

The Watch Hill Conservator



HISTORICAL PRESERVATIONIST RICHARD C. YOUNGKEN HONORED

Richard C. Youngken was awarded the 2021 *Frederick C. Williamson Professional Leadership Award* by Preserve Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission. Rich (pictured right) was honored for his many years of preservation planning work in Rhode Island communities. The presentation was made on October 17th at Linden Place in Bristol, RI. Richard's peers and colleagues reflected on his significant contributions. Rich was the historical preservationist for the award-winning restoration of the Lanphear Livery, where many of you have attended our Lanphear *LIVE!* presentations and where the Conservancy keeps its office. Grant G. Simmons III (pictured left), Conservancy Vice President and key member of the Lanphear Livery restoration team, commented that "*Rich kept the restoration team honest and would not allow any departure from the historic character of the building.*" Sheila Brush, a Board Member of Preserve Rhode Island, praised Richard's "*commitment to educating the public of the historical significance of buildings and their design features.*"

Rich has influenced many historical restoration and community planning projects in the state. These include burying the utility wires and guiding selection of the new street lights for the Conservancy's Bay Street Improvement Project and assisting with the United Theater restoration. Rich was also involved in restoring the Everett Edward Hale House in Matunuck, developing a vision for the Saugatucket River Corridor, creating design guidelines for downtown Wickford, establishing zoning guidelines for Bay Street, and the publication of the book *Watch Hill Style*.

The Watch Hill Conservancy extends well-deserved congratulations to Richard Youngken; we are grateful to have him on our team!

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Another season has passed in Watch Hill - and what a busy one it has been for the Conservancy! We have arrived at the one-year mark of owning and operating the Chaplin B. Barnes Reading Room as a community space. The Reading Room was active this summer: it was the venue for private events, weekly yoga classes, an Ocean Community Chamber of Commerce networking event, and served as meeting space for a number of local nonprofits. Of course, we used the space for our own great programming as well.

Our team was thrilled to be able to offer Lanphear *LIVE!* in person this summer. We hosted eight presentations whose topics ranged from cyber security to hurricanes. These programs offer an opportunity for the community to gather and explore relevant topics in society, history, nature, and technology. We had outstanding attendance at all these events and the views of the video recordings continue to rise. If you missed one, you can watch it on our YouTube Channel. Thanks to the contributions from our members, Lanphear *LIVE!* presentations are free for everyone. We looked forward to every speaker, and we hope you did too.

We were excited that we were able to return to offering our children's program the Napatree *Investigators*. Because of the COVID19 crisis in 2020, we decided it was in the best interest of everyone to put the initiative on pause. This summer, with a number of precautions in place, we felt it was safe to offer it in person. The Conservancy team members who administer the Napatree *Investigators* are well-respected educators at local school districts. We cannot thank them enough for the effort they put in preparing such a wonderful curriculum for these young naturalists. Over the years, we have heard from some families that their now adult children credit their interest in conservation to their time with the *Investigators* program.

If you follow our work, if you support the Conservancy's mission, and if you are one of our members it is important for you to know that what we accomplish is possible because of the dedication of our team. Our Board of Directors generously give significant amounts of time and wisdom for the good of the organization, our Napatree Science Advisors share their knowledge in the stewardship and management of the Conservation Area, our Napatree Naturalists are the face of the Conservancy on Napatree and care for that beautiful resource, and finally, our staff work tirelessly to achieve the Conservancy's mission. Please join me in thanking them for all they do to make our programs successful.

Warmly,

Jocelyn
Jocelyn Lahey

OUR DEDICATED TEAM

Our work would not be possible without the dedication of those who advance The Watch Hill Conservancy's mission to conserve, enhance, and maintain the natural, scenic, and historic values of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay. Together, we work to expand the scientific understanding of the natural environment by educating the public about its importance, to maintain and enhance the historic and community character of Watch Hill, and to conserve and maintain open space in Watch Hill by stewarding the Napatree Point Conservation Area.

