



THE WATCH HILL CONSERVATOR
222 Watch Hill Road
Watch Hill, Rhode Island 02891

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THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2011 VOL. 4 No. 3 WATCH HILL, R.I.



Horsing Around in the Off-Season: Preserving the Flying Horses of Watch Hill



If you ask for directions to anywhere in Watch Hill, the reply often begins with “Do you know where the Merry-Go-Round is? Well, from there...” An icon of summer fun, a trigger for happy memories, a geographic reference point: the flying horses of Watch Hill are all of these and more.

But even they leave Bay Street in the winter. Most go into storage at the Memorial Building of the Library and Improvement Society; some are moved to the workshop of woodcarver Gary Anderson for major or minor surgery or a cosmetic make-over.



Photo courtesy Gary Anderson

“Basically, these are the original horses that have been here since at least the early 1880s, and were probably made in 1867.” Anderson explained early this summer in an illustrated presentation at the Ocean House. The Watch Hill horses are the only surviving example of horses made by Andrew Christian when he was working with Charles Dare, and demonstrate the evolution of the rocking horse (cause of innumerable injuries and occasional deaths) to the safer “spring rockers” with their outstretched front legs, designed to stay clear of the floor on the downward thrust, and finally to the carousel horses we see today. “These steeds have been subjected to damp nights and hot days and hostile environments for over 140 years,” he notes, “but they have been lovingly cared for as well.”

Like anything else made of organic material (the horses are all wood, with leather harnesses and saddles, real horse hair tails and manes, and cloth blankets), the “tethered treasures” have inherent threats to their longevity. Add to that generations of children climbing on them in salty, wet bathing suits and sneakers, hundreds of thousands of metal rings being collected and plunked over painted ears, wind-driven sand blasting from the nearby beach, and other traumas, and it’s no small wonder that they are still able to be enjoyed at all.

Anderson, who teaches marine carving at Mystic Seaport Museum, is an artist who spends most of his time recreating and restoring historical objects in wood, bronze, and paint, as well as carving signs, working in clay, painting, and drawing in pen and ink. He has been care-giver for the 20 carousel horses for 18 years. Working with the Watch Hill Fire District, which owns the carousel, and the Watch Hill Improvement Society, which shares in their maintenance, he continues in the tradition of many former craftsmen. “My guess is there have been dozens involved in their upkeep over the years,” he notes, naming Ed Barber, the Larkins, Lido Mochetti, Bill Street, and Gil Beebe, and

noting that there were countless others whose work is not recorded. Like his predecessors, he repairs and repaints the animals in an on-going cycle of maintenance, often finding himself repairing previous repairs.

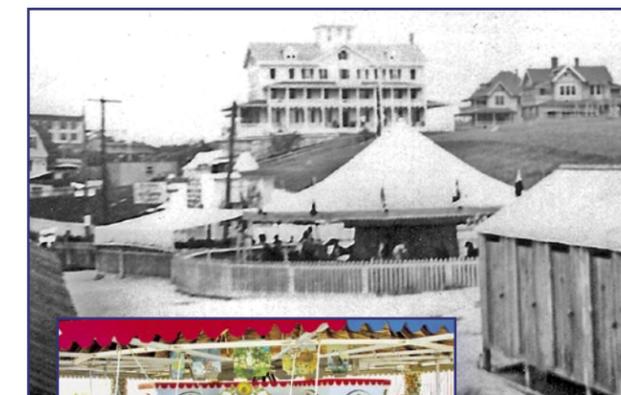


Photo courtesy Gary Anderson



Photo Deb Stallwood

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

CALENDAR

- **Daily, through September 2, Watch Hill Memorial Library and Improvement Society, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.**
- **Sundays, through September 11, Watch Hill Chapel Roman Catholic Mass, 8:30 a.m. Nondenominational “Union” Service, 10 a.m.**
- **August 26, American Songbook, Ocean House oceanhouseevents.com**
- **August 28, 5 p.m., Hymn Sing, Watch Hill Chapel**
- **August 30, 6 p.m. – 9 p.m., Concert in the Park, Watch Hill**
- **September 2, Cabaret on the Lawn, Ocean House oceanhouseevents.com**



Photo Julia Royster

“There have been so many repairs over time that the repairs themselves have left their mark,” Anderson explains. There are joints and nails and a variety of glues where wood has been scarfed in, a connect-the-dots of nail holes, filler materials ranging from wood to epoxy to cement, each adding a new challenge to the restoration/preservation process.

