



**THE WATCH HILL CONSERVATOR**  
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Watch Hill, Rhode Island 02891

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THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2010 VOL. 3 No. 3 WATCH HILL, R.I.

**THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY**  
222 Watch Hill Road  
Watch Hill, Rhode Island 02891  
(401) 348-6540

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For information about community events, lectures, concerts, nature walks, educational programs for children, and others, see the Conservancy's website below.

[www.thewatchhillconservancy.org](http://www.thewatchhillconservancy.org)

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Photos courtesy Sarah Moore Photography

## *Planning for the Unthinkable*

As we enjoy our beautiful beaches and their diverse wildlife, it's hard to imagine a disaster such as the Gulf oil spill happening here. While it's unlikely that we'll see any of the oil from that incident on our shores, other spills are possible, as a result of an off-shore accident or act of terrorism. In the event of such a disaster, state and local officials have a plan in place to manage it and minimize the damage to human health, the environment, and business and industry.

In Rhode Island, the Department of Environmental Management is charged with the coordinated management of oil spills and other emergencies involving hazardous materials. Its "Hazardous Materials/Environmental Protection Plan" spells out the chain of command for response and action, including coordinating the activities and responsibilities of more than 20 agencies and departments on the state and local level, and countless non-government agencies and others such as hospitals, contractors, the Red Cross, the media, and more. The US Fish and Wildlife Service office at Kettle Pond Refuge in Charlestown would be a key player in such an event, as they are uniquely capable of providing information about the area's shores, coastal ponds, and wildlife.

The USFWS Division of Habitat and Resource Conservation oversees FWS programs that promote the protection and restoration of fish and wildlife resources. As such, it identifies sensitive sites and collects data as

to the types of resources that inhabit them. Such information is critical in the event of any situation involving hazardous materials if the affected areas are to be protected from both the initial damage and any clean-up efforts that may further threaten the resources.

The Conservancy spoke with Sharon Marino, Project Leader of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southern New England - New York Bight Coastal Program, whose offices are in Charlestown. She described how her office would respond to a spill. "We are a Natural Resource Trustee under the National Contingency Plan for impacts to a whole bunch of resources for which we have responsibilities: refuges, migratory birds, listed species, certain marine mammals, marine turtles and fish which migrate between jurisdictions. If there were a spill, we would report to the Incident Command [DEM], according to contingency plans that are already in place for Rhode Island."

The USFWS has already provided important data to other regulatory agencies, alerting them to sensitive habitats. In the event of a spill, their role would expand. "We also have to provide counsel on the response itself," Marino explains. "Beach nesting birds and other listed species (tiger beetles, turtles, etc.) are at risk if responders are not aware of locations of the breeding, foraging, and loafing areas. The cure can be worse than the disease in this case, but we try to be prepared with recommendations on how to access the potentially oiled areas without further harming wildlife."



One important task is to deter birds and wildlife from the hazardous area by such means as producing noise with cannons or other noise-makers, chasing them off with boats, or sending up scare balloons. But despite all preventive measures, in the event of a spill many birds and other animals will come in contact with oil. FWS staff and trained volunteers will locate them and help to capture as many as possible and transport them to rehabilitation centers, ultimately returning them, clean and healthy, to the wild. Such measures employed on the Rhode Island coast could save thousands of important birds: during the summer, migrating birds such as nesting piping plovers, Roseate Terns, and thousands of shore and sea birds would be threatened. During the winter, migratory birds such as seaducks, loons, and others, would be at risk.

Documentation of damage is a critical aspect of the FWS role, as one goal is to help to "make the public whole", i.e. restore and reclaim where possible, and make restitution or compensate where restoration is not possible. Marino explains: "Depending on the size and location of the spill, our field or

*Continued p. 2*

Top photo: courtesy US Coast Guard -photographer Anne Betton

Left: courtesy US Coast Guard -photographer Isaac D. Pacheco



### Dorothy Hiett Roberts (1924 – 2010)

Dottie Roberts, a long-time summer resident and friend of Watch Hill, died in Florida on March 14. Widow of the late Commander Alfred M. Roberts, Jr., she was a much-loved and respected member of Watch Hill’s summer community. Through the Alfred M. Roberts, Jr. Charitable Foundation, she supported local non-profit organizations and the Watch Hill Fire District, enabling them to provide service to the community that is remarkable for a village the size of Watch Hill.



