

ISSUE 12 | SUMMER 2021

WILD RHODE ISLAND EXPLORER

MEET THE AMERICAN WOODCOCK!

Also, learn about archery, hermit crabs, young forest habitat, and how biologists are tracking this very secretive bird on the cover!



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

RI DFW FIELD HEADQUARTERS
277 GREAT NECK ROAD, WEST KINGSTON, RI 02892
401-789-0281 | DEM.DFW@DEM.RI.GOV

RI DFW EDUCATION CENTER
1B CAMP E-HUN-TEE, EXETER, RI 02822
401-539-0019

DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT
24HR VIOLATION LINE: (401) 222-3070

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Want to learn even more about RI's fish and wildlife?

Follow us on
YouTube and Instagram!



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management



The Wild Rhode Island Explorer | Summer 2021

Writer/Editor: Mary Gannon

Cover photo: Gerry Krausse

Inside cover photo: Mike Stultz

Contributors: Madison Proulx, Colby Slezak, Gabrielle DeMeillon, Dana Kopec

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HABITAT CHAT

Young Forests

Close your eyes and try to picture a forest. What do you see? Most likely, you see trees! Are the trees big or small? Is there a lot of shade in the forest? Are there any plants growing low to the ground? Are there little pathways between the trees, or are they growing close together? What kinds of sounds do you hear in your imaginary forest?

When most of us think of a forest, we probably think of a habitat shaded by big, tall trees. Forests are beautiful and peaceful places to visit with all of their smells, colors, and sounds. Many different species call forests their home because forests provide them with food and shelter. The cool thing about forests is that they don't always look the same. They change over a long period of time. Most of the forest in Rhode Island is between 70 to 100 years old. That means that no one has cut down the trees or **disturbed** the habitat in that amount of time. The trees are big and tall, and there's a lot of space between them. Biologists call this a **mature forest**, which means it's all grown up! We usually see trees like oak, pine, and beech in mature forests. But what did our forests look like when they were still young?

Young forests are only about 10 to 15 years old. The trees are much smaller, and have thin trunks. Because the trees are so thin, they grow tightly together. You probably wouldn't want to hike through a young forest, because you would have to push through lots of crisscrossing branches, and wouldn't be able to see that far in front of you. Trees like birch, wild cherry, and oak like to grow in young forests. These trees like a lot of sun. Because the forest is still young, none of the trees create a lot of shade, so there's plenty of space to soak up the sun's rays! Eventually, the oaks will grow bigger, and will shade out the sun-loving birches, which opens up space on the forest floor. As time goes on, the forest slowly grows older, and the trees **compete** with each other for space. The strongest trees survive, and space is made on the forest floor. At this point you might want to go for a hike!



A young forest is filled with lots of tiny trees and shrubs. It's almost impossible to walk through, the branches are so close together! Imagine how well you could hide in a young forest if you were a bird or small mammal.



The Eastern towhee is one songbird species that loves young forest and shrubby habitat. Listen for their musical "DRINK your teaaaaa!" call when walking through areas with thick shrubs or brambles.

Photo by Matt DiMaio III

In Rhode Island and across New England, we don't have a lot of young forest anymore. Humans have stepped in and stopped events, like floods and fires, that would naturally knock down old trees and make way for new ones to grow. For this reason, habitat biologists are working on creating patches of young forest in our Wildlife Management Areas. A lot of wild animals use this habitat type, including 40 species of birds! It's hard for humans to walk through young forest, but all of those tiny trees and thickets (tangles of branches) create great hiding places for songbirds to build their nests. Small animals that live on the ground, like snakes, mice, turkeys, and our cover critter, the woodcock, are able to hide from predators in the thickets.

So, young forests might not be the best place to take a relaxing walk in the woods, but they are definitely amazing for our wildlife!

MADDIE'S OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

LET'S PRACTICE ARCHERY!

Hey everyone! Target shooting and archery are some of my favorite things to do! Now that we have some warm weather, let's get outside and practice our skills. First, we need to go over some key safety points:

1. Only point the bow and arrow in a safe direction (down range at the target).
2. Only **nock** the arrow when it is safe to shoot.
3. Be sure of your target and what is in front of it, behind it, and beyond it.
4. Only shoot when you have a safe range or shooting area and a safe backstop.
5. Do not shoot arrows straight up in the air.
6. Handle arrows carefully, they have sharp tips!