Anderson credits Harriet Chappell Moore and her book, *Around and Around: the Story of the Watch Hill Carousel*, with nurturing an awareness and better stewardship of these Watch Hill treasures. But even the best care can’t halt their inevitable deterioration over time, and even a wooden horse can withstand only so many knee replacements, replaced tails, (real horse tails), and eye transplants. Is it time to retire them completely, and preserve what remains of the original materials?

“We’re constantly faced with the question of use vs. preservation,” Anderson reflects. “Is it more important to maintain these horses as pure artifacts or to keep them in service for the enjoyment of this and future generations? We’ve decided, for now at least, to keep them flying. I firmly believe that the more we take care of these things from our past, the better future we will have. There’s a whole new generation of kids in Watch Hill who love them, so I’m sure they’ll be around for a long time.” JY



Photo courtesy Gary Anderson

The Great New England Hurricane of September 21, 1938

The end of summer always brings to my mind the Great New England Hurricane of September 21, 1938. I had not yet been born, but my childhood at Watch Hill in the late 1940s and 1950s was nonetheless overshadowed by the recent memories and stories of that storm, the greatest natural disaster ever to hit New England.

The first thing to know about the Hurricane is that, unlike any modern hurricane, warning of which is given days in advance, the 1938 storm arrived, first on Long Island and minutes later along the eastern Connecticut and Rhode Island shore, with *no warning whatsoever*.

To be sure, the storm had been identified as a full-blown hurricane northeast of Puerto Rico on September 16. As it strengthened over the next three days, the U.S. Weather Bureau office in Jacksonville, Florida, had issued a warning for landfall in southeast Florida. But by the morning of September 20, the storm was slowing and turning north and warnings were dropped because it was expected to curve off to the northeast and pass out to sea. Then, unnoticed by the Weather Bureau, as the storm cleared Cape Hatteras in the early hours of the 21st, it encountered a powerful upper air trough arriving from the Great Lakes and Canada. Swept forward by the trough, the storm rushed northward, unobserved, at the terrific forward speed of 70 mph, probably the fastest ever recorded for a hurricane.



Photo: *Seaside Topics*, November 1938. Reproduced from *Watch Hill Through Time*, Chaplin Bradford Barnes

Photo Richard C. Youngken

An early morning report from the Cunard liner *Corinthia*, located off Hatteras, of extremely low barometric pressure failed to arouse concerns at the Washington, D.C. branch of the Weather Bureau; just 12 hours before the storm hit Long Island, the prediction of a junior forecaster that the storm might be heading for Long Island and New England was overruled by his superiors. No hurricane warning was posted north of Florida and no storm warnings were posted north of Atlantic City; the *New York Times* forecast for New England called for “rain, probably heavy today and tomorrow, cooler.”

By 10 a.m., the sky had clouded over in Long Island and southern New England, and the wind had picked up. Many people observed that the sky had assumed an ominous yellow tint, but with no warnings, few took precautions. Five hours later the storm smashed onto Long Island, roughly 10 miles west of Westhampton Beach, with a ten-foot storm surge on top of an astronomical high tide, already a foot above normal. Observers along the shore first mistook the rushing wall of water for an incoming fog bank. The impact of the storm was recorded seismically as far away as Sitka, Alaska.

Shortly after 3 p.m., the full force of the storm swept across Long Island Sound and onto the Connecticut and Rhode Island coasts. Storm tides of 18 to 25 feet occurred between New London and Cape Cod. The strongest winds were clocked in the dangerous right-hand semicircle, east of the eye of the storm, which landed just west of New Haven. Sustained winds in excess of 100 mph were recorded along the coast from New London to Fall River. The Weather Station at Fishers Island recorded a peak of 120 mph, just after the weather tower blew down. In Providence, sustained winds were 100 mph, with gusts up to 125 mph. As the storm travelled north, the Blue Hill Meteorological Observatory, just south of Boston, and 60 miles from the eye, recorded sustained winds of 120 mph and gusts as high as 186 mph; in New Hampshire, at the top of Mount Washington, sustained winds of 118 mph were clocked, with gusts to 163 mph.

