



THE WATCH HILL CONSERVATOR
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Watch Hill, Rhode Island 02891

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THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2012 VOL. 5 No. 3 WATCH HILL, R.I.

WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY ACQUIRES ISLAND

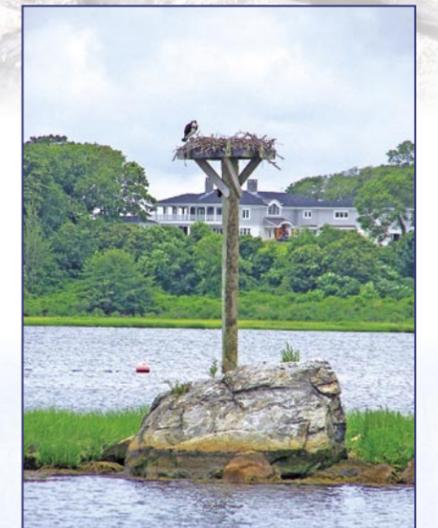
The Conservancy is delighted to announce the gift of a very special piece of Watch Hill property, an island, known as Taylor Island, in the Pawcatuck River near the mouth of Colonel Willie Cove. Through the unusual and creative collaborative effort of two successive owners, the first inspiring the gift and the second completing it, the Conservancy is now the owner of this beautiful small parcel, which is distinguished by a great granite boulder and an osprey platform.

The island is a part of a tract of land originally owned by James W. Taylor, a New Yorker, who, in 1919, acquired it and the point at the end of Breen Road. His daughter, Dorothy Taylor Gutterson, inherited the cottage at the southwest of the point, together with the island, and her grandson, John T. Gleason, in turn inherited part of his grandmother's property and the island from his mother, Mary Taylor "M.T." Gutterson Gleason. It was he who several years ago built the osprey platform. Earlier this year he and his family sold all the former Taylor/Gutterson/Gleason property to Jeanne and John Blasberg of Boston and Watch Hill, with the agreement on the part of the seller and buyers that the buyers would convey the island to be preserved in perpetuity by the Conservancy.

John Gleason recalls early hopes that ospreys would establish residency on the island. "In 1989, with the help of a friend, we installed a pole that had washed up on my family's island, hoping to encourage ospreys to nest. The original platform was a pallet with a plywood top. For 15 years the pole was vacant except for a pair of black back gulls that had several seasons of chicks on it. Around 2003 a young pair of ospreys attempted to build a nest on the platform. It took several years before they successfully fledged young but eventually they did. Watching the adults meet after their winter separation was always amazing."

In 2005, a spring storm knocked down the platform, taking the pole with it. The osprey pair, not to be discouraged, took up residency on the large boulder and successfully raised three fledglings there. In 2007, Gleason successfully applied to Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Commission for permission to replace the pole. In the spring of 2008, the Westerly firm of Atlantic Marine Construction Services donated a piling and installed it on the Island, and the nest was moved from the rock to a new platform atop the pole. "We're really grateful to AMCS," states Gleason. "Without their generous donation the ospreys would not be there today. They are a joy to watch and really make the island special."

The Conservancy is pleased to assume stewardship of this small but important property, and will ensure that the ospreys' habitat is preserved. CB/JY



Photos Richard C. Youngken
Osprey background photo Janice Sassi



THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY

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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

New Trail Path Markers



Conservancy Naturalist Hugh Markey installs a new path marker on Napatree, indicating where visitors can cross the Point from the bay side to the ocean with the least impact on the fragile dunes. Dune grasses help to stabilize the sand while offering protection for birds and other wildlife that inhabit Napatree seasonally or year-round. Visitors are welcome on Napatree, and are encouraged to help the Conservancy, Fire District, Audubon Society, and Fish and Wildlife Service in protecting this remarkable spot.

Photo Janice Sassi

Restoration of oyster beds in Rhode Island waters

Christopher Littlefield, The Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a non-profit global organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Most people know TNC for its ability to work with local and government partners to preserve land. For example, the protection of thousands of acres in the Wood Pawcatuck watershed has helped significantly to protect water quality in Little Narragansett Bay. Many do not realize TNC has a vibrant coastal and marine conservation program. Within the last decade, it launched its Global Marine Initiative, headquartered at the University of Rhode Island's Bay Campus, led by marine scientist Lynn Hale. Within just a few years, TNC has become the world's leader in both coral and oyster reef restoration.