Nock means to load up the arrow onto the bow string, ready to shoot.

There are many different types of archery equipment. Today I want to focus on showing you my cool compound bow! The compound bow is the most popular bow for hunting and target shooting. Many styles are available, but they all work basically in the same manner. Wheels and cams attached to the limbs and bowstring store energy as the bow is drawn to make it easier to pull back until you reach full draw.

BASIC STEPS FOR SHOOTING A BOW

SHOOTING POSITION: Stand at a right angle to the target with your back foot slightly forward and your feet shoulder width apart.

NOCK YOUR ARROW: Nock an arrow while pointing and holding the bow in a safe direction.

GRIP BOW HANDLE: Don't tightly squeeze. Tightly squeezing will cause the bow to move around and your arrow might not land where you were hoping it to.

AIM! Use your bow sights to help you line up your arrow with the target.

RELEASE THE STRING: Once you have the proper target picture in sight. Relax your fingers and release in a smooth, confident manner.

FOLLOW THROUGH! After releasing the arrow, follow through by staying focused on the target and not immediately dropping the bow.



WHILE PRACTICING, ALWAYS HAVE AN ADULT WITH YOU.



Safety tips and basic steps come from "Today's Bowhunter" from the NBEF and Kalkomey Enterprises



About the Author

Hi everyone! My name is Maddie; I am the secretary at the Outdoor Education office. I have the best job ever because I encourage people to go explore the great outdoors! I love to practice archery, learn about wild game animals (turkeys are my favorite), go fishing, and cook up seafood with my family! I did not grow up in a hunting family, so I relied on RIDEM Hunter Education programs to learn and to connect me with awesome mentors who helped me get to where I am today. I am still learning and growing, and now I am here to help you do the same!

CRITTER CAM



Can you spot the critter in this photo? It's a long-tailed weasel! Weasels are small and secretive, and are most often active at night. They may look cute and cuddly, but they are fierce little carnivores! They are predators of small mammals like mice, but will also eat larger mammals like rabbits!



Coming in for a landing! This turkey vulture looks like he may have found a snack on the forest floor. Turkey vultures are nature's clean up crew. They are scavengers and eat dead critters. It sounds gross, but they help to prevent the spread of diseases by removing dead animals from the environment. They have excellent immune systems, and don't catch any of these diseases themselves.

About our trail camera study:

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've 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 our bobcat project! We are currently working on new projects studying beavers, muskrats, otters, and fisher.

UPCOMING EVENTS



Did you know that we have lots of events and classes where you can learn outdoor skills like archery, fishing, and first aid?

Follow us on Facebook or Instagram to check out more upcoming events!

Visit dem.ri.gov/fishwildlife for more info and to sign up!

"SMELLS FISHY" NEWS HERMIT CRABS

LIFESPAN: 10 - 20 years

Hermit crabs are classified as crustaceans, just like shrimp or lobsters. They do not grow their own shells but find empty ones from other creatures and occupy those as their homes. They have an **exoskeleton** on the front of their bodies, which means their bones are on the outside, but the hermit crab's backside is soft, so they find a shell for protection instead.

FOOD: Omnivorous, which means they eat a variety of food, both plants and animals. They mostly eat invertebrates like plankton, fish, and worms.

SIZE: 1.3 ounces up to 11 pounds, depending on the species! They range from 2 - 10 centimeters long.

Also, please don't litter; I can mistake plastic bottles and caps for shells, and can get stuck!

Please don't pick me up or take me home; I will have the best chance at a healthy, happy life if you leave me where you found me.

FUN FACTS

There are over 800 species of hermit crabs, with most living in the ocean and breathing through gills just like fish. In RI, we have 2 species, the long-clawed and the broad-clawed hermit crab. Some hermit crabs are semi-terrestrial. They live on land but still need to soak their gills in water to survive. Only 1 species lives in freshwater, and can only be found on the small island country of Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Just because they are called hermits does not mean they are lonely. They earned this name by living alone in shells but can often be found in large groups with other hermit crabs.



About the Author

My name is Dana, and I am the Technical Assistant at the Division of Fish and Wildlife Outdoor Education Office. I love fishing, mainly fly fishing, and fly tying. A big part of my job is helping people learn to fish. My favorite part is when someone catches a fish, especially if it's their first!