Watch Hill Conservancy Director Chaplin Barnes spoke at her memorial service on July 10, describing her delight in the work made possible through the foundation. “Dottie loved the opportunities [it] provided and became an active and creative partner in its work. One of the foundation’s first grants – to the Westerly Hospital and Home and Hospice Care of Rhode Island, to establish Hospice Suites at the Hospital – was made at her suggestion. Dottie also introduced us to the needs of a remarkable institution in Florida, the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind, and she brought us into the work of the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville and proposed support for the construction of its new hospital, as well as for its very significant research program. An early grant to the Westerly Ambulance Corps, for the Rescue 3 vehicle, which serves the shoreline, gave her great satisfaction, as did the foundation’s recent major support for the Corps’ new Computer Assisted 911 dispatch system, the first of its kind in the state.

“In all, over the past six years, with Dottie’s enthusiastic participation, the foundation, only \$10 million at its establishment, has made grants of over \$3 million dollars, more than \$2 million of which, made to Watch Hill and Westerly institutions, has directly benefitted the Watch Hill community.

“Of the \$2 million that has benefitted Watch Hill, more than \$200,000 has gone directly to the Watch Hill Fire District, which, at its Annual Meeting, awarded Dottie its 2010 Citizen Service Award. The Committee responsible for the award chose Dottie a number of months before her illnesses of last winter and her death, and the award was to have been kept confidential and to have been a surprise even to her. The citation, presented posthumously to Dottie’s family, referred most aptly to the ‘lovely and gracious benefactor, whose generosity was matched only by her modesty.’”

Barnes spoke for her many friends as he concluded, “We have all been enriched by knowing Dottie. We loved her. We miss her, and we remember her with great gratitude and affection.”

### GREENING BEGINS ON OUR OWN FRONT LAWNS (PART II): LEAF BLOWERS

Communities from New England to California are talking about banning leaf blowers, but can barely be heard above the din. As Americans continue their love affair with the lawn, these power tools, practically unknown a few decades ago, can be heard from early spring to late fall as they re-arrange leaves, sand, and other matter that happens to be lying where it isn’t wanted.

The noise is an obvious and legitimate concern. Noise is, by definition, unpleasant, but the Occupational Safety and Health Administration reminds us that it’s more than that: according to OSHA standards, noise over 85 decibels poses danger of hearing loss. Furthermore, studies have established that noise at that level is linked to stress, elevated heart rate and blood pressure, aggravated heart disease, headache, and “social disturbance,” i.e. angry neighbors. It can drown out all other sounds, including alarms, warnings, and approaching vehicles. At 90 decibels, most leaf blowers exceed even the most stringent of noise ordinances.

But noise is only one concern: serious health risks are known to be associated with these ubiquitous tools. Picture this: a small 2-cylinder machine blasts air at a speed of 180 miles an hour, faster than a Cat 5 hurricane, stirring up not only leaves but pesticide and fertilizer residue, mold spores, dried bird and animal feces, and anything else in its path. Engineered to move large items such as leaves, it takes this smaller matter along for the ride. Multiply this by dozens, hundreds, or thousands as homeowners and landscape workers spruce up local properties, and the potential for damage is sobering.



Photo Richard Youngken

Continued p. 3

### PLANNING FOR THE UNTHINKABLE —Continued

regional office managers may become the Trustee Council Representative for continued work on assessing damages. In addition to cleaning up a chemical spill, responsible parties are liable under the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Act, NRDAR. We therefore need to, as the spill progresses, document baseline information so we can assess the impacts of the spill itself on vulnerable Trust resources. Once we can document the impacts, we have means to develop monetary settlements to make the public whole, to replace the lost benefits from natural resources impacted, for however long they are impacted. If the responsible party does not agree to settle on the costs of the assessment and restoration, litigation may be involved. Thus we are very careful in collecting data on impacts of an oil spill – the data may need to hold up in court.”