In Rhode Island, TNC initiated a series of successful quahog restoration transplants under a unique partnership between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the TNC beginning in 2008, in collaboration with RI's Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), the Salt Ponds Coalition, and Save the Bay.

Building on that foundation, TNC then embarked on the first oyster restoration project in the state to demonstrate that oyster restoration can be accomplished not just by planting baby or "seed" oysters, but by selecting the best possible sites and planting shell or "cultch." This cultch is placed on reefs made of oyster and surf clam shells to keep it up off the bottom where oysters can thrive and otherwise would be subject to burial and more predation. The project has been dubbed "Oysters Gone Wild," and is now being implemented in Ninigret Pond in Charlestown. TNC plans to extend the work to other South County ponds next year.

Several experimental reefs were constructed in optimal locations in Ninigret Pond. This project is testing techniques to restore the hard shell substrate of the pond by returning shells to the estuary. Leading scientists believe the lack of shell substrate is hindering the return of wild oyster populations, which have declined over 95% in Rhode Island in the last 100 years due to overfishing, siltation, and consequent lack of shell. These shell deficits and oyster declines are not unique to Rhode Island; globally, oyster populations are at about a tenth of levels a century ago and hard shell surfaces above bottom muck are essential for them to thrive.

To complete the Ninigret Pond projects TNC received an in-kind donation of 1,000 biodegradable mesh bags to be used in reef construction. Filled by staff and many hardy volunteers, the bags of shell weighed 20-30 pounds each and could be stacked like sandbags. TNC is the first conservation organization to test the use of biodegradable mesh bags in reef construction and eliminate the use of plastic materials.

One live adult oyster can filter 30 - 50 gallons of water per day. Oyster reefs provide natural barriers to coastal erosion, and serve as critical nursery habitat for numerous marine species, including juvenile lobsters, crabs, blackfish, and black sea bass. These reefs act as nurseries to boost fish populations. The complex three-dimensional structure of the reef forms a valuable ecological community that is fundamental to the health of bays and estuaries along the entire east coast.

Oyster reefs are analogous, in our temperate waters, to coral reefs in the tropics. The project goal is to restore natural oyster populations in Rhode Island's salt ponds and estuaries to a sustainable level. A grant from the Forrest C. and Frances H. Lattner Foundation, public funding from the NOAA and the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) supported the first two years of the project. Officials from NOAA, RIDEM, and CRMC have been critical to the project's success.

In spring of 2011, TNC hired Coastal Ecologist David Steven Brown, and Dillon McNulty, a recent graduate of Roger Williams University, experienced in oyster restoration, to launch the effort.



With advice and support from shellfish experts at TNC, NOAA, and the University of Rhode Island, they conducted extensive field work at 13 sites around Ninigret Pond to determine the best areas for reef building.

Block Island school students loading shell into buckets for bagging for oyster reef construction.

Photo David Brown



Photo David Brown

The Nature Conservancy's marine scientist Steve Brown, restoration project manager for "Oysters Gone Wild," measuring oysters in the field

Through a partnership with sixteen Rhode Island restaurants and oyster bars, TNC collected more than four tons of shell and educated restaurant patrons on the project and the importance of oyster restoration via "Oysters Gone Wild" tent cards. Local papers, including a front-page Providence Journal article, recently highlighted the importance of oyster restoration and getting shells back into our coastal waters. This recycling effort also kept 60 cubic yards of oyster shells out of landfills.

To ensure proper timing of reef construction, oyster spawning events were assessed weekly by an analysis of reproductive development of adult oysters and microscopic larvae collection using plankton nets. In addition, spat collectors—mesh bags filled with cured surf clam shells—are deployed in the water column by volunteers owning docks on the ponds to assess how many larvae settle. Trained staff and volunteer assistants are currently examining these samples under the supervision of Brown and McNulty. The data collected is providing baseline information on oyster populations and aids in the identification of future restoration sites.

The Nature Conservancy is currently working with Rhode Island environmental agencies to make certain the new reefs are fully protected from harvesting, and is continuously monitoring the new populations. It may take years to achieve success, but by expanding both the scope and scale of the work along the entire Rhode Island coast, TNC hopes these reefs will become a source of wild oysters for people and wildlife for years to come.

