

# WILD RHODE ISLAND EXPLORER

In this edition...

- Learn about grassland habitat
- Learn about exciting bird research in RI

## MEET THE BARN OWL!





**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

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# HABITAT CHAT

## Grasslands Are Great!

When you think of grass, what do you picture? Maybe you picture a neat green carpet, like a front lawn or a baseball field. Do you picture something like the field in the picture above? It looks like someone forgot to mow their grass for a long time! The grasses are tall and messy looking, which is exactly what we want when we're taking care of **grassland** habitat. Wild grasses that are native to Rhode Island don't grow tightly together to make a lawn. Instead, they grow in big, loose bunches. These bunches create a lot of **cover** for animals like mice, snakes, rabbits, and birds. This cover helps them hide from predators like owls, hawks, foxes, and coyotes. Little bluestem, big bluestem, and switchgrass are some of our native wild grasses in Rhode Island.

Most people don't like it when dandelions grow in their lawn. They think that weeds don't belong there. In a grassland, we want wildflowers to grow in between the grasses! Wildflowers add **diversity** to our grasslands, which is important if you want to attract lots of different animals to the habitat. Goldenrod, milkweed, and asters all grow in grasslands. Bees, butterflies, and other **pollinating** insects need these flowers to survive.

In Rhode Island, we don't have a lot of grassland habitat left. That's because we don't have as much natural **disturbance** anymore, like wildfires. Natural disturbance sets the timer back to zero for a habitat. When trees and shrubs are cleared away, the sunlight shines on the bare soil. The first plants to grow on bare soil are usually grasses and flowers. If you left the grassland alone for many years, eventually, a forest would grow back. This habitat cycle is called **succession**.



A monarch butterfly and caterpillar on a milkweed plant, Dean Birch

**At the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife, we work to conserve grassland habitat on our management areas.** We plant native grass and wildflower seeds in our fields. We also keep fields free of invasive shrub species by mowing in the winter when there are no nesting birds and other animals are tucked in their burrows. It's very important to conserve diverse habitats to meet the needs of as many critters as possible!

# BE A WILDILFE HERO THIS SUMMER!



Shh! A fawn in hiding, Gabrielle DeMeillon

## DON'T BE A FAWN-NAPPER!

Baby deer (**fawns**) are often found in people's yards tucked under a bush or in some tall grass. The fawns curl up and stay quiet to **camouflage** among the plants. Many kind-hearted people call our office each summer, worried about the fawns and what they should do. Most often, people think that the fawn has lost its mother, or

has been abandoned. **If you find a fawn, you should not touch it. Just leave it where it is, unless it is somewhere that is very dangerous, like a road.** The mother deer is nearby and will come back for her baby. If you take the fawn in to "save" it, you've actually kidnapped it! Mother deer leave their fawns to quietly rest while they go look for food. They come back to feed the fawn every so often. It takes a few days before the fawn can keep up with mom, so to stay safe from predators, it sits very still. Petting or moving the fawn can be stressful, so if you find a fawn, observe from a distance, and give it the peace and quiet it needs. Mom will come back when you are not looking. She thinks you are a predator, so she wants to be sneaky about going to feed her baby!

## LEAVE TURTLES IN THE WILD!

Turtles are super cute, which means that people like to take them home for pets. This is very bad for our wild turtles and their **populations**! It's actually against the law to take a turtle home from the wild as a pet. Why? Turtles live a long time, and it takes them a while before they are old enough to lay eggs. When we take just one turtle home, that can cause problems for that turtle's population in the future, because that turtle won't be able to **re-produce** and help to keep the population going. We also have some rare turtle species in Rhode Island that people try to steal from the wild to sell for pets. This is against the law, and is called **poaching**. If you see a turtle in the road, first make sure it's safe for you to help. Gently help it cross in the direction it was heading. Once it is safely on the other side of the road, leave it be. Turtles know where they are going. Picking it up and moving it to a "better" spot can actually make turtles confused, and they will try to travel more. This can cause them to cross more roads and find themselves in danger again. Share what you've learned about turtles with your friends and family. Let's work together to help our turtles!