While the Gulf oil spill has not reached our shores, Marino and her staff have been directly affected. “Service employees from across the country, including our office, have been asked to deploy to the Gulf, on rotating 2-week deployments to assist in these tasks. Our staff are doing everything from case planning, developing the assessment by measuring baseline levels of bird mortality, entering data, providing advice on avoidance, and minimization of impacts to listed species and in providing consultation expertise, if impacts to listed species cannot be avoided.”

This kind of hands-on work is field training of the highest order. It’s reassuring to know the USFWS is prepared to fully utilize their skills and expertise closer to home if necessary. We can only hope it won’t be necessary. JY

Photo courtesy USFWS



### NAPATREE NOTES

As I write this in late July, summer is in full swing on Napatree Point. Since our last issue of the *Conservator*, twenty-two piping plover chicks have hatched, thanks to our efforts along with those of US Fish & Wildlife Service, whose staff are out every day monitoring the nests of plovers and least terns. This makes two consecutive years with increasing numbers, following a 4-year period of low productivity. Now Napatree is the second most successful nesting site in the state!



During our participation in Project Limulus from mid-April to mid-July, our Science Coordinator, Juliana Berry, assisted by URI Coastal Fellow Kathleen Hallal and several faithful volunteers, tagged approximately 450 horseshoe crabs!

For those between the ages of eight and fourteen, the Investigators program has been the place to be this summer. Under the direction of Stephen Brown, a science teacher at Pine Point School in Stonington, we have offered morning and afternoon sessions for the second year. More than sixty young people have participated in this year’s program.

Along with fulltime teachers Hugh Markey and Tim Twohig and U.R.I. Coastal Fellow Kathy Hallal, the children have been exploring the wonders of the beach. Armed with nets, buckets, and magnifying glasses, they have been learning to look more closely at common items on the beach. They have seen how dropping a clump of seaweed into a bucket of water frees the many arthropods living in it, and dragging a seine net through the water captures tiny fish, crabs, jellyfish, and other creatures to study — things which would have otherwise remained unseen. The children have been learning to identify their finds and have invariably picked up some treasure to bring home.

JS

Top photo; courtesy Janice Sassi

### WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY PUBLICATIONS

**Watch Hill Through Time**  
Chaplin B. Barnes

**Watch Hill Style**  
Richard C. Youngken



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# New Investigator Guides

Of course, Investigators don't wander the dunes of Napatree on their own. They are led by Naturalists from the Watch Hill Conservancy. Along with returning Naturalists Steve, Jan, and yours truly (Hugh), summer 2010 saw the arrival of several new faces.

Juliana Berry is the Conservancy's new Science Coordinator. An occasional guide on the beach, Juliana spends much of her time putting together the many pieces of scientific info gathered on plovers, horseshoe crabs, water quality, and more.

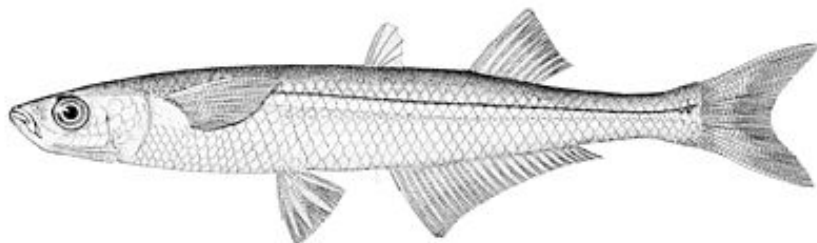
Tim Twohig is a middle school science teacher in the off season. He brings his science knowledge and his skills in working with kids to the Investigator program.

Kathy Hallal is an Ocean Fellow from the University of Rhode Island. Each year, the Conservancy offers the chance for URI students to do field work as part of their education. In addition to the Investigator program, Kathy works with our horseshoe crab tagging program (see the *Investigator*, Winter 2009 issue), tests water quality around Napatree, and performs an assortment of other tasks.

# Critter Corner: Atlantic Silversides

When Investigators are scooping up squirming surprises in the seine net, one fish that makes its way into the observation pan is the Atlantic silverside. This is a fish whose name really makes identifying it easy: it's narrow, about two to six inches long, and has brilliant silver sides! Scientists think the flashing silver confuses predators.