The Nature Conservancy, along with partners and regulators, is exploring the potential to restore shellfish habitat in areas of degraded water quality in a number of select locations around Rhode Island. Potential sites include Little Narragansett Bay, Narrow River, Winnapaug Pond, Green Hill Pond, and other locations around the state. CL

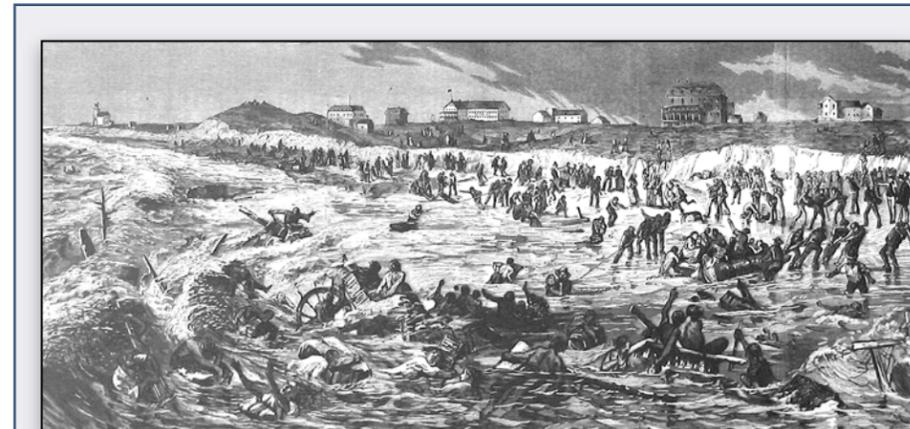
Bay Street Utility Infrastructure Project at Critical Juncture

The Town of Westerly's construction project on Bay Street resumes October 9, following a hiatus of several months for the summer high season. The Town's new water line and storm water detention systems are complete and in the ground, as is virtually all of the Conservancy's underground utility duct bank. Minimal work remains to be undertaken in the street for a small remaining portion of the duct bank to be installed in Larkin Road. But the Town is expected to restore sidewalks and curbs and to repave the portions of Bay Street, Plimpton and Larkin Roads, disturbed in last winter's construction and still not restored. By the conclusion of this phase of the project, the Conservancy will have expended \$2 million of privately-raised funding for its share of the project.

Early October is also the critical moment when the Conservancy is expected to receive hard cost numbers from potential contractors for the remaining long-anticipated final

phase of its project. Involved in that phase are the installation of transformers, running of utility wires underground, the removal of poles, connections to users, and installation of new street lighting, in short the crowning completion of the Bay Street revitalization project.

By October 1, the Conservancy expects to make a determination as to whether it has the funds in sight to complete the entire project. Rough estimates to date have indicated an approximately \$3 million additional cost for this final stage. Between now and then the Conservancy will continue aggressively to seek major gifts and so-far elusive state and federal grants – to be ready to meet the challenge of what is determined to be the actual cost of completion. The Conservancy and its Board are determined and optimistic that this exciting possibility can become a reality.



THE WRECK OF THE METIS

On August 30, 1872, portions of the wreck of the steamship *Metis* were swept onto East Beach with horrific loss of life, but also with acts of great bravery on the part of those who managed to rescue survivors. The Providence-New York liner, heading toward Providence, with a cargo of cotton and passengers and crew above the number recorded, collided with the schooner *Nellie Cushing*, some five miles south of Watch Hill Point, in pre-dawn darkness and a gale. *Harper's Weekly*, September 21, 1872, captured the scene. The Lighthouse and the "Watch Hill" are shown to the left. The Ocean House appears just to the right of center. A year after the tragedy, Congress authorized President Ulysses S. Grant to award gold medals to the men who had manned rescue boats, and ordered the construction of a Life Saving Station at Watch Hill. (For more, see *Watch Hill Through Time* by Chaplin Bradford Barnes, The Watch Hill Conservancy, 2005. Order forms are available on the Conservancy website.)

MEMBERSHIP FORM

The Watch Hill Conservancy is a non-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: _____

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Email: _____

INDIVIDUAL: \$25

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

BUSINESS: \$100

No: ____ Total: \$ _____

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No: ____ Total: \$ _____

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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.