Photo: Kayla Clauson

OUR WILD NEIGHBORS

AMERICAN WOODCOCK

Breeding: In early spring, male woodcock put a lot of effort into impressing a female! Just after sunset, the males sing their buzzy mating song. "Peeeeeent! Peeeeeent!" This tells the females that there is a potential mate in the area. After a few peents, the male takes off into the sky, spiraling like a little rocket ship and making a twittering sound with his wings. Eventually, he spirals back down to his original singing spot, and repeats his song and dance, hoping to attract a mate.

Habitat: The American woodcock likes a mixture of habitat. They use fields and meadows in early spring for their mating song and dance. Females build their nests in thick shrubs or young forest. Swampy areas and stream edges are their favorite places to forage for food. Woodcock are happiest when all of these habitats are near each other so they can find everything they need throughout the year.

Food: Woodcock love earthworms! Their long, flexible beak is perfect for poking through the mud and soil to find them. They will also eat many other creepy crawlies, like ants, millipedes, snails, grasshoppers, flies, spiders, beetles, and crickets.

Scientific name:
Scolopax minor

DID YOU KNOW?

The American woodcock has a lot of fun nicknames, like mudbat, bogsucker, mudsnipe, Labrador twister, and **timberdoodle**! Turn the page to learn more about how the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife is teaming up with biologists at URI to track these secretive birds.

OUT IN THE FIELD

TRACKING TIMBERDOODLES



Hi everyone! My name is Mary Gannon. I am the Wildlife Outreach Coordinator for RI Division of Fish and Wildlife. One of my favorite parts of my job is sharing information with people about all of the cool wildlife projects we are working on! We are very lucky to work closely with biologists and students at the University of Rhode Island to learn more about our state's wildlife. Working together means that we can do more to help our state's awesome critters. Today, I'm in the field with Colby Slezak, a URI graduate student who is working on tracking the elusive American woodcock, also known as the timberdoodle!

Mary: Hi Colby! Can you tell our readers where we are right now?

Colby: We're in Great Swamp Wildlife Management Area in Kingston, RI.

Mary: The Great Swamp has beautiful habitat for a lot of wild animals, but what makes it so great for timberdoodles?

Colby: Great Swamp is a particularly good spot for timberdoodles since there is a lot of young forest habitat. State wildlife biologists help to make sure that the forest doesn't get too old in some spots to help young forest animals like the American woodcock and the New England Cottontail.

Mary: So, it's just about sunset. Most people go out to watch birds early in the morning. Why is this a good time to be looking for woodcock?

Colby: Every spring from late February until early June male American woodcock perform "sky dances" to attract a mate. They begin the evening about 20 minutes after sunset by calling out with their unique "Peeeeeent!" call. The male turns his body and calls in a circular pattern to try to attract a mate. The area where the male displays is known as the "singing ground." After a minute or so of singing, the male will fly up high into the sky in a spiraling motion and then comes tumbling back down to his singing ground where he resumes his song. Females don't sing and so we often don't see them at all.

Mary: That's super cool! Once the birds start doing their sky dance, what will you be doing for your project?

Colby: I carefully watch where the male lands while performing his sky dance and mark this location so we can set up a mist-net (a thin, tall net that looks kind of like a volleyball net between two poles) and capture the bird the following night. We capture the birds so we can attach a radio-transmitter, which will track their movements.

Mary: Once you catch the birds, how do you attach the tracking device? Does the tracker bother the birds at all?

Colby: The radio-transmitter is attached much like a backpack we put on for school. The transmitter sits on the back and then is tied under the body to hold it on. It doesn't bother the bird, and is very lightweight, so the bird won't notice it's there.



Colby attaches a lightweight metal leg band to each bird he captures. The bands have individual numbers on them so Colby will be able to recognize the bird if he catches it again. The bands fit like a bracelet, and do not harm the birds.



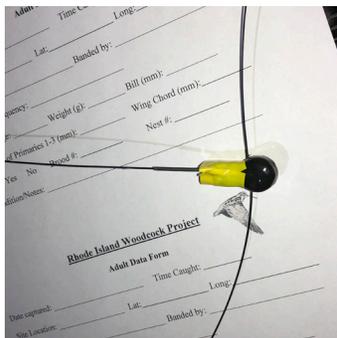
Colby also collects lots of other information about each woodcock he catches, like beak length. That long beak is perfect for poking around in the soil for the woodcock's favorite snack, earthworms!