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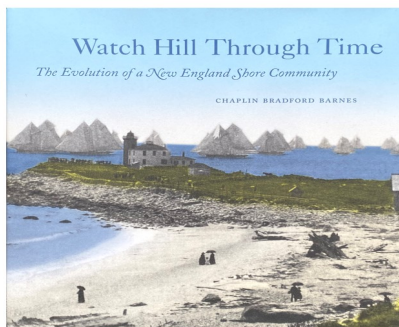
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Watch Hill Through Time captures the character and history of Watch Hill. Author Chaplin Bradford Barnes recounts Watch Hill's colorful and interesting past. Beautifully written and richly illustrated, this book is a wonderful addition to any library.

\$80

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CHANGING TIDES

Having served as Napatree Manager for 12 years, Janice Sassi will be stepping down from this position at the end of the year to take on new responsibilities with The Watch Hill Conservancy. We are grateful for Janice's many contributions and are looking forward to putting her talents toward other Conservancy projects. Our Search Committee, comprised of a group of Conservancy Directors and Science Advisors, conducted a national search for Janice's successor on Napatree. We have chosen Daniel Cole to serve as Napatree Manager starting in the new year. Daniel has considerable experience in natural area management and we are fortunate to have him join our team..

Thank you for your service and leadership Janice, and welcome Daniel!

INTRODUCTION: DANIEL COLE



Daniel Cole, Napatree Point Conservation Area Manager

I am very excited to be joining The Watch Hill Conservancy as Napatree Point Conservation Area Manager. My family and I moved to Rhode Island from Central Florida where I managed The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve - an 11,500-acre flagship nature preserve. As a native New Yorker, I am excited to be back in the Northeast and reconnecting with the natural environment of this area. I cannot think of a better place than Napatree to kick off that process.

Growing up on a small farm in the State of New York helped foster a connection to nature that led me to pursue a degree in Biology at Southampton College of Long Island University. While attending college, I found a love for teaching others. I began teaching high school students early in my professional career and later I transitioned into running outdoor education programs, first at an aquarium and then a nature preserve. While I enjoyed teaching, I found

that I missed the hands-on component of land management, so my next move was to become a Park Ranger with the state of Florida. It was my responsibility to oversee one historic and one botanical island, as well as 10,000 acres of submerged land in the Florida Keys. This role taught me a great deal about the importance of balancing land management and public use/enjoyment. Later, I was offered a Facilities Manager position with The Nature

Conservancy in Central Florida. I worked my way up to Preserve Manager where I led the public-facing aspects of the preserve. With a small, dedicated team, we managed the land and fostered new research opportunities with partner organizations. As soon as I saw the Napatree Point Conservation Area Manager position I knew my skillsets were closely aligned with the requirements of the position.

I will be out and about on Napatree all year, please say hello if you happen to see me around! When I'm not on Napatree, I enjoy spending time with my 4-year-old son, my wife, and two dogs exploring the outdoors, or working on our new house. I look forward to connecting with the community of Watch Hill and managing this beautiful and vital natural area.

Daniel Cole



REFLECTIONS: JANICE SASSI

I am a visual person. When I am on Napatree I usually have a camera around my neck. No matter the time of year or the weather, its beauty takes my breath away. Reflecting on the special moments I have experienced over the years, many images come to mind.

On those 15-degree days in February the barrier is quiet and peaceful. The Lagoon and much of Little Narragansett Bay are frozen and hundreds of Brant, Eider and other sea ducks raft in the surrounding open water. Despite the cold, I always met visitors, who, like me, enjoy the peaceful setting of Napatree in the winter.

By March, the Ospreys, American Oystercatchers and Piping Plovers are arriving, feathers puffed for extra warmth.

Nesting territories are established and the hard work of breeding begins. By late Spring on evenings with a full or new moon, our Napatree team is counting horseshoe crabs who come ashore by the hundreds to spawn. It is a truly magical experience to witness - made more beautiful by the sound of the Watch Hill Bell Buoy and the *peep, pip, hueep* calls of Oystercatchers taking flight.



American oystercatcher feeding on the bay side of Napatree.



Beach rose in bloom

Summers are centered around nature walks and educating visitors in hopes of keeping the plants and creatures of Napatree (many are Federally Endangered/Threatened) from being stressed. Greeting folks who enjoy the beach every weekend, year after year, is akin to a reunion.