At Watch Hill, the 21st had dawned mild and hazy with a brisk breeze. Just days before, a number of families had left for the beginning of the school year; many others had stayed on to enjoy the mild mid-September weather. Those who swam that morning remarked on the warmth of the water.

UPDATE:

Westerly Harbor Management Plan: Watch Hill Cove, Napatree, and Little Narragansett Bay

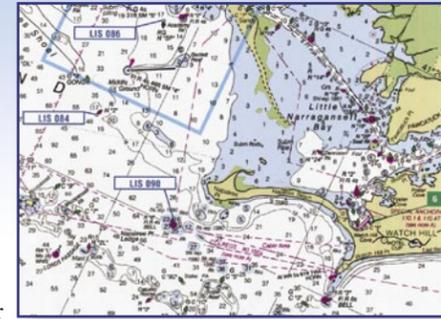


Chart NOAA

This summer, Westerly’s Harbor Management Commission has been reviewing public input on sections of the Town’s Harbor Management Plan that relate to Watch Hill’s harbor areas. The Watch Hill Fire District, the Conservancy, and the Watch Hill Yacht Club have continued to provide information and have submitted a draft plan and implementation language presenting their recommendations. A number of other Westerly shoreline organizations have been contributing to this process by providing local area information.

The public waters of the State of Rhode Island, including those off Westerly, are held in trust for all to enjoy. The State has delegated the authority to devise local harbor management plans to the towns with coastal resources, with final approval of all plans by the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council. Hence the Town of Westerly’s Commission has been proceeding diligently on developing a plan and implementing ordinances, gathering information and ideas from all affected parties along the way. This is no easy task.

A draft Watch Hill portion of the Plan was submitted to the Commission in July with additional information following in August. Continual emphasis has been placed on the importance of recognizing Napatree as a wildlife habitat conservation area, while at the same time preserving its superb recreational values for local beach-goers, tourists, and wildlife enthusiasts. Balancing the impacts of these activities is crucial to the support of both functions.

For example, the draft Watch Hill submission seeks to encourage and guide recreational uses to areas that have the least impact upon terrestrial and marine habitats while retaining full enjoyment by the public. The habitats include the dunes and dune grass areas, areas of the beaches used as nesting sites, the eel grass beds in shallow water near the north side beach, the lagoon, and other areas of the beach that not only support endangered wildlife, but also help stabilize Napatree from the ravages of weather and erosion. The goal is to protect this fragile physical resource from any loss that would diminish its overall environmental character and its recreational values, while at the same time allowing for public enjoyment of the area.

The draft Watch Hill section of the Town’s Plan also addresses visitor safety by organizing boating access to logical, sustainable, and safe areas that are not ecologically sensitive. For example, the fragile lagoon at the westerly end of the Point would be protected as not suitable for landing due to adjacent eel grass beds and the wildlife habitat.

A public anchorage would be maintained off Napatree in Little Narragansett Bay. This area is currently used for anchorage, but is not defined. Under the plan it would be marked each season with buoys designating the anchorage and serving as navigation aids. Few public anchorages exist along the coast for transient boaters; consequently, that off Napatree has been of considerable value over the years, and should be preserved.

Fixed moorings for overnight visitors would also have a separately delineated area at the east end of Napatree closer to Watch Hill Cove, the Watch Hill Yacht Club, and Bay Street dinghy docks. Fixed mooring fields and anchorages do not mix well due to the risk of anchoring equipment fouling fixed mooring tackle; hence it is preferable to maintain them as separate areas, each of which would be located off Conservancy and Watch Hill Fire District Napatree land, thereby preserving the littoral rights of the few remaining private lot owners on Napatree.

Within the draft recommendations of the Fire District, Watch Hill Yacht Club, and Watch Hill Conservancy, Watch Hill Cove retains a fixed mooring zone, which has traditionally been monitored and maintained by the Watch Hill Yacht Club. Here private moorings with standardized mooring tackle will be permitted by the Town. The Fire District and the Yacht Club will continue to be the stewards for the Cove, with the Yacht Club operating under the Town permitting system, with a set of private member and guest moorings.