Woodcock chicks are super cute and fuzzy! Their brown and tan pattern helps them to camouflage and hide from predators when they are in the nest or following mom around the forest.

Mary: Once the birds are released back into the wild, what type of info are you hoping to gather by tracking them? How will this help RI's woodcock in the future?

Colby: By tracking timberdoodles we hope to figure out what resources they prefer so we can create more of those habitat features. Male timberdoodle have been studied here for the past 10 years, so my project is more focused on females (hens), which we know little about here in Southern New England. Females are harder to catch in mist-nets, so we are using trained pointing dogs to locate their nests and chicks. The pointing dogs get very still and point their head in the direction they smell a bird. Once we see the hen, we capture her with a long-handled net. We then attach the same little backpack tracker to learn more about the areas they nest and raise young. An understanding of woodcock resource use will help us better manage our state forests and promote larger populations into the future.



One of the trackers that Colby will attach to a captured woodcock before letting it go. The two long wires on the sides are the "straps" of the little backpack the bird will wear.

Mary: What is your favorite part of working with timberdoodles?

Colby: My favorite part of working with timberdoodles is that they are so secretive, we often don't see them during the daylight hours since they sit still when we approach, and blend in perfectly with the forest floor where they feed on earthworms.

Mary: And lastly, what is your favorite wild Rhode Island critter? Other than this cool little dancing bird, of course!

Colby: My favorite RI critter is the spotted turtle, I often run across them as I track timberdoodles throughout the summer.



About Colby

Colby studied wildlife management at the State University of New York at Cobleskill located in upstate NY. He's currently a PhD student at the University of Rhode Island studying the breeding ecology and resource use of American woodcock in Eastern North America.