Fall means migration and is my favorite time of the year. The skies are deep blue and filled with dragon & damselflies, butterflies, and raptors. Goldenrods are in bloom and hundreds of swallows stage, iridescent in the sunshine. As the summer species leave for warmer climes, winter residents arrive from as far away as the Arctic. The nature of Napatree and its annual rhythm has been so special to me over the years, but so have the people with whom I have been fortunate to work.

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THE RHODE ISLAND NATURAL HISTORY SURVEY AND STEWARDSHIP OF NAPATREE POINT CONSERVATION AREA

*Written by Janice M. Sassi and Peter V. August.
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INTRODUCTION

The Napatree Point Conservation Area (NPCA) is a 35-ha (86-acre) nature preserve that extends into Little Narragansett Bay from Watch Hill, Rhode Island. Napatree is largely owned by the Watch Hill Fire District (WHFD) and The Watch Hill Conservancy (WHC); the town of Westerly and the state of Rhode Island also own small parcels. WHC was granted a conservation easement over Fire District properties on Napatree and is responsible for their stewardship.

The habitats on Napatree are among the greatest in need of conservation in the state—Maritime Shrubland, Maritime Herbaceous Dune, Saltmarsh, and a small lagoon (RIDEM 2015). Rhode Island's largest patch of eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) occurs between Napatree and Sandy Point in Little Narragansett Bay (August et al. 2020a). The National Audubon Society has declared Napatree a Globally Important Bird Area in recognition of its importance to shorebirds and as a stopover site for migrants. Napatree is included in the US Fish and Wildlife Service's John H. Chafee Coastal Barrier Resources System. The Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) has designated the marine environment south and west of Napatree an Area Designated for Conservation because of its importance as winter habitat for sea ducks. The list of rare and endangered species that occur on Napatree is long and includes the iconic piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), least tern (*Sternula antillarum*), American oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), and osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). The URI Coastal Institute has recognized NPCA as a Climate Response Demonstration Site, one of three in Rhode Island. The demonstration sites showcase creative, effective land management to enhance resilience to climate change impacts. Stewardship of Napatree is challenging. It is heavily used by visitors. On a hot summer day 900 people can line the 1.8-km (1.1-mile) beach and 400 boats may be anchored off its bayside shore (August et al. 2020b). The herbaceous dune habitats are fragile and vegetation is easily trampled. The ground nesting



Rey Larsen conducting a bird survey.

piping plovers and least terns, as well as flocks of feeding and resting shorebirds are easily disturbed by walkers or dogs (Mayo et al. 2015). Providing visitors an enjoyable and informative destination is an important element of the NPCA mission (Sassi 2020). Doing so, while protecting the ecological integrity of Napatree, is a priority for WHC.

ESTABLISHING A STEWARDSHIP ROAD MAP

2005 ecological inventory

The Rhode Island Natural History Survey (RINHS or “the Survey”) has provided critical guidance to Napatree managers for over 15 years. In 2004, RINHS was commissioned by Chaplin B. Barnes and Grant G. Simmons III of WHC and the WHFD Park Commission to conduct an ecological reconnaissance of NPCA and to provide stewardship recommendations. Under the guidance of Kristen Puryear, the Survey completed a thorough ecological inventory of Napatree in 2005. The 57-page report included lists of the fauna and flora observed during the study (Puryear 2005).



Hope Leeson (in green) leading a YCL team in plant restoration.

The key management issues that were identified were invasive plant control and animal management. Specific management recommendations were related to preventing bird disturbance by dogs, reducing dog waste on the beach and public paths, and dune erosion from people trampling vegetation. They also included many actions that should be undertaken; for example, trash removal from the beach and continued inventory and monitoring. The report was well-received by the Conservancy and helped establish a baseline condition and identify priority management issues that needed to be addressed. In 2011, Julia Brownlee Royster, staff scientist for Napatree, developed a management plan for the NPCA based, in part, on the recommendations in the RINHS report (Royster and Barry 2011).



Hugh Markey and Laura Craver-Rogers preparing materials for an Investigators class.

