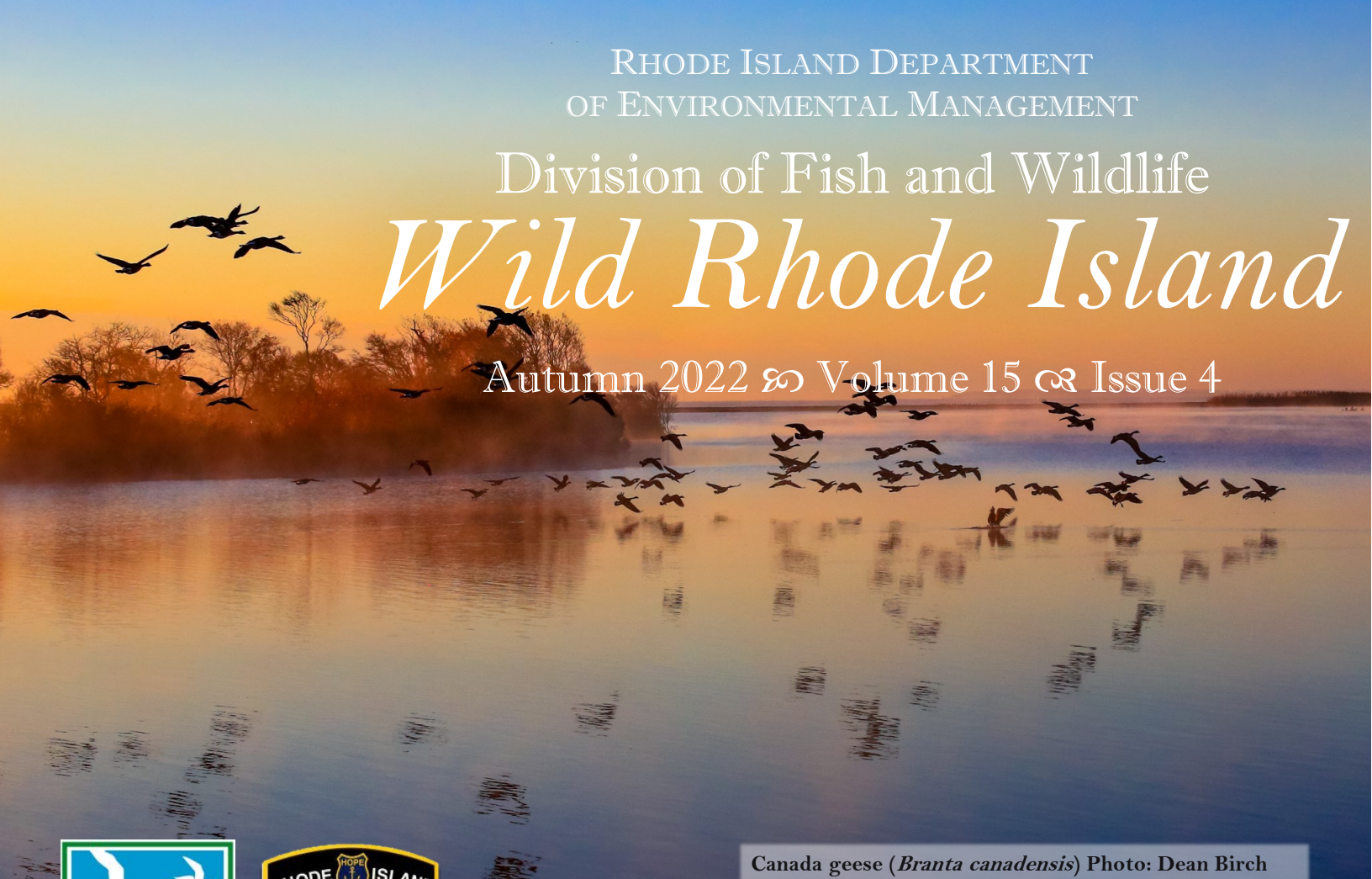
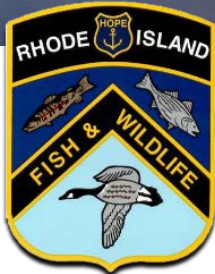