This little fish is nearly defenseless, and spends much of its time in eel grass, another part of the marine environment Investigators learn about. The eel grass provides the silversides with a good hiding place from bigger fish like striped bass and bluefish. When it moves closer to the shore in the summer, it often falls prey to terns and cormorants. It's tough to be the low man on the food chain of life!



## Did you know?

- A seine net is used for many purposes. Along with fishing, the net can be used to separate fish so they can be stocked in freshwater lakes and rivers.
- A cast net is similar to the seine net. It's made to be thrown out over the water by one person. The cast net has been around for thousands of years!

# News on the Beach



We met Roy Clark of Old Lyme, who designed and built this beautiful miniature dory. It's truly a work of art.



Investigators learn how the color of seaweed indicates where it lives in the water. For example, green seaweed lives more toward the surface and brown toward the bottom. Athena counts the nodules on her seaweed to determine it is four years old.

Time to get back to the beach! Hope you liked this edition of the *Investigator*. Look for another issue in the winter with tales of adventure, critter info, and lots more! We hope you've had a great summer!

Editor—Hugh Markey

*The Watch Hill Conservancy and the Watch Hill Fire District operate summer educational programs at the Napatree Point Conservation Area in Watch Hill. The Napatree Investigator is a publication of the Watch Hill Conservancy.*

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# Traces of the Past along Fort Road – the Changing Geography of Napatree Beach

During the rebuilding of the Watch Hill Yacht Club cabanas in January 2010, the construction team was surprised to encounter the water line which served Fort Road, the Yacht Club, the cabanas, and the Beach Club, in the dunes under the cabanas. As plans were being drawn up for the new cabanas, all involved, including the engineers and contractors, had assumed that the water line was located under the existing paved road. The first they knew about its actual location was when their heavy equipment, digging down, ruptured the pipe.

(As previously reported, after the rupture of the pipe, the Watch Hill Fire District decided to relocate its replacement under the current pavement of Fort Road, and the Watch Hill Conservancy determined to run the duct bank for its utility undergrounding project in the same trench.)

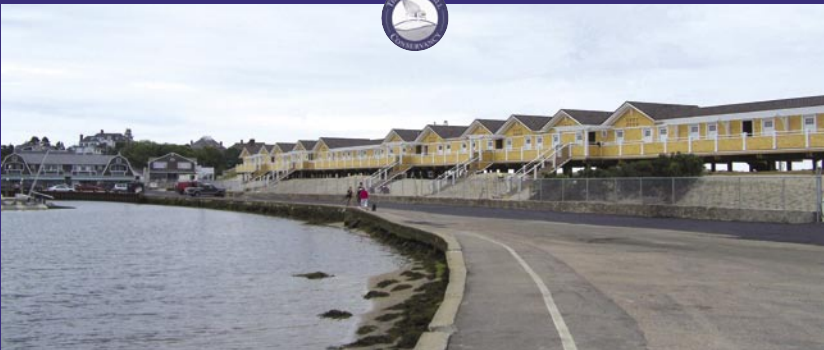
The discovery of the old water line in an unexpected location, in the dunes, as much as 150 feet seaward of the existing pavement of Fort Road, provides an interesting glimpse into the pre-1938 Hurricane conditions of the area involved, and tangible evidence of the shifting geography of Napatree.

It demonstrates, more than 70 years later, that the pre-1938 Hurricane Fort Road, as well as the bathing pavilions, the first Beach Club and the 39 cottages, all destroyed on September 21, 1938 (and all located seaward of that original road), were all situated in what is now either beach or under the ocean.

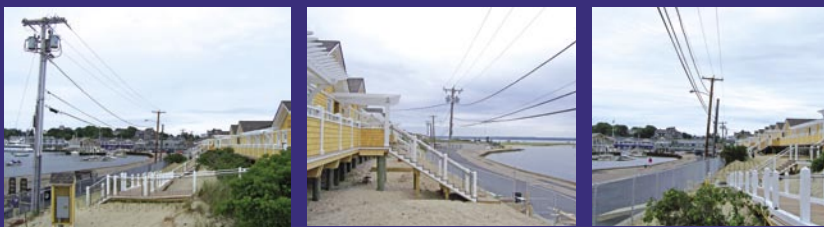
This is consistent with estimates which geographers have provided in the past: that between 1938 and 1945, Napatree retreated some 300 feet northward into Little Narragansett Bay, and that since then, it has continued to retreat, perhaps as much as six feet a year, in that direction.