MOLLUSKS & MUCUS & MOON SNAILS, OH MY!



Naturalist Steve Brown helps the crew identify their finds.

Grab a rake, a bucket, or your own bare feet! We're off to find mollusks!

This season, the Investigators kicked off the sessions with a focus on these sea creatures. Mollusks are oceanic animals that have a head and foot, as humans do. However, their insides are found in what is called a "mass", a loose collection floating inside the animal, whereas human insides are anchored in very specific areas. Mollusks include bivalves like clams and quahogs, as well as snails, such as periwinkles and moon snails.

The Investigators gathered recently along the shore at low tide on the bay side of Napatree and learned about collecting mollusks for study. We brought metal rakes designed to dig in the mud (or muddy underwater bottom) and learned about where mollusks live. We were able to find clams and quahogs (the bivalves) either by using the rakes or simply by twisting our feet back and forth in the mud until we felt something hard under them. Then, we brought the samples up to white dish pans that were filled with water. Steve and I helped the Investigators identify what they found with the help of field guides.

One mollusk that became the star of the show was a large moon snail. Each group managed to find a live snail that was larger than a golf ball. As the Investigators held it, the snail gradually came out of its shell and began to move along their hands on the snail's long foot. As it moved, the Investigators noticed that it left a trail of clear sticky stuff. Imagine their surprise when they learned that the sticky stuff was actually mucus! Eew! Yes, snails secrete mucus to make it easier to move along the sea floor... or along the hands of the Investigators!

The Atlantic Moon Snail.

Photos Hugh Markey



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

Stephen Brown: *Naturalist and director of our Napatree Investigator program*

Hugh Markey: *Naturalist*

Tom Pappadia: *Greeter*

Grace Lentini: *Beach Patrol*

Donnie Cornell: *Warden*

Kathy Hallal: *URI Coastal Fellows alumna*

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.

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FISH PACK A PURSE?

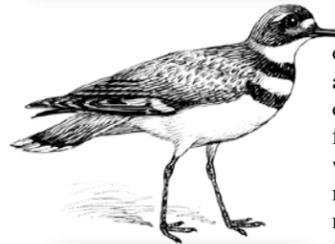
Naturalists on Napatree Point are often asked about small black rectangular items people find along the beach. They have tendrils, or stringy strands, coming out of each corner, and are about the length of a trading card. They're also hard and smooth. What are they?

These strange, small objects are egg cases for skates, small flat cousins of sharks found off the coast of Napatree. Skates are shaped like a triangle, and have a long, narrow tail. The ones sometimes found washed up on the ocean side of Napatree are around 18 inches long, and have a series of pointy bumps on their tails. When the female skate mates with a male, she forms two cases inside her body. Those cases, which are leathery to the touch, will be deposited on the bottom, where they will take roughly nine months to hatch.

The cases found on the beach are sometimes called "mermaid's purses" or "devil's purses" because of their unusual appearance. If the case is hard and dry, the skate has already hatched. Sometimes you can see a small hole, especially in the seam of the egg case. That's where the fish has emerged from the "purse" and, well, gone fishing!



Rose-breasted Grosbeak - This songbird sounds similar to a robin but mellower and more mellifluous; the male and female softly sing to each other as they switch places to sit on their eggs. They nest in trees and inhabit forest edges, eating insects from branches and leaves. Both sexes have large pale beaks and are finch-like in size and shape; the male is easily identifiable in black, white, and pink plumage.



Killdeer - Named for its shrill cry of "kill-deer!", this noisy plover runs across the ground in spurts, stopping only briefly to check on its progress or for insects. Not always associated with water, it frequents open ground like mudflats or even parking lots. Killdeer nests are shallow scrapes on the ground, typical of plovers. If nests are threatened by predators, responses may vary from feigning a broken-wing, loudly calling while bobbing up and down before taking off, or angling the tail over a fluffed-up head and body and running straight at the intruder.