Wild Rhode Island

Autumn 2022 ∞ Volume 15 ∞ Issue 4



Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) Photo: Dean Birch



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

WOODY HILL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA.....	3
MONITORING WINTER FLOUNDER IN RI.....	8
NEW HUNTING, FISHING & BOATING LICENSING WEBSITE.....	11
2022-23 HUNTING REGULATIONS GUIDE.....	12



Hound & Harvest: Lessons Learned Alongside a Hunting Dog

By Sarah Riley, Chief Implementation Aide, DFW

It was my very first pheasant hunt and I found myself standing in a lonely corn field in Dundee, Illinois, a smallish town northwest of Chicago. I had flown out to participate in the *Conservation Leaders of Tomorrow* program: a multi-day classroom and field instructional course in which environmental professionals learn about the history and role of hunting and trapping in wildlife conservation and management.

I stood with one other newbie, listening closely to our instructors as they covered the safety procedures one last time. As I listened, I cradled the shotgun in my arms and tried to calm the nervous excitement bedded down in the pit of my stomach.

Photo Left: Brandy, Tyler Fournier. Photo by: Bill Desmo

Continued on page 4

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.



George Washington Wildlife Management Area: Photo: M. Stultz



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This Issue Features:

HOUND & HARVEST: LESSONS AND LEGACY OF THE HUNTING DOG1

A LOOK INTO WHAT IT'S LIKE HUNTING WITH CANINE COMPANIONS AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A HUNTING DOG.



WOODY HILL MANAGEMENT AREA.....3

LEARN ABOUT THIS MANAGEMENT AREA AND ALL THAT IT HAS TO OFFER FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION.



RHODE ISLAND OUTDOORS WEBSITE.....11

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CHECK OUT THE LATEST ISSUE OF WILD RHODE ISLAND EXPLORER!

Featured State Land:

Woody Hill Wildlife Management Area

By: John Veale, Habitat Biologist, DFW

If you aren't familiar with Woody Hill Management Area, you're not alone. This 723-acre property is nestled in Westerly just minutes from Misquamicut Beach, Burlingame and other south shore highlights, but largely goes under the radar as a hidden gem. Isolated from the hustle and bustle of Westerly south of Rt 1, this property boasts opportunities for hunting, trapping, fishing, hiking and wildlife viewing in upland forest habitats and wetland areas.

The property was acquired by the State of Rhode Island in 1955 from the U.S. Forest Service. Prior to this, the Forest Service had acquired the property from several different landowners through the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 that, among other accomplishments, was used to purchase lands from private landowners that were no longer suitable for farming. Access to the property is on Fallon Trail, at the end of Woody Hill Rd on the southern side of the property where a parking area and trailhead exist. Several other trailheads enter the property through adjacent parcels surrounding the management area, however these lack dedicated parking areas.

The landscape of Woody Hill is similar to others along the terminal side of the glacial moraine that are so characteristic of southern Rhode Island. Gently rolling, rocky topography flows from dry ridgetops with oak overstory and blueberry/huckleberry understory, to intermittently wet stream bottoms characterized by moist soils, red maple, pepperbush and skunk cabbage. The sharp-eyed visitor will notice several large stands of a paradox of the "evergreen" tree world – a species of deciduous, coniferous tree. Larch, also known as tamarac, are related to other pines but unlike any of their cousins, are the only coniferous tree species on our landscape that drops its needles each fall and regrows them in spring.