Aww! A diamondback terrapin hatchling, Mary Gannon

**If you spot a turtle poacher, call the 24-hr RIDEM Law Enforcement hotline (401-222-3070) when it's safe to do so.**

**The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also has a poaching line: 1-844-FWS-TIPS (397-8477).**



# OUR WILD NEIGHBORS

## BARN OWL

The barn owl is listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Rhode Island. We are working to help this species by conserving grassland habitats. We mow fields on our Wildlife Management Areas each year to keep them free from shrubs, which leaves space for grasses and wildflowers to grow. We also plant native grass and wildflower seeds in these habitats to create a healthy grassland ecosystem.

**Scientific name:** *Tyto alba*

**Range:** The barn owl can be found all across the United States, Central, and South America.

**Size:** Barn owls have a 3-4 foot wingspan and weigh under 2 pounds.

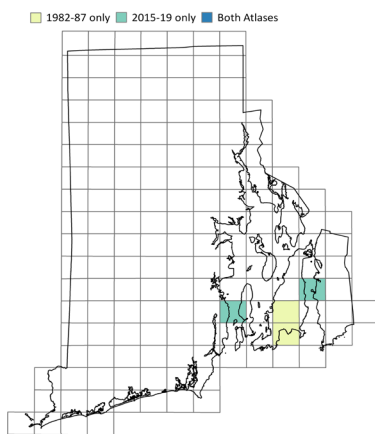
**Habitat:** Barn owls like open areas like fields, grasslands, and farms. They also can be found in deserts, marshes, and woodland edges, and even in cities and suburbs. Barn owls nest in shelters such as hollow trees, nest boxes, and old buildings. They need these nesting areas to be close to their **foraging** habitat, where they go to hunt for food.

**Food:** Barn owls mostly eat meadow voles, but will also eat other small mammals like mice, shrews, rabbits, and even bats

**Breeding:** Barn owls lay between 2 and 18 eggs, and can raise up to 3 broods of owlets in a year. When the owlets are born, they are helpless, and need to be carefully tended by their parents. Owlets are covered in fluffy white **down** feathers until they start to grow their flight feathers.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Barn owls were first recorded in Rhode Island in the early 1900s, with the first nest found in 1938. Their population expanded in coastal towns like Bristol, Tiverton, Little Compton, as well as on Aquidneck Island and Block Island. These areas had old buildings, farm silos, and bluffs which were great nesting spots for barn owls. By the mid-1980s, barn owl numbers decreased. They were only found nesting on Aquidneck Island and Block Island. In recent years, a nest-box program run by volunteers has helped the nesting population on Aquidneck Island.



This map is from the Rhode Island Bird Atlas 2.0. It shows the parts of the state where barn owls were found in the first state bird atlas (yellow blocks), during the second atlas (green blocks), and during both atlases (blue blocks). As you can see, barn owls are not found in a lot of places in the state!

# OUT IN THE FIELD

## The Rhode Island Bird Atlas 2.0

By Mary Gannon, Wildlife Outreach Coordinator



There are a lot of bird species that call Rhode Island home! To keep track of our state's bird populations and the habitats they use, the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife teamed up with wildlife biologists at the University of Rhode Island to complete the RI Bird Atlas 2.0. The field data for this project was collected from 2015 - 2019. All of this information will be organized into a book this year.

In the book, you'll be able to read a lot of information about each bird species found during the survey. There are also maps for each species, showing where they live in the state. That's why this project is called an atlas. We're making a big book of bird maps for Rhode Island! To learn more about all the work that has gone into the RI bird atlas, I talked with Dr. Charles Clarkson, the Bird Atlas Coordinator at URI.

**Mary:** Charles, what are your responsibilities as the RI Bird Atlas Coordinator?

**Charles:** I am responsible for the design and planning of the entire atlas. That means I recruit and train volunteers (we have over 200 volunteers!), I organize all of the data collection that takes place, and then I enter those data into a database and create maps for the final atlas. I am currently taking all of the data we've collected and using it to write a book that will be the second breeding bird atlas of Rhode Island.

**Mary:** Collecting information about ALL of the bird species in RI is a lot of work! Where did you even begin?

**Charles:** Well, I started by designing the project. One of the most important things in science is called "experimental design." You want to be sure that before you go into the field and start collecting data, the way you collect the data makes sense and will give you the information you need to complete the project. If you get it wrong, sometimes you need to start over again. With a big project like this, that is really hard to do! So, I planned the data collection by thinking about what I wanted the final product to look like...how I wanted to present maps and how I would need to collect data to make those maps.