Note: This information is accurate as of July 25, 2011; subsequent meetings and actions by the Harbor Management Commission, the Town, and the participating organizations, guided by public input, may have resulted in some changes by the time of publication of this issue of the *Conservator*. RCY

MEMBERSHIP FORM

The Watch Hill Conservancy is a not-for-profit organization. Your membership supports the protection of the natural and cultural resources of Watch Hill, a variety of programs, and educational publications, including this newsletter.

Member name: _____

Preferred mailing address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

INDIVIDUAL: \$25
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

BUSINESS: \$75
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

FAMILY: \$100
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

SUPPORTER: \$250 - \$499
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

SPONSOR: \$500 - \$999
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

PATRON: \$1,000 - \$2,499
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

BENEFACTOR: \$2,500 - \$5,000 or more
No: ____ Total: \$ _____

OTHER CONTRIBUTION Total: \$ _____

Mail to:
THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY
222 Watch Hill Road
Watch Hill, R.I. 02891

Please include names of family members 18 and under. If you are making gifts of memberships, please include the names and addresses of those to receive these gifts.



Trash or Not?

Take a look at this picture. Is all of that trash? What should be taken off the beach, and what's okay to leave? Here are some ideas:



Photo Hugh Markey

Photo Julia Royster



- A. Brick:** man-made. It can stay. It's probably from one of the many houses that lined Napatree many years ago. Although it's man made, it won't damage the environment. Just don't stub your toe on it!
- B. Fish skull:** Some might find it gross, some interesting, but that skull is part of the natural environment, so it can stay. When fish die, their bodies become an important food source for many different creatures like crabs and snails.
- C. Wrapper:** man-made, of course! Shiny plastics and mylar balloons pose a particular problem, because sea turtles that normally feed on jellyfish can mistake them for food. Eating these can make the turtle seriously ill, so they should be taken to the closest covered trash barrel!
- D. Bottle:** Lots of kids collect sea glass, but whole bottles like the one above are just junk! Please carry out everything you carry in!
- E. Cool rock sculpture:** Go for it! Lots of pretty things can be made with natural objects that you find on the beach, and left for others to admire!



Photo Julia Royster

That's just a sample of some of the cool things we did along the shore this summer. We'll talk more about our adventures in the next edition of the Napatree Investigator. Until then, see you on the beach!



Photos Julia Royster

Find out more about us by going to www.thewatchhillconservancy.org

See You at the Beach!

- Stephen Brown: *Naturalist and director of our Napatree Investigators program*
- Hugh Markey: *Naturalist*
- Tom Pappadia: *Greeter*
- Donnie Cornell: *Warden*
- Juliana Berry: *Environmental Project Coordinator*
- Janice Sassi: *Napatree Point Conservation Area Manager*

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.

The Watch Hill Conservancy
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Website: www.thewatchhillconservancy.org

A group of Watch Hill friends went to Weekapaug at about 1 p.m. to enjoy a picnic lunch. The party broke up, however, with rising wind and the arrival of rain around 2:30. Several of the guests encountered falling trees as they returned to Watch Hill. Shortly thereafter, windows began to blow in and chimneys fall on Lighthouse Road, and observers saw the sea beginning to wash over Napatree and then the first four or five Napatree cottages disappear into the Bay. Forty-two people – cottagers, servants, and workmen – were trapped on Napatree when escape to higher ground was cut off by the rapidly rising seas. Roughly two terrifying hours later, by about 4:30, all 39 cottages, the two Pavilions of the Watch Hill Beach Association, the Beach Club, and the Yacht Club had been demolished. Fifteen people were killed as their houses were shattered around them under the punishing waves. Twenty-seven others survived as they were swept, clinging to wreckage, across the Bay to the Connecticut shore. Other houses were destroyed at Watch Hill, one on Lighthouse Point and several along East Beach, but no further loss of life occurred.

In a matter of hours, Napatree, its cottage colony obliterated, became the empty barrier beach we know today. The northern tip of the Point, breached by the sea, became an island, Sandy Point. Napatree itself had been shoved northward into Little Narragansett Bay. Few remnants of the buildings that once stood there remain. Although a visitor occasionally spots a granite block or a brick on the beach, the concrete, stone, and asphalt remains of seawalls, terraces, and even of Fort Road itself are seaward, buried in the beach or submerged in the waters of Fishers Island Sound.