2010 ecological inventory

In 2010, WHC and WHFD once again engaged the Survey in a second ecological assessment of NPCA. This study, led by Jane Buxton, included a team of expert land stewards and conservation biologists. The review panel again identified plant trampling on dunes, invasive species management, and disturbance to birds by dogs and walkers as key management challenges (Buxton 2010) and very specific stewardship actions were recommended. In the prologue, RINHS Executive Director David Gregg made a strong argument for engaging visitors and educating them of the ecological importance and sensitivity of the site. The Napatree Investigators youth education program (co-taught



Keith Killingbeck and Jessica Cressman-Greene monitoring shrub patch dynamics.

by RINHS board member Hugh Markey) was acknowledged to be a successful means of building public support for NPCA and teaching the next generation of citizens the importance of coastal ecosystems (Brown et al. 2020).

Finally, the report closed with a strong recommendation to establish an ongoing monitoring program of the condition of Napatree and development of a well-managed database to permanently archive this information.

IMPLEMENTING A STEWARDSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND MONITORING PROGRAM

Stewardship of Napatree

The two studies by RINHS established a solid foundation for the stewardship of Napatree. The 2005 and 2010 reports gave rise to the first comprehensive management plan for Napatree (Royster and Barry 2011). Immediately after the 2010 study, a team of science advisors was formed to recommend stewardship and monitoring initiatives to the Napatree Manager and to advise on how to implement the recommendations offered in the 2010 RINHS assessment. Survey scientists and board members - Keith Killingbeck, Peter Paton, Jon Boothroyd, Hope Leeson, Howard Ginsberg, and Peter August - were on the initial science advisor team. When Jon Boothroyd passed on, he was replaced by RINHS board member Bryan Oakley. These individuals still actively counsel the Napatree Manager on stewardship issues.

The recommendation to reduce dune trampling was heeded. Through a system of conspicuous trail markers, the number of trails on Napatree has been reduced from 64 paths spanning 3.9 km (2.4 miles) in 2012 to 8 approved paths (0.5 km, 0.3 miles) in 2016. This has reclaimed 0.6 ha (1.5 acres) of herbaceous dune habitat (August et al. 2020c).



Bryan Oakley measuring dune height with GPS.



Peter Paton monitoring shorebirds.



Howard Ginsberg and Aya Rothwell conducting bee surveys.

WHC has partnered with RINHS on an aggressive program of plant restoration on closed trails and invasive plant management on Napatree. Hope Leeson (RINHS botanist) has been the chief restoration ecologist on a number of projects funded by CRMC and the URI Costal Institute. Over the past 7 years, 2,600 plants of 20 species have been planted on Napatree. Species have been chosen based on their suitability for Napatree environmental conditions and the value they provide pollinators and migratory species (Leeson et al. 2020).

The Youth Conservation League (YCL), sponsored in part by RINHS and the Rhode Island Conservation Stewardship Collaborative, has been commissioned on two occasions to help with plant restoration and invasive plant control. The YCL consists of teams of high school students who spend the summer doing conservation land management (Cote et al. 2020). This activity follows the 2010 recommendation to use environmental educational opportunities as a means to train the next generation of land stewards.

A specific recommendation of the 2010 assessment was to establish a comprehensive digital data repository of relevant information for the NPCA. This has been accomplished; the NPCA cloud-based database now contains over 100 Gb of GIS files, data tables, documents, photos, and videos for Napatree (August et al. 2020d). In addition, starting in 2013, we began publishing an annual State of Napatree report of monitoring data and project reports. They are available online from The Watch Hill Conservancy (Sassi 2020).

Inventory of the fauna, flora, and geology of Napatree

The Survey has played a significant role in collaborating with Conservancy scientists in inventorying the plants and animals of Napatree (Table 1). Some examples, all of which are available for download, can be found in Sassi (2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The Napatree Point Conservation Area is an important ecological refuge and one of the most pristine coastal barrier systems in the region. Napatree is a public resource and is an extremely popular destination for visitors in all months of the year, and their density can be extremely high in the summer. Balancing the need to protect the plants, animals, and ecosystem processes of the site with providing the public access to Napatree is a challenge faced by Napatree stewards. The Rhode Island Natural History Survey has played a critical early role in developing management and stewardship plans for Napatree. Through ongoing research and monitoring by RINHS staff and Board members, the Survey continues to fill an important niche in the stewardship of Napatree. Napatree is but one of many landscapes in Rhode Island that have benefitted from the work of RINHS. Through its work on invasive plant control, plant restoration, and maintenance of the rare species databases, many regions of the state benefit from the scientific leadership provided by the Rhode Island Natural History Survey.