**Mary:** What was the most challenging part of completing the Atlas?

**Charles:** Triple-checking everything to make absolutely sure that we had all of the data we needed in order to write the book. There are so many moving parts to the bird atlas and they ALL need to be complete in order for the project to be successful. So at the beginning and end of every field season

I would look at what data we had collected and what we still needed. I was constantly monitoring the progress of all 165 atlas "blocks" and all the data for every species of bird in the state.

**Mary:** What was your favorite part of working on this project?

**Charles:** Getting to explore this small state! Over the life of the atlas, I visited every square inch of Rhode Island looking for birds and I found some really amazing places in our state I never knew about. Finding new habitats and exploring new places was really eye-opening to how rich our state is with natural beauty.

**Mary:** What are some things that you learned from all of the data? Were any of the results surprising?

**Charles:** I'm still learning more every day. Our state is home to over 150 breeding bird species and every one uses the state differently. I've seen big declines in some species and sadly there are even species that used to breed here and no longer exist. But, there are new species as well and it is really cool to learn about how, as our state's habitats have changed, the birds using these habitats have changed as well.

**Mary:** What are some dangers that birds face here in RI?

**Charles:** Well, Rhode Island has a lot of humans living in a small amount of space, and this can make it tough for birds to find the resources they need to survive. But, in this state, most of the people and buildings are in the major cities and towns. Outside of these areas, our state has lots of open, natural habitats where birds can thrive. Each place in the state carries its own set of threats to birds. For example, in the urban habitats, birds face threats from pollution and cat predation. In the natural landscapes, there are fewer grassland and open habitats and birds that live in these habitat types are finding it more difficult to find places to nest.

**Mary:** What are some things Rhode Islanders can do to help birds?

**Charles:** Planting native vegetation in your yard, helping pollinator and insect populations by not using chemicals on your property and keeping our cats indoors are great things people can do to help birds. Feeding birds appropriate foods like sunflower seeds and suet can be very helpful during the winter when birds are in need of abundant food resources to get them through cold periods.

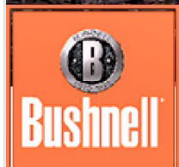
**Mary:** And lastly, what is your favorite Rhode Island bird species?

**Charles:** I am a really big fan of two species that are actually fairly common in our state: the Yellow-billed Cuckoo and the Great Crested Flycatcher. Both of these species are long-distance migrants and spend most of their year in the tropics. I love the tropics and visit as often as I can and when I see these two species in Central America in the winter and then see them in my backyard in May and June, I can't help but be really impressed by them.



# CRITTER CAM

Say cheese! This bobcat isn't posing for the camera, it's actually marking its territory.



MO S17

57°F 13°C

07-28-2018 07:41:42

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. **We teamed up with wildlife biologists from the University of Rhode Island to learn more about our state's mammals with trail cameras. A whopping 248,743 photos were taken during this study!** We'll be featuring some of the best photos here. A huge thanks to the patient URI students who sorted through all of those photos!



This looks like a scene out of a Disney movie! A fawn takes a peek at a raccoon sniffing at a tree.



MO S31

39°F 3°C

06-22-2019 06:14:32





## CAPTION THIS PIC!

We caught this raccoon hanging around near one of our research cameras!

Send in a caption for this photo by September 1, 2020.

We'll reveal the winning caption in our next issue! Submit your caption by sending an email to:

[mary.gannon@dem.ri.gov](mailto:mary.gannon@dem.ri.gov)



nell MOS10 57°F 13°C 08-09-2019 21:12:42

# WILD QUEST

## "CREATURES OF THE NIGHT" MADLIBS



**FILL IN THE BLANKS TO CREATE A WACKY WILDILFE STORY!**

Mary Gannon

I was laying in my \_\_\_\_\_ one night when suddenly I heard  
noun

a/an \_\_\_\_\_ sound. It almost sounded like a/an \_\_\_\_\_.  
adjective noun

I \_\_\_\_\_ up and \_\_\_\_\_ to my window to see what it could be.  
verb (past tense) verb (past tense)

\_\_\_\_\_! There was a/an \_\_\_\_\_, lumbering  
exclamation adjective

\_\_\_\_\_ in my backyard! I couldn't believe my \_\_\_\_\_.  
Rhode Island mammal body part