A 20-acre impoundment lies at the heart of the management area and was the site for a cooperative project



with Ducks Unlimited in 2017. The goal of the project was to restore function to the wetland by replacing a failing water control structure with a new one that now allows biologists to manage water levels to encourage waterfowl breeding and migration stopover. By drawing down the water in spring, areas of shallower water can be drained to expose mudflats and allow emergent wetland vegetation to sprout and grow, creating cover and nesting habitat. The following fall, water is raised back up, flooding those areas of emergent vegetation to provide feeding areas and additional open water for migrating waterfowl. Cooperative projects like this one have been very successful at improving habitat value to wildlife while simultaneously creating more and higher quality hunting opportunities.

Woody Hill is managed as a public hunting area, and game species within its boundaries aren't limited to waterfowl. White-tailed deer, wild turkey, coyote and several species of small game all occur on the property, providing great hunting opportunities in the upland portions of the property, as well as wetland edges. In addition to the waterfowl in the impoundment, an ample population of beaver is present and anyone wishing to find an "off the beaten path" trapping site would do well to place a few sets here.



Hound & Harvest continued from page 1

Next, it was our hunting guide's turn, and as he gave instructions, two bird dogs busily sniffed and zig-zagged around his legs, clearly thrilled to be at work that day. "When they get on the scent of a bird, they'll get 'birdy,' you'll notice that they get more focused – that's when you know to get ready." Aware of the guide's mention of them, and eager to get going, the two dogs looked up at him expectantly, waiting for their cue.

Once the guide had finished his instructions, he signaled to the dogs and in an instant, they were on mark and ready to begin. I walked elbow to elbow with my instructor, the other participant and her instructor some yards away to our left. The guide followed behind whistling commands to the dogs, who forged ahead, moving hastily yet methodically through the dried corn stalks. As I watched them work, I became fascinated by how well-trained they

were, and by the seemingly metaphysical connection they had with the hunting guide.

We walked on for some minutes, and I welcomed the opportunity to be outdoors on a day which would have otherwise been spent in front of a computer. Despite the overcast sky and chilly October breeze, it was a pleasant afternoon, and took a moment to admire the peaceful vastness of the fields around me. Suddenly, I felt a nudge from my instructor and my attention snapped back to the hunt. "Look," she whispered, pointing at the dog, "he's getting birdy."

He was indeed acting differently – his frantic zig-zagging had seized, and he was now fixated on the path directly ahead of him. His once wildly-wagging tail was now taunt, trembling slightly. There was a bird ahead of us. We couldn't see it yet, but he knew it was there.



Photo: Danny Mallette

“Get ready now—” but before she could finish the dog took off, crashing through the stalks and barking excitedly. Without warning three pheasants flushed high and sailed toward the tree line to the south. I was so startled I barely noticed that my instructor was still calmly walking me through the steps, “make sure to aim carefully, there should only be sky behind the line of the shot. Again, only take the safety off right before you’re ready to shoot...” But by then the birds were too far off and we both knew it. “That’s ok!” she chirped, “you had good control and posture. When you’re ready, we’ll try shooting.”

The dogs circled back, panting hard. Their bright eyes and lolling tongues made it look like they were smiling. They looked back and forth between us as if to ask us how we did. “Sorry buddy, no such luck this time” I said apologetically, and thought “you did your job so well! Next time, I’ll do mine...”

But the hardworking, ever-diligent hunting dogs were not dismayed. With another signal from the guide, they simply turned around and resumed their work, noses to the ground. We followed slowly behind.

I think back on that experience and still find myself awestruck by the expertise of both the dogs and their trainer. I wondered what it takes to go from the chaotic lawlessness of a puppy to the focused discipline that is the hunting dog. What does it take from a trainer to have that level of consistency and determination? Are there individual dogs that take to training more readily than others? Which breeds lend themselves best to which types of hunting? What are the joys, and (I’m sure) frustrations, of hunting with dogs? I decided to learn more.