Wilson's Phalarope - Reversing the usual avian roles, the female is the more colorful of the two sexes. The females also do the courting, fend off competitors, and leave the responsibilities of egg and chick rearing to the male. Characterized by their white, gray, and rust or crimson markings, their range does not usually extend this far east in North America. These shorebirds are great swimmers, using their fringed toes to swirl in circles on the water and stir up small aquatic creatures such as brine shrimp to feed on. (Photo: National Resources Conservation Service)



Did you find the answers to the questions from the beginning of this issue? If you did, you've earned the title of Napatree Investigator! Keep looking, reading, and asking questions!

See you on the beach!

SUMMER BIRD SIGHTINGS

The season is in full swing, and that includes birding. Whether you watch birds casually as an aside to your day at the beach or you're an avid and habitual observer, Napatree offers the opportunity to see an impressive number and variety of shorebirds and other birds each year. In addition to our resident avian population, the spring and summer find breeding species stopping by; the fall and winter play host to the migratory kind.

The last few months have shown a typical mix, including swallows, terns, cormorants, plovers, gulls, sandpipers, egrets, and, of course, ospreys. There have been a few standouts, however; these are birds that we rarely get the chance to spot here:

Ruby-throated Hummingbird

The only hummingbird to breed in eastern North America, this small and lithe bird has amazing flying ability and agility. It can halt instantly, hover, turn on a dime, and move up, down, backwards, and sideways, especially in pursuit of insects (whether they are resting, in mid-air, or in a spider web) or nectar. With their short and stubby legs, however, you won't see them walk or hop. The male and females each have a bright green back and crown and can seem to be jewels in flight, particularly the male with its glittering red throat and when aggressively defending its feeding territory with lightning-fast aerial chases. Residing in forests and meadows, their nests are the size of a thimble! (Upper photo: Steve Maslowski, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



Upland Sandpiper - The upland sandpiper is endangered in Rhode Island, and is not normally found at the coast. It prefers native grasslands and airports, of all places. A "ground" bird, it forages on insects and weed seeds while walking and sites its nests in shallow, scraped depressions. (Photo: U.S. Forest Service)



Great Crested Flycatcher - A songbird with a distinctive head crest, this bird keeps to the treetops. It is a cavity nester, often making its home on top of trash, using hair, leaves, twigs, paper, feathers, and even shed snake-skin. Mainly an insect eater, it can be found in the brushy western end of Napatree.



This year's unusual sightings of these birds attest to the significance of Napatree as a home and stop-over for a large number and variety of birds. Be sure to carry binoculars and a camera on your beach walks. The Conservancy's staff of naturalists invites you to share photos of birds rarely seen on Napatree. JB

Dogs on Napatree, Again

Misinformation regularly circulates to the public as to the legal restriction of dogs on Napatree, during certain times of the year and during certain times of the day.

To set the record straight, the *restriction is part of an ordinance of the Town of Westerly*, which the Napatree Conservation Program helps the Town to enforce by making visitors aware of it. Most visitors appreciate being informed and welcome a dog-free beach visit during the summer daytime hours.

The provision can be found in the *Westerly Code of Ordinances, Section 76-8*, which prohibits animals on public beaches of the Town,

except as it permits dogs, on a leash, at any time between the day after Labor Day and May 1, and between May 2 and Labor Day, again, only on a leash, and only between the hours of 6 p.m. and 8 a.m. The ordinance also prohibits dogs in any area demarcated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a nesting area for the threatened piping plover. The ordinance further provides that all dog droppings must be picked up and removed by the person walking or having control of the dog. (The Conservancy supplies plastic bags, which visitors use, but many, instead of removing, leave them behind for us to pick up; we would like to see that change!)

The Scoop on Pet Waste at Rhode Island Beaches

Amie Paris and Lauren Russo

We all love our pets. They are our best friends and favorite companions; however, what they leave behind can be harmful to our health and the environment. The US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) has identified pet waste as a pollutant and has included it as part of the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES).

USEPA states that pet waste is 57% more toxic than human waste, and can harbor bacteria and parasites which cause illness in humans. Diseases spread by pet waste include campylobacteriosis, giardiasis, salmonellosis, and toxocarriasis. All of these illnesses can cause gastrointestinal upset (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea). Some of the other symptoms may include fever, rash, or headache.

Children who are playing in the sand at the beach can come in contact with pet waste and then put their unwashed hands in their mouth. In addition, rainwater or the tides can carry and spread the bacteria from pet waste to the water in which we swim. In both of these cases, pet waste can make people sick. Just two or three days' worth of waste from 100 dogs can contribute enough bacteria to temporarily close a large area to swimming and shell fishing.