The \_\_\_\_\_ creature looked back at me and \_\_\_\_\_.  
adjective verb (past tense)

"\_\_\_\_\_!" I shouted, "No one will ever believe this!"  
exclamation

I \_\_\_\_\_ to grab my camera so I could take a picture. When I returned to the  
verb (past tense)

\_\_\_\_\_, the animal had \_\_\_\_\_. I was so \_\_\_\_\_,  
noun verb (past tense) emotion

that I \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.  
verb (past tense) verb (past tense) verb (past tense)

Hopefully that \_\_\_\_\_ animal will come back to \_\_\_\_\_ again soon!  
adjective verb

# CREATIVE CORNER: NOCTURNAL CREATURES

Bat by William



Did you know that 8 species of bats have been found in RI? Each spring, our bat biologist keeps an eye on our bat populations by counting female bats as they exit their roosts at sunset. Female big brown and little brown bats roost together in old buildings, barns, and bat houses, where they give birth to their pups (babies). Around midsummer, the pups are able to fly, and are also counted as they fly out of the roost to spend a night out looking for bugs to eat!

Flying squirrel by Caleb

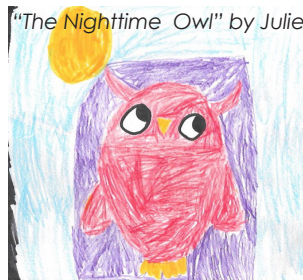


Most of us have probably seen gray and red squirrels before. If you didn't know we had flying squirrels in RI, it's probably because they are gliding around the forest while we are asleep! We've caught flying squirrels at our bobcat trail camera stations in the middle of the night. Pretty cool!

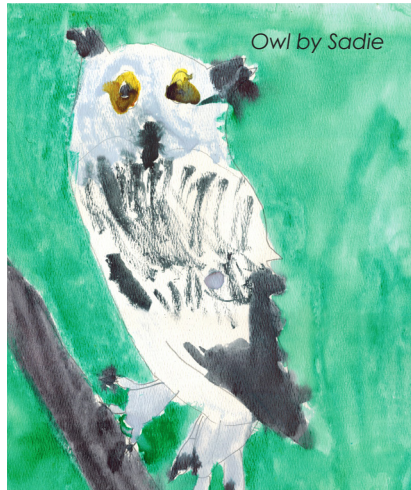


Owls are perfectly adapted to be nocturnal hunters, with great night vision and silent flight! In Rhode Island, we have a few common owl species, like the great-horned, barred, and screech owl. There are also some more uncommon species like the saw-whet, long-eared, short-eared, and barn owl. If you're really lucky, you might even spot a snowy owl along the coast in the wintertime! Volunteers completed nocturnal surveys as part of the RI Bird Atlas 2.0 to figure out where owls are nesting in our state.

"The Nighttime Owl" by Juliet



Owl by Sadie



Barred owl by Charlie



Caedmon drew a hedgehog, a super cute nocturnal animal! Wild hedgehogs are native to Europe. Here in New England, we have a larger prickly critter living in the

forest: the North American porcupine! (You can see one pictured in Jack's artwork to the right.) Northern Rhode Island is at the southern edge of the porcupine's range in New England. We keep track of rare mammal sightings for our records. If you spot something out of the ordinary, let us know!



Lily sent in her drawings of a striped skunk and a fox. These are two very common nocturnal creatures here in RI. Sometimes these animals make their dens underneath sheds, porches, or piles of sticks and leaves in yards. The best thing to do is to leave them be during the spring and summer when they are raising their babies. Be sure to keep your trash cans secure, and don't leave out any pet food or other things these critters might find tasty. Be sure to give them space, and NEVER try to feed or touch them. Let's all work together to keep wildlife wild!



Send us your artwork and writing by  
**September 1, 2020**  
to be featured in our next issue!

The theme for our fall issue is:  
RI mammals

If you would like to share your creative work, you can send an email to  
[mary.gannon@dem.ri.gov](mailto:mary.gannon@dem.ri.gov)

# WANT TO READ MORE?

Subscribe to receive Wild Rhode Island Explorer online or directly to your mailbox. It's FREE to all!

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Learn more at  
[dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach](http://dem.ri.gov/wildlifeoutreach)



Want to learn even more? Check out the *Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's* YouTube channel. We've been posting lots of cool videos about RI's wildlife and virtual field trips with our biologists!



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