Through talking to some of the DFW staff who have experience hunting with dogs, I found that the most commonly used in Rhode Island are “bird dogs” who assist hunters harvesting waterfowl like ducks and geese, and upland birds like pheasant and woodcock. Generally,



retrievers will watch and wait until the hunter harvests a bird, and will then go out, retrieve it and bring it back to the hunter. This is important when waterfowl hunting, as the dogs will sometimes need to swim out to retrieve the bird. Breeds such as Labrador retrievers, Golden Retrievers and American Water Spaniels are well suited to the task and are some of the most popularly used when waterfowl hunting. Upland gamebird dogs can include pointers or flushers, and breeds like the German Wirehaired Pointer and Cocker Spaniel assist by pointing out birds hidden in the underbrush, or flush them out of the vegetation and into the air for the hunter.

Some Rhode Island hunters use dogs to help find small game while hunting, like rabbits and raccoons; typically, beagles are used for rabbit hunting and are still considered the gold standard by many rabbit hunters. In other parts of the country, where it is allowed, hunters sometimes use dogs to assist with hunting deer, bear, and bobcats. However, in Rhode Island deer hunting with dogs is prohibited, and there is currently no season in the State for bear or bobcat.

There is no hard and fast rule to the perfect hunting dog, however, and many of these breeds have specialized skills which lend them better to one type of hunting or another, but often they can be trained as needed.

Dan Lehman, DFW's new Hunter Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation ("R3") Specialist, has been working with hunting dogs most of his life. "Growing up," he says, "my father had several Labradors that he trained for hunting waterfowl and upland game. When I was 18, I got my first Labrador puppy, which I trained for waterfowl and upland game hunting. I have trained several other Labradors since then." During his career as a California Game Warden, he trained a Labrador to find not only waterfowl and upland game but also to find illegally harvested fish and game during law enforcement searches.

Over the years, Dan has gained valuable insight into best practices while training by working with retrievers, pointers and small game dogs like Jack Russell terriers. "The most challenging thing while working with a young dog is to know when to end the training session. A young dog has a short attention span and will lose focus if the training session goes too long. There is a famous training book called *The Ten-Minute Retriever* (John and Amy Dahl, 2001) that explains that a young dog's attention span is short, and the authors suggest that daily training session should only last about ten minutes. I have used this method and the book to help train several dogs. I have also learned that screaming and yelling at the dog does not work at all. Screaming at a dog only makes the dog excited and you end up with a sore throat. Using a calm, strong voice is most effective when giving verbal commands to a dog."

However, not all hunting dogs get a formal training, like they would for a hunting guide or game warden, often they are the family dog who gets its start by going along for the ride, and learning as they go.

"I wouldn't consider what we do "formal training" Jenny laughs. I'm sitting down with the Division's Waterfowl Biologist to learn about her personal experience hunting pheasants with her golden retriever, Diesel.

"We had a female that had been hunting with us for years and when we got him as a puppy, we started taking him

along to sort of learn from her. I've been fortunate that our hunting dogs have picked up on it on their own, or have learned from each other."

As she spoke about her experiences, it became clear that although this informal style has the benefit of allowing a hunter and dog to learn alongside one another while becoming a better team, it also takes a lot more time and patience.

"Diesel is now ten years old, and we've probably been hunting with him for at least eight of those ten years. For him, being out there looking for pheasants is his favorite thing to do, but he can get frustrated if for most of the hunt he doesn't pick up on the scent of a bird. He can definitely lose interest. We didn't get a lot of birds those first years."

Like me, Jenny enjoys seeing them get to work, "I love watching a dog do what it does best. When they're hunting, they're in their element and it's amazing to see."

When asked what she thought her dog's favorite part of hunting was, she smiled and said, "I'm not sure if its rolling in a mud puddle or finding a bird. It could go either way depending on the day."

I was intrigued by the idea that a dog could pick up on the specialized skills involved in hunting, simply by watching another dog, but Jenny explained it's not that easy.

"Diesel will point the birds, flush them, and find them once they're on the ground, but he won't bring them back to us, which is really inconvenient when the bird lands in a thicket. He did once, but it was because we were hunting with a dog that did bring birds back. I think he got a little jealous and just wanted us to know he could do it too – if he wanted to."