Table 1. Rhode Island Natural History Survey officers, Board members, staff, and their students (*) participating in Napatree natural history studies, all of which can be downloaded from Sassi (2020).

Topic	RINHS-affiliated Investigators
Plants	Keith Killingbeck, Lisa Lofland Gould, Hope Leeson
Bees	Howard Ginsberg, Aya Rothwell*
Birds	Rey Larsen (2020 RINHS Distinguished Naturalist)
Shorebird Disturbance	Peter Paton, Tom Mayo*, Peter August
Moths	Mark Mello, Jamie Bogart (RINHS Godzala Grant recipients)
Shrubs	Keith Killingbeck, Jessica Cressman-Greene*
Mid-sized Mammals	Peter August
Physical Geography	Peter August
Geology	Bryan Oakley

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The stewardship of the Napatree Point Conservation Area is supported by The Watch Hill Conservancy and the A.M. Roberts Charitable Foundation. The Watch Hill Fire District Park Commission provides essential logistic services for our work. The Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council and the URI Coastal Institute have provided generous grants to support many of the stewardship activities described here. David Gregg and Kira Stillwell have been key collaborators in all of the projects with the RINHS. Jocelyn Lahey provided helpful comments on the manuscript.

AUTHORS

Janice Sassi has been the Manager of the Napatree Point Conservation Area for over a decade and is responsible for the stewardship of Napatree. Peter August chairs the Napatree Science Advisors. He is Professor Emeritus of Natural Resources Science at URI and is the founding President of the Rhode Island Natural History Survey.

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Providing Ecosystem Science and Information

REFLECTIONS: JANICE SASSI

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*Chaplin B. Barnes, A Conservancy founder,
past Vice President and our first Executive Director*

Chap Barnes' and Grant Simmons' love of Napatree, and their passion for protecting it, was apparent the first time I met them. Their wisdom in navigating the many challenges in stewarding this special, but fragile ecosystem has guided me through my time here. It was their foresight to engage with Dr. Peter August who assembled our tremendous team of Science Advisors. These folks are my scientific north star in stewarding Napatree. Each one is a nationally-recognized expert in their discipline and they are incredibly generous in volunteering their time and knowledge. Much of our scientific monitoring takes place during the warm months.

Whether helping to drive survey rods with the geology team on a stifling hot day, or swatting mosquitos during shrub monitoring, I love working with our dedicated scientists. They also happen to be a lot of fun!

Most of all, I deeply appreciate the Napatree Naturalists, past and present, who work so hard and have taught me so much. Especially our Senior Naturalists – Tom Pappadia, Steve Brown, and Hugh Markey – they are the anchor of our management and education programs.

Napatree is recognized as a model for ecosystem management, where people are an integral component of the ecosystem. I am so proud of what Team Napatree has accomplished and it has been an honor and privilege to be part of that team.

Janice
Janice Sassi



Napatree *INVESTIGATORS*

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Hello Napatree Investigators! It was so awesome to have you back on the beach this season! In a way, it felt like a million years since we'd run the program; but as soon as we saw your faces, it felt like we'd never left. Steve, Hugh, Emily, and Katherine all had a terrific time helping you investigate all the wonderful things that are found on Napatree. Let's talk about some of the things we found!

QUIT BEING SO CRABBY!

There we were, climbing over the rocks, dropping our crab rigs into the water. We held them there for a minute, and it seemed like nothing was happening. Then slowly a dark claw appeared, followed by a dark body. A partner scooped it up in a net, and we had our first catch of the day: a green crab!