Today, markers commemorate lost lives and the phenomenal impact of the storm on the landscape. A bronze plaque located by the Plimpton Dock records the names of the fifteen people whose lives were lost. Along Ocean View Highway, by the cart path on the slope of the Misquamicut Club hill, below the 11th tee and across the road from the lower golf course and the ponds, stands a carved granite boulder at some dozen feet above the road, marking the high-water mark of the Hurricane.

As the warm end of summer arrives, with the tranquility and beauty of September days, I hope that ours and future generations will remember and think about that historic and terrible day in the history of Watch Hill.

CBB

For further reference, the recollections of Napatree survivors, written and published just months later in *Watch Hill in the Hurricane of September 21, 1938 (Watch Hill: Seaside Topics, 1938)* make gripping reading. Much of this material appears in *Watch Hill Through Time: The Evolution of a New England Shore Community*, Chaplin Bradford Barnes (Watch Hill: The Watch Hill Conservancy, 2005). Another valuable publication is *Sudden Sea, The Great Hurricane of 1938*, R.A. Scotti (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2003). Much fascinating meteorological information is contained in *Divine Wind, The History and Science of Hurricanes*, Kerry Emanuel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2005).

THE WATCH HILL LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS ASSOCIATION: PRIVATE ENTERPRISE FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD



Its light flashes rhythmically through the night sky, alerting sailors that they are at the entrance to Fishers Island Sound and that there are dangerous reefs nearby. In dense fog, the deep resonance of the fog-horn sends the same warning. The U. S. Coast Guard maintains these navigation aids, but the buildings that house them and the adjacent grounds are preserved by a local, volunteer, educational enterprise: the Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association.

A group of local citizens, led by the Watch Hill Improvement Society, stepped in. "They saw the need to preserve the site and the buildings" recalls Bill White, current president of the Association. "And they knew it was up to the people of Watch Hill. They worked to help form the Association and a lease was negotiated with the Coast Guard. We took on four buildings and about four acres of land." Over the years, buildings have been stabilized, preserved, and given new functions, and the grounds have remained open to the public. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on capital improvements, emergency repairs, the establishing of the museum, and an annual operating budget of about \$45,000, raised primarily by rental of two apartments in the lighthouse building, an annual appeal for funds, donations, and the earnings of a small endowment.

Continued p 4

In 1807, Thomas Jefferson commissioned a lighthouse on the site; it was destroyed and a new one built in 1856, which continues to function as it has for over 200 years, with one significant change that has had a profound impact on the stewardship of this historic site: automated equipment has replaced lighthouse keepers. While the Coast Guard ensures that the navigation aids are working properly, the buildings that house them and the grounds were decommissioned in 1986.

Photos Richard C. Youngken



Lighthouse continued

Under the terms of the lease, the Coast Guard retained responsibility for repairs to the sea wall. "The nor'easter of 2007 seriously damaged the wall on the east side of the property, undermining and cracking the wall and leaving a gaping hole in one section. Some repairs have been made, but not by the Coast Guard," explains White. "Even though it's technically responsible for the repairs, it was unable to raise emergency funds, so the Association took on the work itself. More extensive repairs are desperately needed, and the Coast Guard does not have funding, so again the Association is stepping up. We have completed engineering work and are moving on to the permitting process. If all goes well work may begin this fall."

"We're lucky to have a modest endowment," notes White, "but we're going to need some help from local foundations and the public. They've supported the site for over twenty years. It's seen as a special and important place, and we're confident they'll help us continue to preserve it, to maintain the wall so no further damage is done."

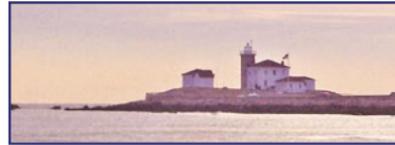


Photo Richard C. Youngken

The site is open year-round for walking, sightseeing, and fishing; the museum is open two afternoons a week in July and August. The road, however, is privately owned by property-owners on Lighthouse Road, so access is by foot only (except for senior citizens and the handicapped, who may drive in). White explains, "It's important that we continue to be good neighbors, so we don't host large events and we don't want the site to bring traffic onto the Point. We welcome visitors to enjoy the view and be by the ocean, and encourage them to visit the museum, but the road is narrow and the sight lines are limited, so for safety's sake we ask that they park off site and walk in."