After speaking with Jenny, I had a better understanding of the joy that dog and hunter share when they head out on their early morning trips, and that like a hunter, the dog has its particular skills, abilities and preferences. In the same way that Jenny learned to hunt from her father and brother,

Diesel also learned the ropes from the family. It is a reminder of how important family tradition can be to passing down these skills and knowledge to future generations, and having mentors to pass along best practices, skills and knowledge to future hunters (and hunting dogs!)

Back in Dundee, Illinois, the hour was getting late on the one and only day of the pheasant hunt. Over the past couple hours, we had missed several birds but the dogs, mentors and guide were the epitome of patience as we slowly made our way across the fields. It had been quiet for quite a while, and I began to accept that I might not harvest anything that day, but my determination wouldn't allow me to lose all hope. Again, the cheerful padding around of the dogs and encouragement from our mentors reminded me that this is the act of hunting, no harvest is ever a promise.

As suddenly as before, the dog in front of me got birdy, but this time I was ready. Once more, the dog leapt forward and gave a bark, flushing a male pheasant high up into the sky. I took a deep breath, focused, aimed, and - success!! With the help of the dogs and guide, I was able to find and retrieve my quarry. Later that night, our mentors showed us how to process the bird and prepare the meat. It's not the easiest way to harvest a meal - but it is by far one of the most rewarding. As we loaded back into the truck at the end of a long day, I couldn't tell you who was more tired and pleased with their day afield - me or the dogs. As the old saying goes, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life."

In the future, the RI Division of Fish & Wildlife's Outdoor Education Team would like to hold a class on hunting dog techniques for new and returning hunters, but for now those subjects are covered in some of the other classes, such as Introduction to Waterfowl Hunting and Introduction to Upland Gamebird Hunting. For more information about these classes, go to <https://dem.ri.gov/natural-resources-bureau/fish-wildlife/outreach-education/hunter-education> or call 401-539-0019. These courses are free and open to the public, but registration is required, so make sure to sign up while spaces are still available!



Photo: Desmos Photos



Photo: Dany Mallette

Winter Flounder Monitoring and Management in RI

By: Rich Balouskus, Principal Marine Biologist, RIDEM Division of Marine Fisheries



About The Species

A flatfish species once abundant throughout southern New England, the winter flounder population has markedly declined since the 1980s to its lowest biomass levels on record. A 2020 assessment of the Southern New England stock revealed that the stock is overfished but overfishing is not occurring, and the spawning stock biomass was at only 32% of the target. This means the number of adults is lower than needed to maintain a sustainable population even though fishing levels are low. While fishing mortality has been attributed to initiating these declines, the southern New England population has not recovered even with significant reductions in commercial and recreational harvest. Though stock-wide reductions in fishing mortality were implemented, deterioration of local subpopulations persisted. Therefore, additional efforts tailored to specific estuarine spawning habitats were needed. Within Narragansett Bay, the RI Division of Marine Fisheries implemented multiple measures intended to reduce fishing mortality and improve flounder survivorship through the first year of life, including prohibiting commercial harvest, gear restrictions during spawning season, and spatially restricting bottom trawling. These efforts were needed because the life history,

particularly spawning site fidelity, of winter flounder makes it vulnerable to localized depletion.

Some adult winter flounder remain in shallow coastal waters year-round while others return to estuaries from offshore to spawn in the winter months (December – April). Winter flounder enter Narragansett Bay and the south shore coastal pond systems in RI to spawn in the early part of winter (November) and engage in spawning activity from roughly January through April annually. Spawning and egg deposition takes place predominantly on sandy bottoms and algal accumulations. Winter flounder eggs are non-buoyant and clump together on these substrates. Survey data indicate that peak-spawning activity takes place during the month of February, however this appears to vary annually in relation to average water temperatures.