One of the *Investigators*' most popular weekly theme is fishing for crabs on the bay side of Napatree. We had our "crab rigs": a piece of heavy wire bent into a triangular shape and tied to a piece of string. Then, our secret bait: chunks of hot dogs! You found a partner and lowered your rigs close to the edge of the rocks. Sometimes nothing would happen for a few minutes, and it was hard to be patient. But before long you could see the crabs sneaking out from the shelter of the rocks to begin feeding, pulling tiny chunks from the hot dogs, and putting them into their tiny mouths.

You had to slowly lift the crab upwards, since they were never hooked; we had to count on them being distracted by eating while a partner carefully slipped the net underneath. Then it was time to bring our trophy to the shore, where Steve, Hugh, Emily, or Katherine would help you figure out whether it was a male or female. Remember how to tell? We looked at the underside of them: a boy would have marks like a rocket ship, and the same area on a girl would be much wider. We caught dozens of crabs that day, and we had a closeup view of these secretive creatures.

And next time you're on the beach, remember two things: you can tell which kind of crab it is by counting its "teeth": the pointy parts on the top, from one edge to its eye. If there are five teeth, it's a green crab. Remember: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5, G - R - E - E - N.

Second, you can handle a green crab and not get pinched if you hold it from the back of the shell. They can't reach back that far!



Photo Credit: Christopher Katalinas, National Sea Grant Office

MONSTERS, MERMAIDS, AND *INVESTIGATORS*

Stories about sea monsters have been around for centuries. Sailors who went exploring or in search of whales knew almost nothing about the creatures swimming below their ships. With no idea what was swimming around them, being miles from dry land, and probably being more than a little frightened, sailors sometimes explained the strange things they saw as sea monsters. Here are two legendary sea monsters, along with one monster cooked up by our *Investigators*!

What was the kraken? It was a mythological sea animal said to be large and strong enough to drag a ship and her sailors to the bottom of the ocean. We know there is no such thing, but how did these stories begin? Researchers believe they may have come from frightened sailors who saw things like giant octopus and squid moving around in the water. Their strange shapes and movements made them think that they could be attacked. This wasn't true, but it's hard to disprove a rumor!

*"Below the thunders of the upper deep,
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee
About his shadowy sides..."*

*"The Kraken",
by Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

Continued...



A Kraken attacking a submarine from Disney's "20,000 Leagues under the Sea"

Mermaids, on the other hand, were not monstrous, though still just make believe. They were supposed to have been creatures with a human top half and a fishlike lower half. Many sailors claimed to have seen them over the centuries. Even Christopher Columbus reported seeing one! But if they weren't merpeople, what were those sailors seeing? Possibly an animal like a walrus or a manatee, mixed in with a good amount of imagination.



And then there were the *Investigator* sea monsters! As one of our last activities for the season, Naturalist Steve came up with a scavenger hunt for natural things found on Napatree. There were many items on the list, from colored rocks to seaweed to plants. At the end, *Investigators* took items they had scavenged and made sea creatures out of them! Some were realistic, like a sea turtle, while others were... let's say a little harder to identify! There were rocks for eyes, seaweed for hair, sand for bodies. Everyone had a great time making their own legendary creatures and showing them off to one another!

BEWARE THE MAN 'O WAR!



This season, *Investigators* found just one species of jellyfish: the comb jelly. Combs are small enough to fit into the palm of your hands. They love to eat other jellyfish, but they're completely harmless to people. However, just a few weeks after the *Investigator* program ended, Naturalist Matt discovered a much more dangerous variety: the Portuguese Man o' War.

From the surface, the Man o' War looks just like a purpleish plastic bag. The bag-like part is called the sail, and it drifts with wind and current throughout much of the Atlantic. But beware: this jelly packs a punch! Beneath the sail, this animal trails tentacles as long as 30 feet. These tentacles contain stingers called nematocysts. While the nematocysts are intended to paralyze fish so they can be eaten, they can also give humans a super painful sting. If you see a Portuguese Man o' War, stay away! They are just as dangerous on the beach as they are in the water.

That's it for the Fall issue of The Investigator! Steve, Emily, Katherine, and I hope you had a wonderful time this summer. We'll be back next year with more adventures and cool things to see out on the most beautiful place in the world: Napatree Point!

- Hugh Markey