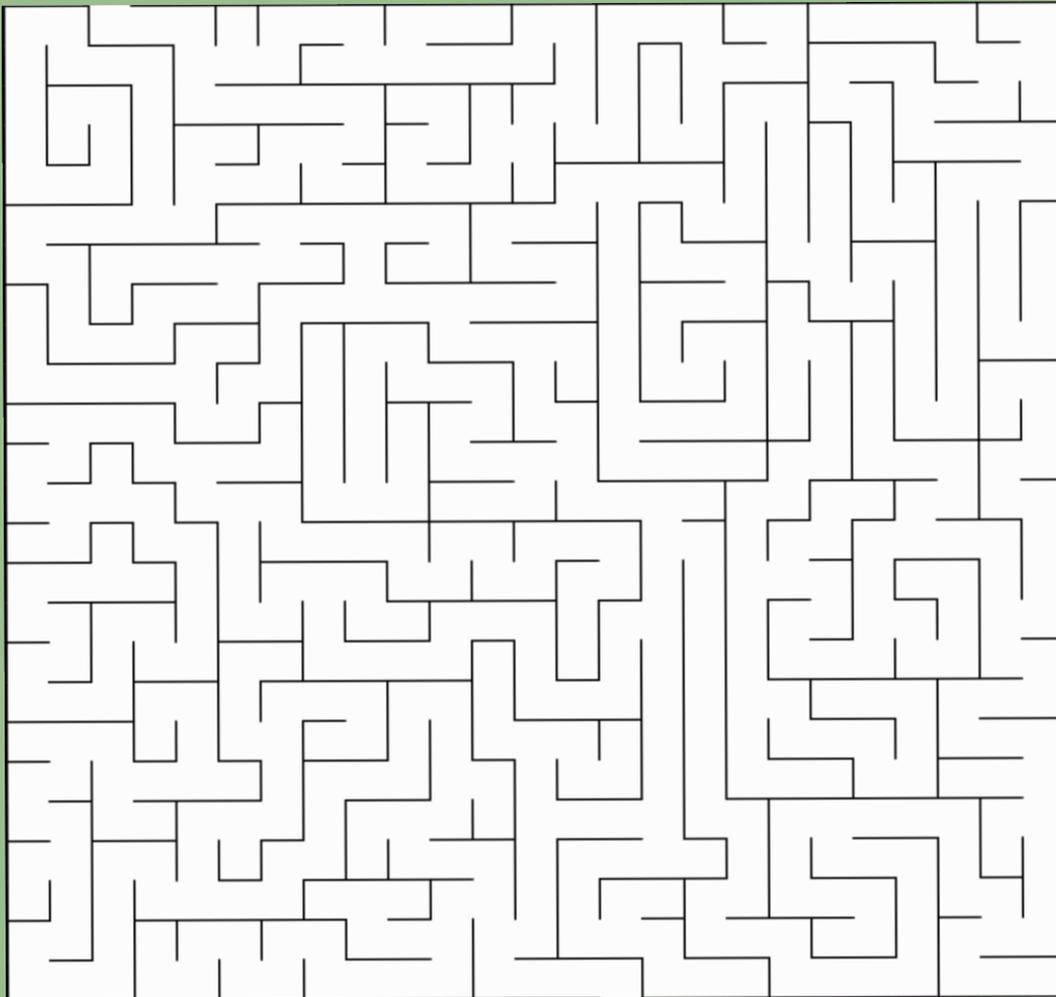
WILD QUEST



PEENT!

This little timberdoodle is on the hunt for his earthworm lunch. Can you help him find his way through the young forest habitat?

START



FINISH!

Lunch is served!



CRITTER CARDS

Rhode Island is home to many different wild animals. Some are very common and easy to spot. Others are rare and hard to find. Their populations might even be threatened or endangered for many different reasons. At the Division of Fish and Wildlife, we've created a list of Species of Greatest Conservation Need. We focus a lot of our work on helping these species. We do this by studying their populations, protecting special habitats, and spreading the word about these really cool critters.

Threatened and endangered species don't just live in faraway places, like the rainforest. There are lots of species right here in our own little state that need our help. In fact, there are over 400 species on our list! Learn more about them by cutting out and collecting these Critter Cards!

Fold in half



EASTERN RATSNAKE



1

I can only be found in southwestern RI. I like to use ledges and rocky areas for den sites and basking. I help control rodent populations. Mice, chipmunks, and rats are some of my favorite things to eat.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Sadly, ratsnakes often get hit by cars while crossing roads. Be careful while driving! Sometimes, people kill snakes because they think that we are dangerous and scary. We're really shy and don't like to be bothered. Please help spread the word that we're actually important members of the ecosystem!

BIG SAND TIGER BEETLE



1

I live in sand flat and pitch pine barren habitats. I used to be found in 10 places in RI, but some of my populations have disappeared. Most of my safe havens are on State Management Areas or other nature preserves.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Restoring my habitat would be a big help. Also, a lot of my habitat has been ruined by people riding ATVs and dirt bikes in places where it's against the rules. When visiting management areas, please just walk and respect the rules for our wildlife!

LITTLE BROWN BAT



2

I used to be found all over RI, but my numbers have shrunk because of a disease called White-Nose Syndrome. I can still be found in some spots, though. Each summer, I gather with other females in places like barns and attics where we have our babies, called pups. I only have one pup a year. In the fall, we migrate to other states to hibernate in caves and mines, which is when we are most at risk to catch White-Nose.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Protecting the places where I roost and hibernate and building bat houses will help make sure I have the shelter I need. Many people are afraid of bats, but we're not so scary. We eat lots of bugs that bother people, like mosquitoes and crop pests (moths and beetles). Help spread the word that bats are awesome!

AMERICAN WOODCOCK



2

I am a master of camouflage! My mottled brown feathers help me blend in to the forest floor to avoid predators. I especially love young forest habitat. You can hear my "Peeent!" call at dusk in April and May.

WHICH ACTIONS WILL HELP ME?

Creating and caring for young forest habitat will help me for the future. Protecting fields, forest edges, and wetlands will also help because I use all of these habitats at different times of the day and year!



ABOUT THIS PHOTO: SUNFLOWERS FOR WILDLIFE

Our habitat team plants wildlife food plots each year across state management areas. Sunflowers are not only bright and cheery, but are a great food source for lots of wild animals! Bees and other pollinators love the flowers, while lots of different birds and small mammals snack on the seeds in late summer and early fall. Goldfinches, mourning doves, wild turkey, pheasant, and chickadees are some birds you might spot. You can help wildlife by adding plants like sunflowers, wildflowers, and fruiting shrubs to your garden!

Photo by Mike Stultz



RI Department of Environmental Management

DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE

Great Swamp Field Headquarters

277 Great Neck Road

West Kingston, RI 02892



TO: