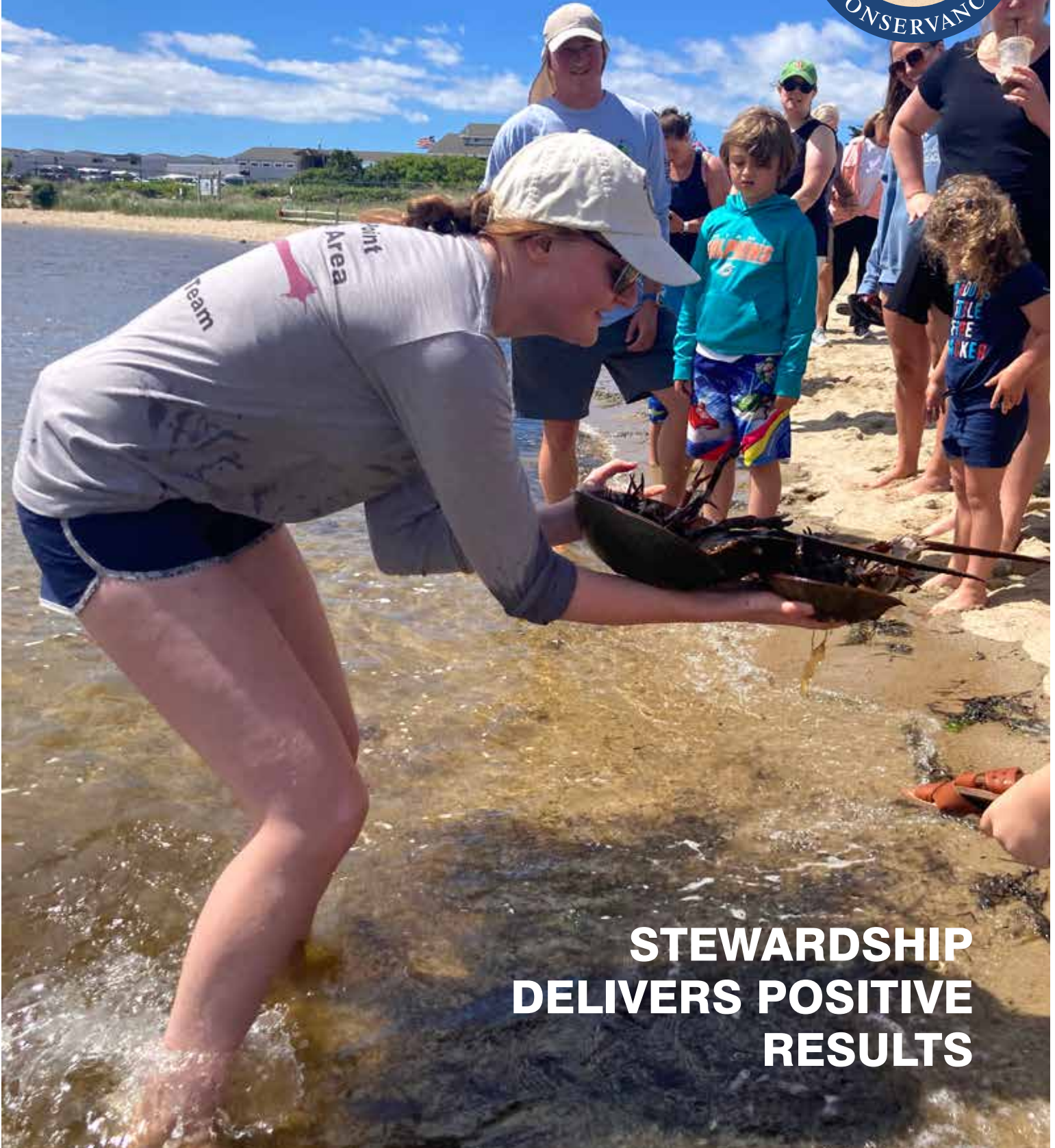




The Watch Hill Conservator



**STEWARDSHIP
DELIVERS POSITIVE
RESULTS**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Preserving the values of Watch Hill and Little Narragansett Bay would not be possible without the dedication of those who educate the public about the vital stewarding of the Napatree Point Conservation Area and about maintaining the historic and community character of Watch Hill.

We are especially grateful for the support of the membership of the Conservancy, our Community Programming Sponsors, the A.M. Roberts, Jr. Charitable Foundation, the URI Coastal Institute; and our staff, Board of Directors, science advisors, and volunteers who give so much of their time and wisdom to achieve our mission.

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FROM THE DESK OF THE CHAIRMAN



For years, I have hoped to spend autumn in Watch Hill. This year, my wish was granted, providing me with the delight of watching our community transition from summer to fall. The crowds have gone, and the soft, golden sunlight of autumn seems to make everything sparkle and glow, highlighting the ever-changing colors of the foliage, the sea, and the sky. The crisp, cool air makes it easy to spend time outdoors enjoying the sights and sounds of the migrating birds and the spectacular, but ever earlier, Watch Hill sunsets. We are so fortunate to know and appreciate such a rare and beautiful place. And it helps remind me of the importance of the stewardship provided by The Watch Hill Conservancy.

It has also been a time to reflect on the busy summer season; though at times it feels like a whirlwind of activity, the season was a wonderful success! Our Lanphear LIVE! Monday evening speaker series was again very well attended. The three special presentations offered, one each with our colleagues at the Westerly Library, the Westerly Historical Society, and the Watch Hill Memorial Library and Improvement Society were equally popular. Our annual Celebration of Summer fundraiser set a record with more than 300 in attendance! It was a quintessential New England summer evening at the Misquamicut Beach Club, much to the delight of our guests. And our Napatree programming, under the leadership of Conservation Area manager Daniel Cole, was again outstanding. Visitation to the Conservation Area was robust and our educational programs were well attended.

Last spring, our Board formed a committee and engaged the highly regarded search firm OperationsInc to guide our search for a new Executive Director. I am excited to share that in November, Barbara Axmacher joined us as the new Executive Director of The Watch Hill Conservancy. We are very impressed with Barbara and could not be more pleased that she has accepted our offer. Barbara has extensive not-for-profit business and leadership experience and is relocating from East Hampton, New York to the Westerly area. Her extended family has owned a home in Matunuck for years. She has spent lots of time in the area and loves southern Rhode Island. Please join us in welcoming Barbara to Watch Hill, Westerly, and The Watch Hill Conservancy!

As the leadership team at the Conservancy turns its attention to next year and next season, our first task is the annual membership drive. With changing legislation and other political headwinds, more frequent storms and rising seas, and ever-increasing development pressure, the conservation and historic preservation work of The Watch Hill Conservancy is more important than ever. As our challenges increase, our need for support to meet those challenges also increases. I hope we can count on you to renew your membership and, if possible, to increase your level of support.

Enjoy this beautiful issue of The Watch Hill Conservator, and best wishes for a joyous holiday season.

Sincerely,

Deborah Lamm
Chairman, The Watch Hill Conservancy

IT'S MEMBER RENEWAL TIME!

Please visit

[Thewatchhillconservancy.org/join/](http://thewatchhillconservancy.org/join/)
to become a member or renew your
current membership.





FROM THE DEPTHS TO THE SKIES, IT'S BEEN A GREAT YEAR FOR CONSERVATION

Every summer, The Watch Hill Conservancy partners with organizations to help protect the many organisms that rely on Napatree as part of their life cycle. This season turned up some record-breaking moments, along with new educational programs.

Counting Crabs

By Hugh Markey, *Editor*

Naturalist Jenn Croteau has been keeping track of *Limulus polyphemus*, better known as Atlantic horseshoe crabs, for the past two years. Her job is to walk the length of Napatree at high tide and count the prehistoric-looking animals as they come ashore to lay their eggs. Those numbers are relayed to Connecticut's Sacred Heart University, which tracks populations around New England. In addition to providing important information about the population levels, Jenn enjoys taking visitors out to be part of the process. "I love it when we have members of the public that come out with us because horseshoe crabs are surrounded by misconceptions. People think horseshoe crabs are like scary aliens, or that their tail is poisonous. Obviously, none of that is true, so I like having people get up close with them

and learn about them, because horseshoe crabs are such a unique species. This is an organism that hasn't evolved in 425 million years and is completely harmless."

The mating season runs roughly from April to July, and the counts take place at high tide. On an average night, Croteau may count hundreds of them. This year had at least one noteworthy record: "We counted 1,800 horseshoe crabs in one night, which broke the previous record of 1,600 in 2022. In total, we counted 3,724 this season, which is about average."

"I love it when we have members of the public that come out with us because horseshoe crabs are surrounded by misconceptions."



The new discovery table was a popular program. This was inspired by a story that naturalist Hugh Markey shared about a horseshoe crab molt (the shell cast off by the crab as it grows) found on the beach. A visitor asked him about it, and even as he replied, more visitors began to approach, each with their own set of questions. "I ended up standing at the base of that dune for at least a half hour," Markey said. "Group after group came up to learn about the animal and its conservation." With that interaction as inspiration, we aimed to create a welcoming space for visitors to ask questions and learn about Napatree and its rich ecosystems. To do this, we set up a table featuring a variety of objects commonly found on Napatree. The assortment included a horseshoe crab molt, remnants of the cottages that were washed away in 1938, shells, and a variety of wrack line items. We set the table up for three hours at the entrance to the conservation area every other Sunday. Over 250 visitors stopped by the table to ask questions, share stories, and interact with the display. The most popular questions were about the channeled whelk egg case or "beach maraca." To most, this commonly found item looked like an animal spine, but it was an egg casing that housed hundreds of tiny channeled whelks before they hatched.

New Programs on the Beach

By Daniel Cole, *Napatree Manager*

With the Napatree Point Conservation Area seeing over 40,000 visits every year, the need to convey the ecological importance of Napatree to these visitors is essential. To do this, the Conservancy has offered a variety of outreach activities for over 16 years. The two longest-running outreach programs on Napatree are the Saturday morning nature walks and the very popular Napatree Investigators children's program. Since its inception, we have had over 600 youngsters participate in this free educational program. These activities showcase the importance of the Napatree ecosystem and its diverse wildlife.

To build upon this legacy, The Watch Hill Conservancy increased its program offerings in 2023. These included a family seine net program, guided family horseshoe crab walks, and a discovery table beach display. Additional one-off programs led by Napatree Science Advisors were offered in June and October.



Other activities included two daytime horseshoe crab walks and a monthly beach seine net program. These walks gave over two dozen participants the chance to learn about the importance of conserving these prehistoric creatures. It was the first time many of the children were up close and personal with a horseshoe crab, and some were brave enough to gently hold the animal, creating a lasting memory. To increase family program offerings, we scheduled a seine net program on the last Saturday of every month. Children assisted in pulling a seine net to discover the hidden world of Little Narragansett Bay. The participants were delighted to find comb jellies, silversides, pipefish, and a juvenile puffer fish in the net. The fish were released unharmed after identification, discussion, and observation. The program was a hit, with one child stating that he was going to grow up and become a "jellyfish scientist!"

Egg case that once housed hundreds of tiny channeled whelks before they hatched.



Plovers Set Record

By Hugh Markey, *Editor*

Those fluffy little white and beige birds that nest at Napatree arguably receive more attention than any other organism. Piping Plovers are carefully monitored and protected by our naturalists, and we work in vital partnership with US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), who visit Napatree every day throughout the spring and summer nesting period. At the close of the 2023 season, USFWS Wildlife Biologist/Plover Coordinator Maureen Durkin had good news for Napatree.

"This season, 11 chicks fledged. That's an all-time high that reaches back to the 80's when the counts began. That's really great!" Durkin said. USFWS counted 111 pairs in RI, a new record, and a tenfold increase since data collection began. She credits the increase in part to NGO partnerships with conservation organizations like The Watch Hill Conservancy.

"Plover conservation just isn't successful without partners. You can't just have one agency or one person or one group that does it all. You need federal agencies, NGO's, and right down to the public. It really does take a community to support management of those birds." With the plovers

"Plover conservation just isn't successful without partners. You can't just have one agency or one person or one group that does it all. You need federal agencies, NGO's, and right down to the public."

displaying a maddening habit of nesting in exposed areas, Durkin says it's even more important to keep many eyes on the birds, along with reaching out to the public and speaking with them about why plovers are important. "You're dealing with trying to give a tiny little bird an area on a very busy beach where it can be successful.

"It's wonderful to see the increase at Napatree. It's one of the most important pieces of undeveloped coastal habitat in Rhode Island. There aren't many of them left. Places like Napatree are extremely important and to see it reaching its potential in terms of what it can support for plover pairs is just really exciting."

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Richard C. Youngken 2023 Winner, Whittemore Award

We are delighted to award Richard C. "Rich" Youngken the 2023 Frederick B. Whittemore Award for Exceptional Service. For decades, Rich has generously supported many aspects of our mission to conserve, enhance, and maintain the natural, scenic, and historic values of Watch Hill.

As we face increasing challenges in preserving the community character of historic Watch Hill, we rely on Rich's thoughtful expertise to understand the impact of a project proposal or a zoning change in our community. Some examples of Richard's contributions include:

- The Youngken/Barnes publication of *Watch Hill Style*, a benchmark in documenting the community's unique architecture. With beautiful photographs and engaging narrative, it records the unique architectural character of Watch Hill. Held in high regard by the historic preservation community, our affiliation with Rich reflects favorably on the Conservancy.
- From its inception, Richard and Joan Youngken co-produced *The Conservator* in its formative years. Establishing a high bar for content and design excellence, *The Conservator* is a beautiful and informative magazine of The Watch Hill Conservancy.
- Rich served as a key resource for two complicated projects in Watch Hill: the restoration of the Lanphear Livery and the Bay Street Improvement Project. In each instance, his preservation-minded approach allowed for restoration to modern design standards without compromising the heritage values. Upon completion of the Bay Street Improvement project, Richard was our primary liaison with the Town of Westerly in establishing historically appropriate, aesthetically pleasing, and environmentally sensitive street lighting.
- Rich Youngken co-authored our grant application to outfit the Chaplin B. Barnes Reading Room with furniture and AV equipment. The award by the Lattner Foundation also provided funds for Rich to develop the beautiful interpretive displays for the Atrium. The quality of the public spaces in the Lanphear Livery are largely a result of Rich's work.

While he has been the recipient of numerous awards, we feel it appropriate that The Watch Hill Conservancy show its deep appreciation for Richard C. Youngken's tireless work on behalf of our organization and the entire Watch Hill community by awarding him the 2023 Frederick B. Whittemore Award for Exceptional Service.



BATS, PROHIBITION, AND RI'S BEST:

Lanphear **LIVE!** Presentations a Success

Janice Sassi and Peter August

THE CONSERVANCY'S FLAGSHIP LECTURE SERIES, HOSTED A RICH SCHEDULE OF EXCELLENT SPEAKERS LAST SUMMER. THE CHAPLIN B. BARNES READING ROOM WAS THE VENUE FOR A WONDERFUL DIVERSITY OF PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS:

- Dr. Yan Sun engaged the audience in a Socratic-style discussion about the vulnerability of the nation's power grid from malicious attacks by cybercriminals and terrorists.
- Professor Roberta Mudge Humble from the Westerly Armory gave a lively presentation of a potpourri of examples of Rhode Island leading the nation in being the first, best, or most unique state. It was a fun mix of history, sports, geography, and little-known facts about the Ocean State.
- Scientists Drs. Peter Paton, Peter August, and David Gregg gave a fascinating overview of the migratory patterns of birds, bats, and insects on Napatree. This presentation was co-sponsored by the URI Coastal Institute.



• Master Falconer Jim Gwiazdzinski had the audience mesmerized as he described the ancient art of falconry and how it is practiced in Rhode Island.

• Dr. Alissa Cox gave an overview of an important topic facing coastal communities – how sea level rise reduces the ability of septic systems to treat household wastewater. Her wit, passion, and



enthusiasm brought clarity to a complex topic that does not get the public attention it should.

• The Conservancy partnered with the Westerly Historical Society, and the Westerly Library & Wilcox Park in presenting two lectures by local historian Jack Spratt; one on how The Prohibition impacted (or did not impact!) Watch Hill, and a beautiful photographic tour of Watch Hill in the year 1886.





*Celebration of Summer
2023
Enjoyed by all!*

SAVE THE DATE

*Celebration of Summer '24
Friday, June 28, 2024*



NAPATREE

Investigator



FALL 2023

HELLO NAPATREE INVESTIGATORS!

Steve and Hugh here, and we'd like to say how much fun we had on the beach last summer! We thought we would say hello and share some stories about the cool things we did and saw. What do you remember? Plus, there's a new feature to the Investigator: a crossword puzzle! All the words come from this issue, so read on and have fun!

TIDE POOLS

Mention low tide to an Investigator, and they may think of standing on the pile of rocks on the bay side and trying to coax a crab into their net. But things like crabbing and clamming aren't the only things happening at low tide. There's a special area on Napatree that hides a whole new aquatic environment. It can only be reached by making the entire mile and a half trip out to the tip of Napatree. At the end of the long walk is the Investigator's reward: the tide pools.





What are tide pools?

Tide pools are puddles of salt water left behind when the tide goes out. In and around the rocks at the tip of Napatree are small pockets of water, where an assortment of fish and crabs are trapped.

The rocks are often covered with rockweed, the dark green colored type that has air pockets. Rockweed has an impact on a variety of other marine species. The strands of the rockweed, called fronds, create a sheltered habitat that hides smaller organisms from predators.

What else lives there?

Other tide pool residents are hermit crabs. Each of these lives in a shell within the tidal pool. The shells are left behind as organisms like periwinkles or whelks die. The hermit crab will find one that fits, and quickly crawl inside. As a hermit crab grows, it will look for an empty shell that's a bit larger than the one it's currently living in. When the time is right, the crab will crawl out of its old shell and into the new one. This is done quickly, because a hermit crab without a shell may make an easy meal for nearby animals.

Why do they call it a hermit crab?

The name "hermit crab" is not quite accurate. A hermit is someone who chooses to live alone, without contact with other creatures. Part of the reason for the "hermit" name is the fact that, when threatened, the crab will quickly withdraw its body into its shell, making it more difficult to eat. Hermit crabs actually get along fine with others.

PLOVER PROTECTION

When Steve and Hugh aren't showing Investigators cool stuff on Napatree, one of our jobs is to protect a little bird with strange nesting habits: the Piping Plover. As you recall, we learned that Piping Plovers nest right out on the open sand. Most of the time, they don't even build a nest! They make a small dent in the sand (sometimes called a divot) and lay their eggs right there. That's why you'll sometimes see ropes along the dunes: they're there to keep people and dogs out of the nesting areas so the plover eggs stay safe!

In most cases, plovers will lay two to four eggs. Those eggs are usually arranged in a neat little square. The mother and father spend almost a month incubating the eggs. During the brief moments when neither of them is on the nest, they rely on the eggs' camouflage to keep them out of sight of predators. And plover eggs are very hard to see!

Once the plover chicks hatch, they'll quickly start searching for food. With most bird species, the parents bring food to the chicks for the first few weeks of life. Not so for plovers! Once the eggs hatch, plover chicks will immediately head to the nearest wrack line (clumps of dried seaweed on the sand). There, they'll start feeding on the many bugs that call the wrack line home. This habit of feeding themselves as soon as they hatch is called precocial. Plover chicks are born with their eyes open and quickly form a fluffy layer of feathers called down.



Crossword Puzzle Key
 1. Low, 2. Down, 3. Napatree, 4. Wrack, 5. Quahog, 6. Plover,
 7. Rake, 8. Divot, 9. Clam, 10. Hermit, 11. Tide,
 12. Eggs, 13. Foot, 14. Rock, 15. Salt



THE GREAT BATTLE: FOOT OR RAKE?

It's an argument that has lasted a decade: when clamming (or "quahogging," if you're a Rhode Islander), is it better to use a clam rake or your feet? Naturalists Steve and Hugh have been locked in a tense battle over these methods for years. "There's nothing like pulling a rake along the bottom and having it stop when it comes to a clam," said Steve. "You just dig under it, turn the rake over, and pull up a beauty!"

On the other hand, naturalist Hugh is never without his quahogging gear since it involves two tools: his right and his left foot! "Using your feet is by far the best choice," Hugh said. "All you do is twist your feet back and forth in the sand until you feel a lump of something hard stuck in the sand!" Hugh often gets help from Investigators in retrieving them as they dive down to dig out the quahog from under his foot.