CBB

# Watch Hill Conservancy Underground Utility Project Fort Road 2010



Fall: Phase 1B, poles and overhead wires removed



June: Phase 1A Completed



April: Underground Duct Bank Construction, Phase 1A

# LEAF BLOWERS continued

Those behind the blower are not the only ones at risk. Leaf blowers produce clouds of debris and dust that can rise as high as second-story windows or as far as half a city block, and can take considerable time to disperse. For many people, the airborne particulate matter causes only a minor inconvenience – a sneeze or two – but the American Lung Association doesn't take it lightly; they recommend that passers-by turn away and cover their mouths and noses in the vicinity of leaf-blowing. Along with airborne particulate matter, the inefficient engines are a point source for unfiltered gasoline by-products, carbon monoxide, and petro-chemical gases, all of which aggravate bronchitis and other respiratory

conditions, and cause and exacerbate lung damage, especially in children, whose respiratory systems are still developing, and in the elderly and ill, whose resistance may be low. Spokesperson Margaret Leathers, executive director of the association's San Francisco chapter, reports that "one hour of using a gas-powered leaf blower generates as much pollution as driving a car for 100 miles. In the Bay Area alone, blowers account for 1.4 tons a day of smog-forming compounds and 15 tons of carbon monoxide." While suburban and rural areas do not generate this quantity of toxins, the effect on users and those nearby is nonetheless serious. The resultant airborne particles are toxic, but landscape workers rarely wear masks to protect their eyes or lungs, and others are all too often unaware of the risk.

To its credit, the Town of Westerly has enacted a noise ordinance, but rather than regulating the use of residential power equipment for lawn and grounds maintenance, it makes an exception for "lawn care and grounds maintenance equipment in normal daytime usage if used and maintained in accordance with the manufacturer's specifications." In the interests of public health and comfort, a safe environment, clean air, and maintaining our quality of life, the Town might be well advised to revisit the issue and consider regulating, if not outright banning, these noisy and dangerous machines.

JY





## Stranded Seals

As summer draws to a close and fall approaches, Rhode Island beach walkers may soon be rewarded by seeing seals basking on local beaches. From October to early spring, seals migrate to Rhode Island coastal waters from Canada or Greenland, and occasionally “haul out” on Rhode Island beaches to rest. While they may seem out of place and appear to need help, it’s important to remember that this is their normal behavior. After their long journey and between meals, they simply need some R&R. Disturbing them is not only unwise: it’s prohibited by law.

Mystic Aquarium, DEM, Save the Bay, and other organizations that monitor, regulate, and educate about seals in Rhode Island stress the important role that beach-goers play in their survival. A well-intentioned intervention – even as seemingly minor as getting close to the animal – can do considerable harm. Seals have no natural predators here, so humans pose the greatest threat. Consequently, the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 was adopted to protect seals by prohibiting approaching, touching, feeding, or harassing them. Harassing does not mean simply teasing, poking, or letting a curious dog get too close. Any human action that interrupts the animal’s normal behavior, attracts its attention, or disturbs it in any way is considered harassment, and is prohibited for the safety of the seal and observer alike.

Regulations and guidelines have saved hundreds of seals along the New England coast since 1972, some of them right here in Watch Hill. Over the course of a winter, many come and go without incident, and the population is growing. But occasionally one will show signs of distress. That’s where the Mystic Aquarium and its First Responders can make the difference between life and death. A stranded yearling was found on Napatree in January of 2008, transported to the Mystic Aquarium Seal Clinic for treatment for dehydration, and later released. Without prompt action, it would have died.



Such assistance is not unusual for the Aquarium, which works with volunteer First Responders and environmental organizations along the New England coast when sea mammals and marine turtles are found stranded. Typically, a stranded animal will be transported to the clinic, treated, observed, and released. In some instances, more drastic measures will be taken. When a harp seal yearling was stranded in Niantic in 2008, a physical exam revealed his stomach held a large quantity of stones.