Fyke Net Survey

Since 1999 the RI Division of Marine Fisheries staff have been monitoring the population of spawning adult winter flounder in the coastal ponds of RI using a type of fixed gear called a fyke net. Fyke netting is a passive fishing method that was commonly used in commercial fishing. However, in



this case fyke nets serve as an excellent tool for biological fishery sampling to assess fish populations that utilize shallow water habitats. Fyke nets have been used to catch fish for hundreds of years; originally used in Finland to harvest herring, whitefish, and salmon. The net is set with a stake that is driven close to shore at low tide which is attached to a long leader, similar to the coastal fish traps encountered throughout the RI shoreline but on a much smaller scale. The leader runs perpendicular to shore and is connected to the main body of the net which is comprised of a series of parlors terminating in a codend. Typically, where the leader meets the opening of the net there are two smaller wings splayed out in a “V” and spread apart with either a bar or stakes. A fish swimming along the shoreline will encounter the leader and be directed into the net with a small likelihood of escape. One benefit of using a fyke net to sample fish is that the gear does not result in high mortality, typically the fish are returned to the water unharmed after information is collected on size, sex, and spawning stage.

The focus of this study has been in Point Judith Pond, Potter Pond, and Ninigret Pond, in Washington County, RI. Nets are tended every three to seven days depending on the size of the catch and weather conditions. Fish caught in the survey are counted, measured, sexed, and their spawning stage determined (see Table 2). When possible, healthy flounder are tagged with Peterson disc tags and returned to the water. There is a reward of a hat for fishermen who give information on location of catch and the size of the tagged fish. Water quality parameters including temperature, salinity, and dissolved oxygen are also recorded. Abundance is measured using a relative index based on catch per unit effort, in this case net hauls.

Tagging study recapture data has shown that winter flounder display a strong tendency to return to natal

Table 1: Definitions of Important Terms

Fishing Mortality	The rate at which fish in a stock die because of fishing (ASMFC 2009).
Natural Mortality	The rate at which fish die from all causes other than harvest (ASMFC 2009).
Spawning Stock Biomass	The total weight of the mature females within a stock of fish; frequently used instead of total biomass as a better measure of the ability of a stock to

areas to spawn. On multiple occasions, tagged fish have been caught in the same exact location the following year from where they were first captured, thus it may be difficult for local populations to recover due to the lack of returning reproductive adults. Winter flounder tagged in the coastal ponds and recaptured at sea display a migration pattern moving south and to the east as they return to the ocean. Beginning in the winter of 2021/2022 a more advanced acoustic tagging methodology began to be deployed in Ninigret Pond. An array of 12 receivers was positioned throughout the pond to track movements of tagged winter flounder within the system. This information will help elucidate both within estuary habitat use as well as frequency and timing of entries and exits from the ocean to the pond.

The results of the survey have shown that in Point Judith

Table 2: Spawning Stages of Winter Flounder Explained

Immature	A fish that has not yet reached sexual maturity and does not contribute to spawning
Ripe	The pre-spawn stage
Running Ripe	The active spawning stage
Spent	The post-spawn stage
Resting	The non-active spawning stage

Pond the adult spawning winter flounder population has been in decline since 2001 from an average of about 24 to 2 fish per net haul in 2019. Companion surveys which examine juvenile fish population abundance in the coastal ponds and Narragansett Bay mirror these results closely. While juvenile winter flounder abundance is variable among coastal ponds and Narragansett Bay, an overall downward trend over the last two decades is clear.

The low population levels found in Point Judith Pond have prompted management action to close the pond to all winter flounder fishing to aid in the recovery. Other factors may be contributing to the low abundance in Point Judith besides fishing pressure. Predation of adult and juvenile winter flounder by sea robins, summer flounder, cormorants, egrets, and seals, among many others contribute to natural mortality resulting in low population levels. Aside from predation, warming winter water temperatures due to climate change may also be holding the population in check. It has been documented that young-of-the-year winter flounder experience higher mortality during warmer winters. It is possible that the Southern New England stock is no longer large enough to overcome these external factors and will see little or no recovery.

