **sapling** growth at ground level. We call this type of habitat "**early successional habitat**." Many species such as New England cottontail, whippoorwill, and American woodcock use these dense **thickets** for nesting sites and protection from predators. Also, several species of moths and butterflies rely completely on plants found only in barren habitats.

Mary: What is your favorite thing about being a habitat biologist?

Tanner: I love to work hands-on with the land. It is very satisfying to know that the habitat changes I cause can create almost immediate and positive results for wildlife.

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

Tanner: My favorite Rhode Island wild animal is the eastern box turtle!!



Above: the burn crew (photo: T. Steeves);
Below: new growth sprouts
from a scrub oak



THE CRITTER CAM

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. Lots of people use trail cameras for many reasons. Wildlife biologists use camera “traps” to collect information about animal populations. Hunters use them to scout for the best place to hunt deer or turkey. Some people set them up just for fun in their backyards. Even though trail cameras are used for many purposes, one thing is certain — they capture some cool photos!



Fall is the white-tailed deer breeding season, also called the rut. During the rut, male deer, like this guy, will travel far and wide to find a mate. (Photo: DFW)

CHECK OUT SOME FALL PHOTOS CAPTURED FROM AROUND RHODE ISLAND!



These turkeys look very wary of our camera! Turkeys are always on the lookout for predators, including turkey hunters. This year's fall archery turkey season ran from October 1 to 14. (Photo: DFW)



One of our wildlife biologists was hoping to scout out some deer on his hunting trail cam...He was surprised to find photos of a red-tailed hawk instead! (Photo: D. Ferreira)

**CAPTION
CONTEST!**

We'll reveal the winning caption in our next issue!
Submit your caption by December 10th at
<http://bit.ly/FWcaption-fall18>
or send an email to mary.grande@dem.ri.gov.



Photo: Jim Lee



CREATIVE CORNER

Do you like to draw or take photos of wildlife?
Do you like to write stories and poems about
what you see in nature?

**We would love to include them
here in the Creative Corner!**

In each issue of The Wild Rhode Island Explorer, there will be a theme for the Creative Corner. Your artwork and writing could be featured right here!

The theme for our winter issue is:
Animal tracks in the snow

If you would like to share your creative work, send it to us at www.bit.ly/FWcreative-F18
OR email mary.grande@dem.ri.gov OR you can mail it. There's a lot of options!

RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife
ATTN: Mary Grande
277 Great Neck Road
West Kingston, RI 02892



WILD QUEST!

PITCH PINE BARREN WORD HUNT

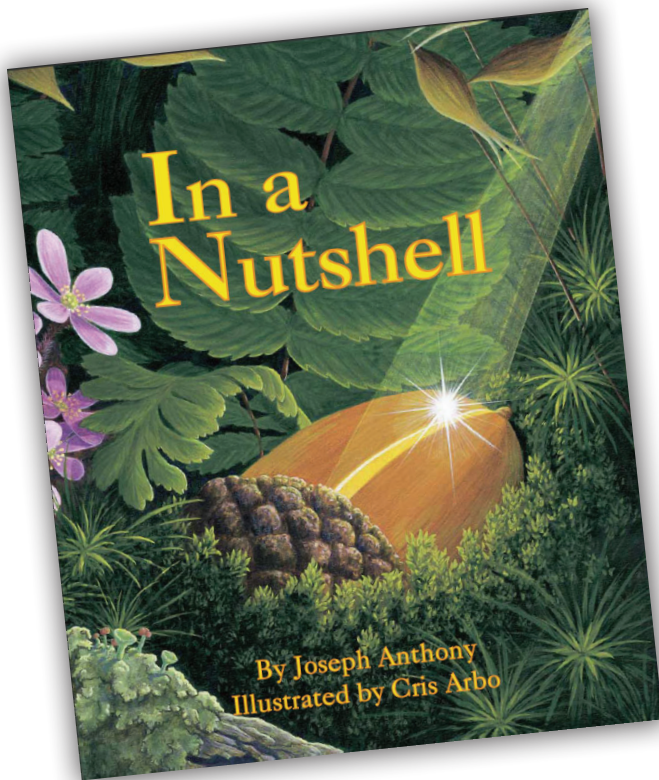
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Pitch Pine
Burn
Habitat
Barren

Understory
Canopy
Thicket
Woodcock

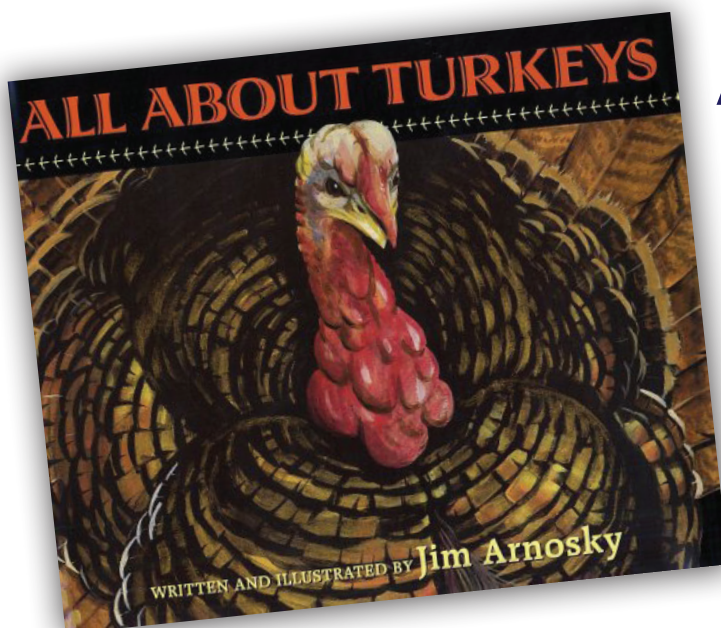
Whippoorwill
Box Turtle
Scrub Oak

BOOK NOOK



In a Nutshell by Joseph Anthony, illustrated by Chris Arbo

In this book, you'll learn about how an oak tree grows from an acorn, and its important job in the forest.



All About Turkeys by Jim Arnosky

This book will give you all you need to know about a wild turkey's life, habitat, and behavior.

Questions?

Contact Mary Grande
DEM FISH & WILDLIFE
mary.grande@dem.ri.gov
401-782-3700

Learn more at
dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach