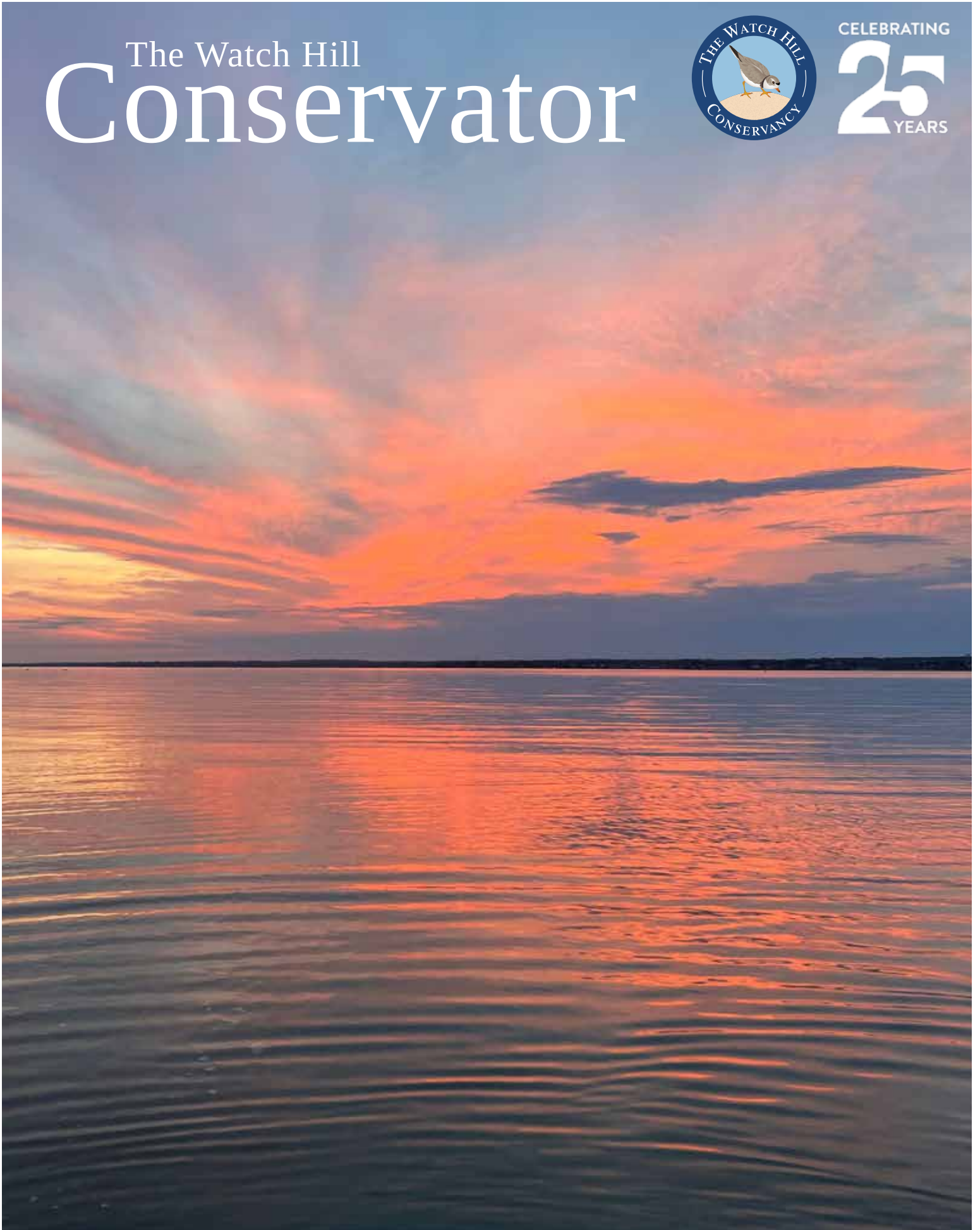


The Watch Hill Conservator



CELEBRATING
25
YEARS



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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Cover photo by Emma Bean

“The fact is that no species has ever had such wholesale control over everything on earth, living or dead, as we now have. That lays upon us, whether we like it or not, an awesome responsibility. In our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth.”

- David Attenborough, *Life on Earth*

CHARTING THE FUTURE

In our Spring newsletter we shared exciting news about The Watch Hill Conservancy's commitment to developing a comprehensive 5-year management plan for the Napatree Point Conservation Area. This forward-looking initiative, centered around enhancing our scientific research, ecological monitoring, and stewardship programs, will serve as a roadmap to ensure our conservation priorities, research efforts, and management strategies are aligned and effective in protecting Napatree Point, one of Rhode Island's most cherished natural landscapes.



This past August marked a milestone in this endeavor. In collaboration with Impact by Design, a nationally recognized environmental consulting firm specializing in conservation strategy and facilitation, we hosted an intensive two-day planning workshop. Held on-site, the workshop brought together 23 participants representing eight local Rhode Island partner organizations—an important gathering of scientists, educators, and advocates, all united by a shared commitment to Napatree.

Participants worked collaboratively to identify pressing threats that could impact the long-term health of Napatree's natural systems. As a fortunate participant, I came away with a sense of inspiration—not only from the experienced professionals in the room, but from a group whose voices resonated most clearly and passionately: our Conservancy Naturalists. These emerging conservation leaders, many at the dawn of their professional journeys, spoke with a rare blend of intellect, compassion, and unwavering commitment to the natural world. Their words, delivered with clarity and conviction, conveyed a deep understanding of the ecological intricacies of Napatree—and an even deeper sense of responsibility to protect it.

It is their dedication and vision that became the guiding force behind this edition of *The Conservator*. In the pages that follow, you'll hear directly from these young stewards, in their own voices. They share their reflections, aspirations, and hopes for the future of Napatree Point. Through their stories, we are reminded that conservation is not only about data and planning—it is about people, especially those who choose to dedicate their lives to the protection of the places we all cherish.

As we move forward in shaping Napatree's future, we do so with the knowledge that its legacy is in good hands.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Barbara". The script is cursive and elegant, with a long, flowing tail on the letter 'a'.

Barbara Axmacher
Executive Director, The Watch Hill Conservancy

WE RAISE OUR GLASS TO YOU!

Many thanks to those who joined us for our Songs of the Sea membership appreciation event held on Thursday, August 14.

With Chaplin B. Barnes Reading Room transformed into a cozy seaside cottage, we celebrated our valued members with a high seas good time!

Guests enjoyed nautical nibbles, grog, and the live musical stylings of local sea shanty band Sharks Come Cruisin for an evening of all around maritime merriment!



THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." - Margaret Mead

Join Today!

To continue the important work we do, we need your help.

Your support will best position the Conservancy
to meet the challenges of the next 25 years.

We can't do this without you.
Our success is made possible through your generosity.

Become a Member today!

Visit: <https://thewatchhillconservancy.org/join/>



NAPATREE BY THE NUMBERS

25,404 Estimated Visitors

5,093 Boats

19 Public Programs with **177** Participants

16 Days of the Napatree Investigators Program with **110** Participants

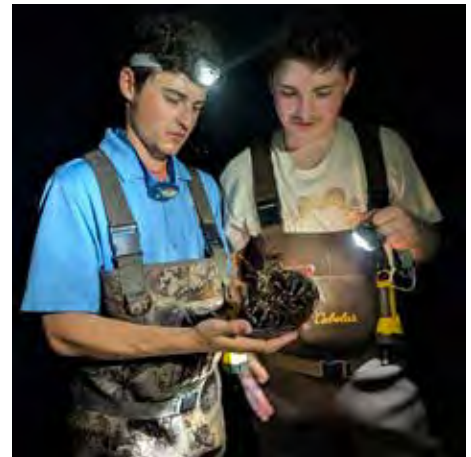
The Discovery Table was at the Napatree Entrance on **19** days and Naturalists had **957** Interactions with Visitors

740 lbs. of Trash Removed by Naturalists

64 Volunteers took part in **20** Horseshoe Crab Surveys. They Counted **2,685** Horseshoe Crabs and Tagged **36** Horseshoe Crabs

15 Pairs of Piping Plovers Successfully Fledged **5** Chicks

8 Shorebird Surveys Documented **76** Species of Birds (1/1/25 to 8/8/25)



SUMMER 2025

By Daniel Cole, *Napatree Point Conservation Area Manager*

Thank you to the 2025 Napatree Naturalists and staff for another fantastic season at the Napatree Point Conservation Area.

The Watch Hill Conservancy's Napatree Naturalists serve as educators, stewards, and ambassadors. They monitor wildlife, assist with research, lead outreach programs, respond to emergencies, remove debris, and educate visitors about the importance of the Conservation Area. Over 40,000 visitors annually enjoy the beauty and wildlife of the Napatree Point Conservation Area thanks to the dedicated efforts of our Napatree staff.



LIFE AS A NATURALIST ON NAPATREE POINT: A JOURNEY OF PURPOSE

By Paige Letzelter,

Naturalist, Napatree Point Conservation Area

When I first stepped onto the sands of the Napatree Point Conservation Area as a naturalist the summer before my senior year at the University of Rhode Island, I had no idea how that summer would shape my life.

At the time, I was completing my bachelor's degree in wildlife Conservation Biology, which I followed with a master's degree in environmental policy and management, both from URI (2020–2025). Like many students, I was uncertain about my next steps—what field to pursue, what path to follow. But working in the Conservation Area that summer changed everything.



Napatree Point is a place of remarkable natural beauty—coastal habitats, dunes, and salt marshes alive with wildlife. As a naturalist, I was given a front-row seat to nature in motion. Every day brought new discoveries, from osprey nests and tidal pools to the seasonal migrations of shorebirds. But more than the stunning

landscapes, it was the people I met who had the biggest impact.

Our team of science advisors and fellow Naturalists were incredibly smart, passionate, and inspiring. Many visitors, some of whom had been coming to Napatree for decades, shared heartfelt stories and expressed deep gratitude for the Conservation work being done. Their enthusiasm and appreciation reinforced the importance of what we do.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my work has been engaging with young minds—whether through our Investigator's Program or local elementary school field trips. I hope some of the kids I've interacted with walked away with a spark of curiosity or a newfound interest in environmental science. Napatree's programs are designed not just to educate, but to open eyes—to offer new ways of seeing and appreciating the natural world. Our goal as Naturalists is to be accessible to all visitors, even those who don't sign up for formal programs. Sometimes, the most powerful teaching moments are spontaneous.

This summer, a memorable moment came during an unexpected wildlife rescue. A great black-backed gull with an injured wing had to be captured and transported to the Wildlife Clinic of Rhode Island. Another Naturalist and I spent several minutes chasing the gull up and down the beach—finally catching it just as a couple arrived from their boat. They watched the whole event unfold with curiosity and concern, and we took a few minutes to explain what we were doing and why. What started as a simple rescue turned into a powerful learning opportunity. Moments like that remind me how environmental education can happen anywhere, at any time.

I've now been working with The Conservancy for three years, and the work we do—both in conservation and education—has a real impact. It inspires individuals, influences communities, and even informs organizations looking to build similar models of stewardship and coastal management. The opportunity to inspire people to protect their local environment or pursue a career in environmental science has kept me coming back.

The Napatree Point Conservation Area is more than a beautiful place—it is a living classroom, and I am honored to be a part of it.

BIRDS, BIRDS, BIRDS

By Matt Zucconi

Avian Surveyor, Napatree Point Conservation Area

In Fall 2017, I began my undergraduate studies at URI majoring in Environmental Science & Management but without a clear focus. In my junior year as I started to take more major-specific courses, (wetland wildlife management, ornithology, and wildlife field techniques), I quickly began to realize viewing the environment through the lens of wildlife behavior and their ecological roles piqued my interest. As a senior, I chose my graduate TA as my internship mentor and integrated myself into a preexisting field research project learning about the American Woodcock; a bird species threatened under New England's current ecological configuration. My field work included setting up mist nets, extracting birds, banding their ankles, and applying radio transmitters to the birds to track their migration movements. It was the most hands-on experience outside of the classroom I had gained, and I quickly realized field work was something I'd become passionate about.

At the close of my senior, I took a position as a seasonal Naturalist with The Watch Hill Conservancy in the Napatree Point Conservation Area, a globally important bird habitat. Until this point, although I had worked in the field, nothing had specific goals pertaining to wildlife conservation. Working on Napatree meant I could educate beachgoers on the local ecology of the barrier beach and enforce rules aimed at protecting the coastal flora and fauna. It meant informing people about nesting Piping Plovers, Least Terns, and American Oystercatchers, and what citizens can do to ensure their protection. I put my schooling to the test and began to educate



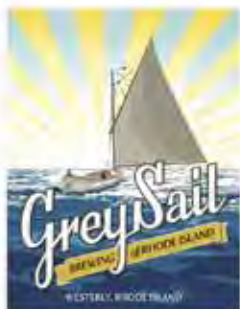
other people as to the importance of our favorite sandy beach and the significance it has to the many migratory shorebirds that use this fragile dune habitat to create their nests and the busy intertidal zones to gain the necessary nutrients to feed their chicks.

Now, as the avian surveyor for The Watch Hill Conservancy, I monitor the birds of Napatree Point every month using a very specific tried and true protocol. My work contributes to a conservation legacy that has been created around the global importance of this ecological goldmine. Additionally, I actively educate the public about the hundreds of bird species that use Napatree Point through organized Bird and Learn walks that take place once a month. Not only do I get to fulfill my own passion for collecting data on bird abundance and distribution, but to also share this information with the many visitors to the Conservation Area. There are few better places in the state of Rhode Island to experience this than at Napatree Point.

**THANK YOU TO OUR 2025 COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING SPONSORS
FOR THEIR GENEROUS SUPPORT**



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LANPHEAR *LIVE!*

2025 Summer Presentations

The 8th season of the Conservancy's flagship summer speaker series, Lanphear *LIVE!* featured an array of fabulous speakers! This year we featured the Anderson family and their loving res-



toration efforts of the iconic Watch Hill Carousel, statewide rescue to release wildlife rehabilitation with Dr. Blaine Hymel of The Wildlife Clinic of Rhode Island, the importance of sustainable aquaculture with Perry Raso of the famed Matunuck Oyster Farm and Bar Restaurant, and unique adventure experiences with travel journalist Peter Mandel. Rounding out the series, author and photographer Markham Starr presented at our 2025 Annual Meeting on the significance of ceremonial stonework throughout the Northeast. We thank our speakers for sharing their experience, energy and outstanding passion.

As Lanphear *LIVE!* is offered free to the public, our Community Programming Sponsorship program plays an important role in augmenting the associated expenses incurred to present this series. A very big thank you to our 2025 Program Sponsors for their generous support - we could not do this without you.

To watch past Lanphear *LIVE!* presentations, please visit The Watch Hill Conservancy website at www.thewatchhillconservancy.org.

THE PASSIONATE NATURALIST

By Emily Watling

Naturalist, Napatree Point Conservation Area

As a fourth-year Naturalist, I have loved every second of working with the Watch Hill Conservancy (WHC), and was honored when asked to write this article for The Conservator. Through this position, I have combined my devotion to learning, education, research, and stewardship – working on transformative projects, promoting sustainable practices, and conserving the natural environment of the Napatree Point Conservation Area (NPTCA) and Little Narragansett Bay (LNB). I am proud to work for an organization that reflects the values I have dedicated my life to.

I grew up in awe of the natural world, spending time absorbing the knowledge of the Earth and encouraging others to love it as much as I do. As I learned more about humanity's impact on this planet, I knew that I would dedicate my life to protecting it.

I transferred to Eastern Connecticut State University as a junior to pursue my degree in Environmental Earth Science. Determined not to miss out on research opportunities, I introduced myself to a coastal geologist during orientation. I did not know then how influential Dr. Bryan Oakley would be in my academic and professional journey. That conversation led to two transformative years studying the eelgrass beds in LNB, eventually writing my first journal article, now published in *Coasts* as of this month! His mentorship shaped my path in coastal science and conservation, and it was Dr. Oakley who first encouraged me to apply to the WHC.

Over the past four years, I have seen firsthand the dedication and passion involved in managing a conservation area. The

Conservancy utilizes research to inform stewardship decisions, and I am grateful to contribute. I have led a species monitoring program with RI DEM, worked with volunteers on Project Limulus Horseshoe Crab walks, facilitated public events, and continued monitoring the LNB eelgrass beds. This position has helped me explore my passions and inspired my focus on research and management in graduate school.

I am currently finishing my master's degree at the University of Connecticut in Biological Oceanography, along with a graduate certificate in Sustainable Environmental Planning and Management. My time as a Naturalist exposed me to the world of science-based management, and pushed me to explore this topic further. My research examines the interactions between oyster aquaculture and eelgrass, aiming to inform future management of this vital fishery.

A single person cannot make a huge difference alone. It is the collaborative efforts of passionate and dedicated stewards that will protect this planet and the species that rely on it. Working with the Conservancy has provided me with the opportunity to participate in the protection and management of the NPTCA and share this knowledge with others. My time with the Conservancy has fueled my love for environmental stewardship and taught me invaluable skills in outreach, education, management, and research. I have found a home not only at Napatree, but also among the amazing people who care for it at the Conservancy. I will be eternally grateful to them for their continued kindness and support.





NAPATREE

Investigator



FALL 2025

HOWDY, INVESTIGATORS!

Welcome back, Investigators! We have a new batch of stories about some of the fascinating creatures we saw this season, along with our ever-tricky crossword!

Our programs encourage kids to love the environment, and to carry that love throughout their lives. From the five-year-old Beach Bums to Investigators, college interns to scientists, we're here to grow, learn, and preserve our beautiful Napatree Point Conservation Area. So on with the show!



ANGELS ON NAPATREE?

We had a really unusual visitor to Napatree: an **angel** ray! It's a type of sea animal that looks a little bit like both a **shark** and a ray. It has a flat body with wide fins that stick out like wings—kind of like an underwater angel, which is how it got its name!

Angel rays live at the bottom of the ocean, usually on sandy or muddy sea floors. They like to hide by burying themselves in the sand, so only their eyes stick out. They do this to stay safe and to surprise their food! When a small fish or crab swims by, the angel ray jumps out super-fast to catch it. They're very good hunters!

Even though they look like rays, angel rays are actually part of the **shark** family. But don't worry - they're not dangerous to people. They're much more interested in little sea animals they can eat.

Angel rays can be found in warm ocean waters all over the world. Some live close to the shore, and others live deep in

the ocean. They like places where they can lie flat and stay hidden.

Baby **angel** rays are called **pups**. The mommy **angel** ray keeps the babies in her belly until they are ready to be born. When they come out, they already look like tiny **angel** rays and can swim and find food all by themselves!

Sadly, **angel** rays are in trouble. People sometimes catch them by accident when fishing for other animals. Their homes on the ocean floor can also get damaged by big fishing boats. Because of this, some kinds of **angel** rays are now very rare and need our help to stay safe.

Angel rays are amazing animals with cool shapes and clever ways of hiding. They show us how many different and wonderful creatures live in the ocean. By learning about them and protecting their homes, we can help make sure they don't disappear.



THE SECRET LIFE OF PIPEFISH

Have you ever seen a fish that looks like a straightened-out seahorse? Meet the **pipefish**! These fascinating creatures are close cousins of seahorses, and just like them, they're full of surprises.

Pipefish have long, skinny bodies that make them look like sticks or pieces of seaweed. This helps them blend in with their surroundings, so bigger fish don't notice them. Most **pipefish** live in **shallow** waters, hiding among sea grass, coral, or kelp

forests. Their camouflage is so good that sometimes even scientists have trouble spotting them!

One of the coolest things about **pipefish** is the way they eat. Instead of having teeth, they have long, straw-like snouts. They use these snouts to slurp up tiny shrimp, **plankton**, and other little creatures floating in the water. Imagine sipping your dinner through a straw—that's a **pipefish's** life!

But the biggest surprise about **pipefish** is who takes care of the babies. In many species, it's the dad who carries the eggs! The female lays her eggs into a special pouch on the male's belly. He keeps them safe until they hatch, a bit like a kangaroo carrying its joey. This unusual parenting style makes **pipefish** some of the best dads in the ocean.

Pipefish come in many colors and sizes. Some are only a few inches long, while others can grow to nearly a foot! Their delicate, graceful movements make them look like underwater dancers.

Next time you think of amazing ocean animals, remember the **pipefish**. They may be small, but with their clever disguises, straw-like snouts, and super-dad skills, they're some of the ocean's most remarkable little wonders.



ACROSS: 4. Pipefish, 5. Plankton, 9. Nettle, 10. Shallow
DOWN: 1. Medusa, 2. Pups, 3. Tentacles, 6. Angel, 7. Shark

Crossword Puzzle Key



MEET THE SEA NETTLE:

THE OCEAN'S FLOATING MYSTERY

Towards the end of the Investigator sessions, we had a chance to see a purple-ish floating animal. We saw a glowing, umbrella-shaped creature drifting by our class: a sea **nettle**! These jellyfish are both beautiful and mysterious, and they've been swimming in Earth's oceans for millions of years—long before dinosaurs roamed the land.

Sea **nettles** don't have bones, a brain, or even a heart. Their bodies are made almost entirely of water, plus a soft, bell-shaped top called a **medusa**. Hanging down from this bell are long, stinging **tentacles**. They use these tentacles to catch food, like tiny fish

and **plankton**. When prey brushes against them, the **tentacles** release tiny stingers that act like a net. Then, the food gets pulled up to the jelly's mouth in the center of its body.

You might wonder: are sea nettles dangerous? For people, their sting can feel like a sharp burn—definitely not fun, but usually not deadly. For small sea creatures, though, those **tentacles** are a powerful trap!



Sea nettles are also important for the ocean's food chain. They help keep **plankton** and small fish populations under control, and in turn, turtles and larger animals eat them. Even though they seem simple, sea nettles play a big role in keeping the ocean balanced.

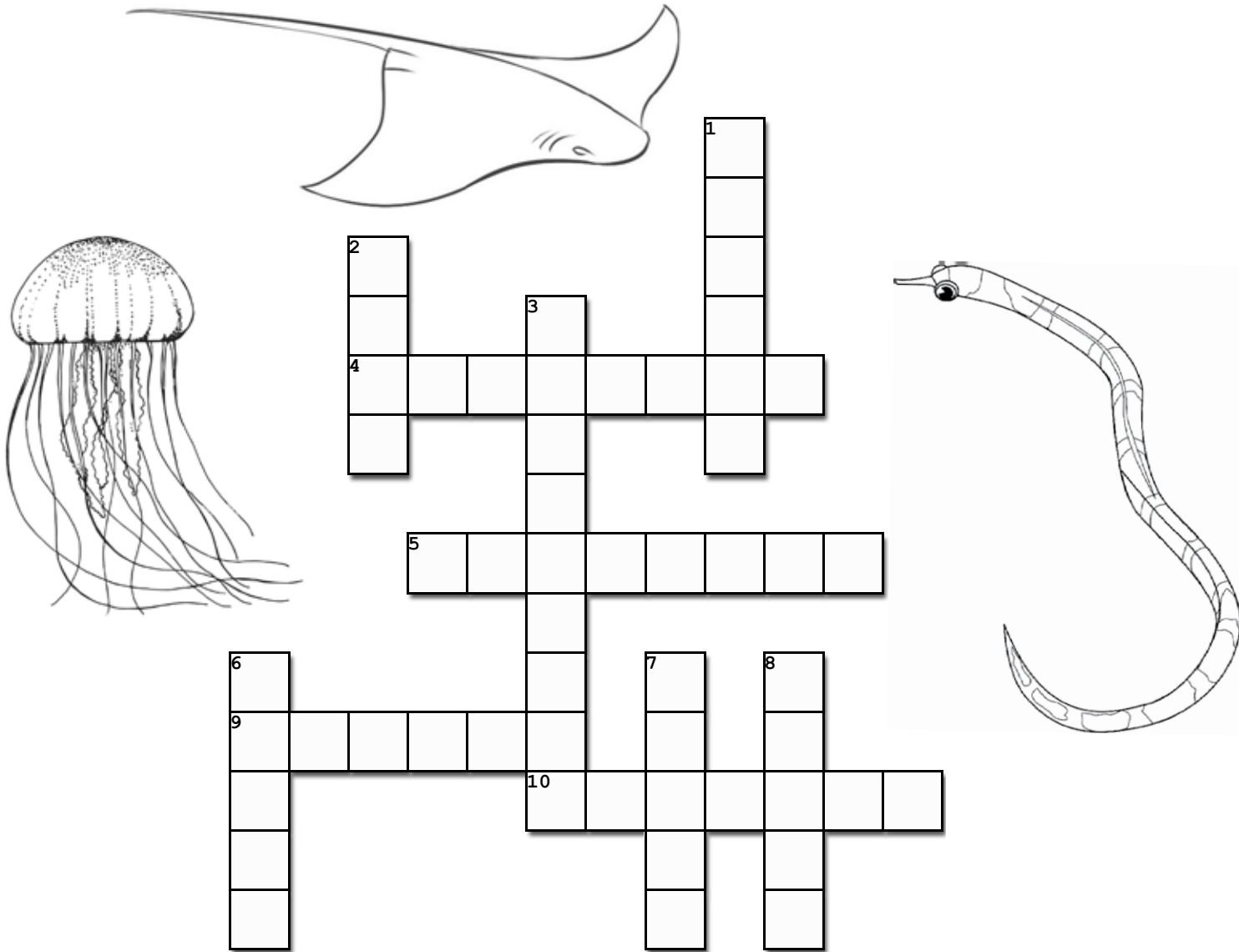
One of the most magical things about sea nettles is how they move. They pulse their bells like umbrellas opening and closing, which makes them glide gently through the water. At night, when light shines through the ocean, they can look like glowing lanterns drifting in the deep.

So the next time you see a picture of a jellyfish, remember the sea **nettle**—a creature with no brain, no bones, and yet an amazing way of surviving in the ocean's great mystery.

Steve and I, along with our intern helpers, hope you had a terrific summer. Enjoy your school year, and before you know it, you'll be returning to our favorite spot: Napatree Point Conservation Area!

Crossword Puzzle Challenge

Welcome to the crossword! All answers can be found in this issue of the Investigator. Plus, you can color the drawings of sea animals!



ACROSS

4. we loved seeing these animals that are cousins to sea horses.
5. one of the tiny creatures that pipefish feed on.
9. the purple jellyfish we saw is called the sea _____.
10. Pipefish like to live in _____ water.

DOWN

1. the bell-shaped on the top of the jelly is called the _____.
2. baby sharks are called these.
3. jellies use these to gather food for themselves.
6. the special kind of ray that visited us this summer.
7. rays are a part of the _____ family.
8. females lay their eggs in their partner's _____.