Janelle Schuh, Stranding Coordinator for the Mystic Aquarium, explains that “in their natural habitat, seals live on ice floes and it’s instinctive to eat snow and ice. Beyond that habitat, they can’t distinguish between snow and sand, so may eat sand and rocks on the beaches.” Without surgical intervention and follow-up, this may lead to perforation of the stomach and probable death.

Westerly Hospital Gastroenterology Department and Mystic Aquarium veterinarians worked together to remove most of the stones. The seal remained at the Aquarium under medical care for several weeks before being released. A tracking device later showed that he had recovered from his ordeal well enough to return to the colder waters of Greenland within a few months.

In a recent lecture about the First Responder program, Schuh stressed the role of volunteers who can get to the scene before the Mystic crew. First Responders protect the animal by keeping bystanders at a distance, identifying the species, noting symptoms, and contacting the Mystic Aquarium professionals, who are both qualified and permitted by law to take whatever action is necessary. The Aquarium is seeking more volunteer First Responders, and holds several free training sessions a year. No experience or expertise is required. Contact the Aquarium if you would like to volunteer.

What should you do if you see a seal on the beach? First, be aware that this behavior is typical for seals in Rhode Island in the winter. They do not need to be in the water or wet all the time; they may stay beached for long periods simply to rest. However, if a seal is in a flat position, with head and flippers on the ground rather than in an upward-curved “banana” pose, it may be in distress. Do not approach the animal; stay at least 50 yards away. Alarming it may cause further distress. Call Mystic Aquarium at 860-572-5955 ext. 107. JY

For more information and excellent videos about stranded seals, visit these web sites:

<http://www.mysticaquarium.org/videos/animals/401-animal-rescue-program>

<http://www.mysticaquarium.org/videos/animals/390-seal-release>



Top photo & photos above and to the left: courtesy Mystic Aquarium

Far Left: photo courtesy Skip Graf, Mystic Aquarium

## Coming Soon!

As this issue of the *Conservator* goes to press, President Obama has just signed an executive order creating the first National Ocean Policy in the country’s history. How is Rhode Island on the cutting edge of ocean policy-making? Look for more information in the Winter issue of the *Conservator*.



NAPATREE INVESTIGATOR NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2010 VOL. 2 No.2 WATCH HILL, R.I.



## Investigators Summer 2010!

### “Hot town, summer in the city...”

That line, from a song your parents would remember, isn’t a bad description of summer 2010! At the time this edition is being written, we’re looking at the hottest season in years. This is a huge contrast to our first walk of 2009. If you were with us then, you may recall that it was windbreaker weather! Cool temps and a stiff breeze kept everyone out of the water. How things change from one year to the next!

Anyway, it’s time to get to our late summer update! Have fun!

*Hugh, Steve, Jan, Tim, Juliana, and Kathy*



On July 18th, naturalist Steve Brown was able to capture an injured loon that was unable to fly. The loon was certainly an able swimmer and Steve got quite wet! The bird was turned over to US Fish & Wildlife Service, which transported it to a wildlife rehabilitator.

## The Seine Net: An Investigator Favorite

“Who’s gonna go deep?” “I will!” As the Investigators walk the beach at Napatree, there’s one tool that never fails to get attention: the seine (pronounced “SANE”) net. Made with floats on top and weights on the bottom, it’s a long net stretched between two poles that always gets a lot of excitement going on the beach.

When the seine comes out for the first time, most Investigators continue to explore on their own; meanwhile, two kids take the net, with one staying close to shore and the other going a bit deeper. As the deep part of the net is brought around in a circular sweep, a wide variety of marine creatures are brought up. The team brings the net up to the beach, and then the screams begin!

“Whoa! Check this out!” “Hurry up and get the bucket! We’ve got a million fish in here!” Suddenly the entire crew is crowding around the net, now alive with glittering silversides and scampering sand shrimp. Once the team gathers the critters for observation, there’s stiff competition to see who will be the next to try out the net!

Later, Investigators and Naturalists will identify the catch and learn a bit about them before returning them to the water. Then it seems the cry is always the same: “We need to do this again!”

Photos by Janice Sassi



CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINE AND SHARE WITH FRIENDS!