Pet waste is also harmful to the environment. It contains high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus, and can cause an increase in algae growth (algal blooms) in the bay. When bacteria decomposes algal blooms, they require oxygen from the water. During decomposition the water's oxygen supply is used by the bacteria instead of by animals in the bay. When pet waste is thrown in storm drains, the runoff from streets to these drains washes the waste right into the bay and ocean.

In 2011, the Rhode Island Department of Health's (HEALTH) Beach Program partnered with the University of Rhode Island (URI) Undergraduate Research Initiative to investigate the extent of pet waste at beaches in Rhode Island. Data was collected from beach managers, the public, and from water quality analysts. In addition, students from URI visited saltwater beaches throughout the state and evaluated each for pet use, visible pet waste, visitor's perspectives and opinions regarding pets at the beach. If pet waste was observed on a beach, water samples were collected and analyzed for the presence of E. Coli bacteria (One in five of the beaches where pet waste was observed had elevated levels of E. Coli bacteria). Results from the study were utilized in educational outreach materials that communicate the results of the investigation and the importance of citizens to clean up after their pets.

One observation of the surveys shows that regulations regarding pet use at beaches vary by facility management. Many beaches allow pets year-round while some have restrictions based on seasons or times of the day.



Philly enjoys a morning stroll on the beach. Photo: Elizabeth Gooding.

More than 100 members of the public were polled at beaches throughout the state during the investigation. The results of the surveys included:

- 82% of respondents think pet waste on the beach is a problem.
 - 23% of respondents had seen or come across waste on the beach.
 - 74% said pet waste on public beaches should be better regulated.
 - Less than half of the respondents knew the regulations regarding dog use at the beach they were visiting.
- In Rhode Island, there are some 255,000 dogs who produce approximately 70 million pounds of waste each year. It is each pet owner's responsibility to clean up after their pet. If you are visiting a beach in Rhode Island with your four-legged friend:
- Know and follow the rules of every beach and public area that you visit.
 - State beaches: No dogs allowed from April 1 to September 30.
 - Town beaches: Ordinances and potential fines vary by town but rules are generally posted at each beach.
 - When you take your pet outside, use a bag to pick up pet waste. Dispose of the bag in a proper disposal receptacle.
 - Don't throw waste near or in storm drains.
 - Encourage your friends and family to do the same.

In the future, where pet waste is observed to be a problem, HEALTH will continue to develop a pet waste management plan and work with partners to find and eliminate sources of contamination at Rhode Island beaches.

~Amie Parris and Lauren Russo are with the Beach Program at the Rhode Island Department of Health.



Welcome to another issue of the Napatree Investigator!

Steve, Kathy, and I hope you've been having lots of fun at the amazing Napatree Point Conservation Area, because we sure have! – Hugh Markey

Before you jump into the rest of the issue, we have some questions for you to think about:

1. What are Mermaid's purses? Are they accessories that Ariel left on the beach?
2. Those long insects with big wings flying along the dune – should I be afraid of them?
3. How can snails move so well over a sandy sea bottom?

Not sure of the answers? Read on and find out!

DRAGONFLY DELIGHT

“SEWING NEEDLE BEES! RUN! THEY'LL SEW YOUR LIPS SHUT!”

Have you ever heard someone say that? Are there really insects that can sew your lips together?

No way! In fact the bugs that kids say that about are not bees at all, but dragonflies. These four-winged fliers are often seen hovering over the dunes of Napatree Point. Dragonflies can fly forward, backward, or hover in place like helicopters as they continually search for their insect meals. They have fierce-looking jaws and long

bodies that make it seem as if they have stingers, but they are completely harmless to people.

Dragonflies are most often found near water, either fresh or salt. When they perch on a piece of grass or a branch, their wings stand straight out from their bodies. Because they have four wings instead of two, dragonflies can do lots of flying stunts when they're chasing down a meal. The wings make it easier to stop, go, and turn, which gives them an advantage over their buggy breakfast. Dragonflies can be very helpful in keeping down the population of harmful bugs like mosquitoes!

So the next time someone starts to scream about “sewing needle bees”, just say, “Relax! Those are just delightful dragonflies!”