The Coast Guard is gradually selling decommissioned lighthouses to not-for-profit organizations or to individuals who agree to maintain the historic structures. Watch Hill Light is not yet on the "For Sale" list, but if that day comes, White asserts that the Association expects to be prepared to take full title. "The community has invested a lot in this place; we're preserving it because it's an important landmark, and a beautiful site. We do it for the public, the people of this area."



Photo Richard C. Youngken

Chaplin Barnes, Executive Director of the Watch Hill Conservancy, commends the Lighthouse Keepers Association for their commitment to preserving this landmark. "It's a quiet effort to maintain a property that most people would think is managed by the federal government. It's not. The public should know and appreciate what the Association does as a private agency to take care of the buildings and their site for the public."

The Association welcomes contributions in support of their efforts. Donations can be mailed to The Watch Hill Lighthouse Keepers Association, Post Office Box 1511, Westerly, RI, 02891 JY

Napatree Notes

Even though we have enjoyed fabulous weather this summer, our endangered and threatened bird species have not fared well. Least terns, piping plovers, and American oystercatchers all nest on the ground and with that behavior comes obvious risk. All nests are monitored daily by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which found that some of the nests were predated (raided or destroyed by predators) and some were lost to high tides.

Sadly, in addition to losing nests to the forces of nature, someone spent considerable time during the week of June 20th cutting ropes that form enclosures designed to protect the piping plovers' and least terns' nests on Napatree. The ropes were cut on both sides of the poles displaying signs that explain the reason for the enclosures. Hundreds of feet of rope were removed, and there was evidence of human and dog traffic in the protected areas. Napatree is now left with 4 nests, having lost 21.

These birds are protected by law; vandalism of this kind is a crime. If you have information concerning this despicable act, please call the Fish and Wildlife Service at 364-9124. JS



Photos Janice Sassi

On Saturday, July 8th, Marion Krepcio, a naturalist and sole proprietor of a local marine-based educational company whose goal is teaching conservation and preservation of local ecosystems, treated a group of amateur conchologists (people who study mollusks and shells) to the wonders of Napatree's tide line and the treasures within. Participants learned about the important role the common quahog shell played in the lives of Native Americans and New England settlers, meeting needs from fertilizer to calcium supplement! If you have ever picked through a wrack line or admired a pretty shell, a stroll with Marion Krepcio opens up your eyes to a fascinating world to which most people just give a passing glance. JS



Glaucous Gull Sighting

Recently, bird watchers have been treated to the presence of a Glaucous Gull. This Arctic native was observed by Reynold Larson, who has been recording bird species on Napatree since 1963! JS



NAPATREE INVESTIGATOR NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2011 VOL. 3 No.3 WATCH HILL, R.I.

NEW AND NOTABLE FROM SUMMER 2011!

By Hugh Markey

What a summer for Napatree Investigators! This season, Naturalists Steve Brown, Hugh Markey, and Kathy Hallal had help from Caroline Mellen, Cole Hill, and Will Hartford, all high schoolers who did a great job! Plus, Steve and Hugh improved this season's program by having themes that changed throughout the season. We investigated horseshoe crab tagging, shell collecting, crab life, and more! Here's some of what we learned about.



Investigators Aid in Research

Napatree Investigators have learned lots about horseshoe crabs: how to pick them up (not by the tail, please!), why they're important (their eggs provide protein to birds, among other vital uses), and how to tell boys from girls (boys have "boxing glove" claws made to hang onto the female). But this year, Investigators had a chance to help with important scientific research on these creatures: tagging and recording information.

One focus of this season's Investigators' program has been learning about these creatures, who look pretty much the same as they did 400 million years ago. When Naturalists Steve, Hugh, and Kathy brought a group of Investigators onto the beach this season, they were lucky enough to tag several of these animals. Our crew took measurements across their shells (or "carapaces"), recorded their sex, tagged them, and released them back into the water. The information we recorded will be entered into a computer as part of Project Limulus.

People finding tagged crabs later should write down the tag number and call the toll-free number to tell the folks when and where they found it, along with whether the crab was alive or dead. Be sure to leave the tag ON the crab if it's alive, so scientists can continue to monitor it as it goes forward with its life. Our Investigators did an outstanding job in this scientific research!



Photos Hugh Markey

CUT ALONG THE DOTTED LINE AND SHARE WITH FRIENDS!