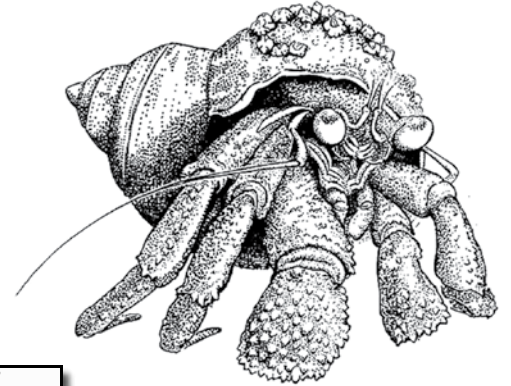
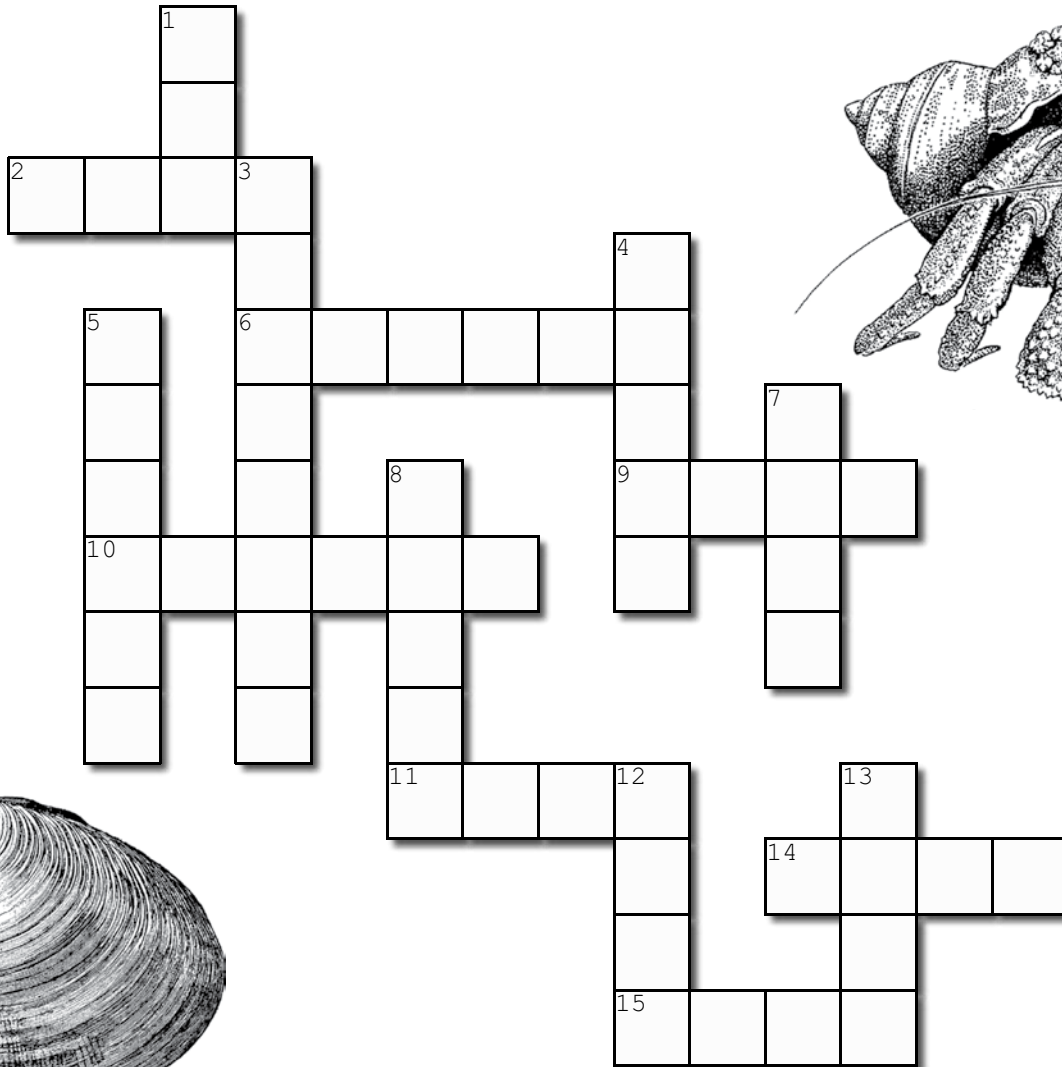
In each case, the trick is to move the "tool" until you find something hard that really feels stuck in the mud. Dig a little deeper, and you've found your quarry!

Despite the different methods used, Hugh and Steve usually end up with the same result: each naturalist gets roughly the same as the other. Stay tuned next summer as the competition continues!



It's the Investigator Crossword Puzzle!

Here's a new challenge for you: a crossword puzzle! All these words are taken from this issue of The Investigator. Do you know the answers?



ACROSS

2. The fluffy feathers that many chicks have when they hatch.
6. Our endangered bird.
9. This is the shellfish we searched for.
10. This crab lives alone.
11. This pool is where we can find lots of life hiding in the rocks.
14. This type of weed has bubbles in it.
15. That beach is surrounded by ____ water.

DOWN

1. The best tide for exploring.
3. The name of the beach place we took you each session.
4. Dried seaweed where birds find food is called the ____ line.
5. People from Rhode Island call these shellfish by a Native American name.
7. The tool that Steve drags along the sea bed.
8. Another word for the tiny dent in the sand that forms the bird's nest.
12. That bird's ____ are well camouflaged.
13. Hugh uses this "tool" when searching for shellfish.