Future Management

The abundance and spawning index in concert with tag/recapture data collected in this survey is a tool to aid in estimation of population size and year class structure. Studies such as this one are especially useful when collected for a long period of time. A long-term approach to adult winter flounder assessments in RI south shore coastal ponds is paramount and will enable fisheries biologists to fine tune the management strategy for this species. This research project will continue to provide valuable information about flounder movement, population size, exploitation rates, growth rates, natural mortality, and fishing mortality.

The prospects of rebuilding the Southern New England winter flounder stock have been discussed extensively by scientists and managers, as the stock's outlook has not looked promising. With warming waters found to negatively influence the stock's productivity, coupled with a projected warming ocean for foreseeable decades, winter flounder population models incorporating future climate conditions project that even under fishing moratoriums, it may not be possible to rebuild winter flounder to previous stock levels. Despite ominous stock-wide outlooks, fisheries managers should not be deterred from developing informed strategies for stock resiliency. In concert with rebuilding targets that consider temperature-induced productivity, this research suggests future management measures should focus at spatial scales where winter flounder persist and provide the greatest chance for survival success.



Photo: Pat Brown

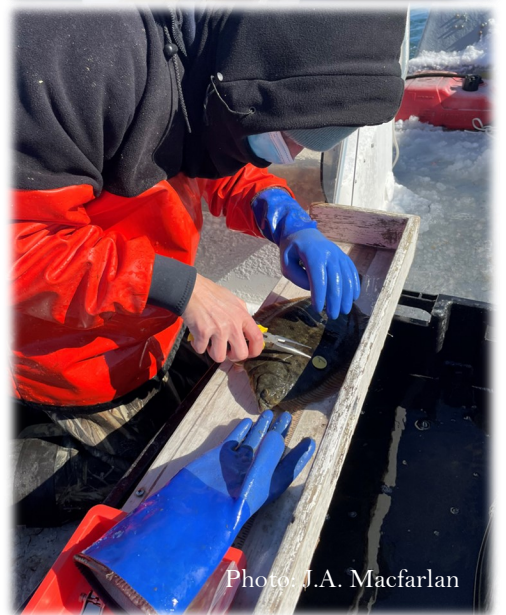


Photo: J.A. Macfarlan



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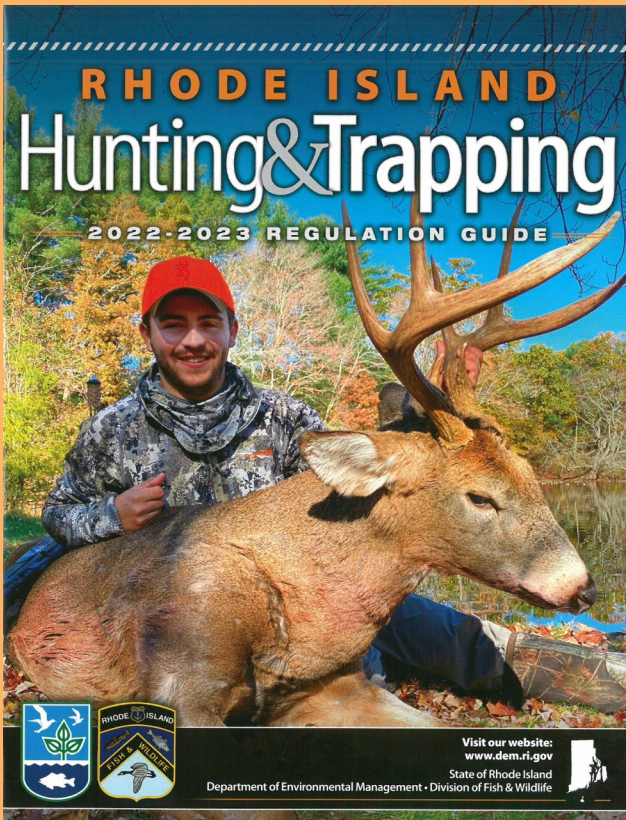
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Photo: Stramon Mill Management Area, Little Compton by Sarah Perrazo



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