November/December 2005

Connecticut Wildlife

PUBLISHED BY THE CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
BUREAU OF NATURAL RESOURCES ● WILDLIFE DIVISION

From the Director

Introduced species. Nonnatives. Some get here by accident, some are released intentionally, while others are escapees. In most cases, they don't become established outside their native range. Either the environmental conditions are not suitable or they are unable to compete with endemic species. However, in some instances, introduced species become "invasive," dominating their new habitat at the expense of native wildlife or humans.

Monk parakeets are pet trade escapees that have been present in Connecticut since the early 1970s. These South American birds are colorful, highly visible and, at least initially, a novelty in the areas they colonize. Monk parakeets found a niche in west-coastal Connecticut and this out-of-place "parrot" developed a following among a segment of the public. However, other citizens have been critical of the birds' noisy behavior and their habit of damaging ornamental plants. Utility and safety authorities are concerned about the monk parakeets' tendency to construct massive colonial nests on transmission line poles and light towers. The birds that select utility structures for nesting become imprinted on these structures and will not switch to using trees. Removal of the nests simply encourages the birds to construct additional nests on nearby structures, often magnifying the problem.

Not all birds are protected equally under the statutes. While it is unlawful to harm many birds, there are some exceptions. Starlings and English sparrows are totally unprotected. Monk parakeets are unprotected when found depredating ornamental trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or when concentrated in such numbers to constitute a public health or safety hazard. Utility companies have found that lethal removal of monk parakeets, in addition to nest removal, is necessary to resolve the hazards posed by nesting materials on transmission lines. Connecticut statutes permit lethal control under these circumstances.

The prevailing opinion used to be that monk parakeets would be vulnerable in Connecticut. One harsh winter or some other factor would keep their numbers in check, if not eradicate them altogether. However, it does not appear that is going to happen. Monk parakeets are native to areas in South America with a climate similar to ours and are expanding their range dramatically here. If this population expansion continues, will monk parakeets become the agricultural pests that they are in South America? Will there be ecological consequences that we are not yet aware of? If these threats materialize, will we be able to control this species once it has become widely distributed?

Under existing laws, monk parakeets have enough protection that their population will likely continue to increase. As it does, we will have to closely monitor what effect, if any, they are having on the state's ecology and its citizens.

Dale W. May

Cover:

The DEP Wildlife Division is requesting volunteers for the Bald Eagle Survey scheduled for January 14, 2006 (see page 14, where you will also find information about Shepaug Eagle Observation Area and the CAS Eagle Festival).

Photo courtesy of Paul J. Fusco

Connecticut Wildlife

Published bimonthly by
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Department of Environmental Protection
www.dep.state.ct.us

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The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program was initiated by sportsmen and conservationists to provide states with funding for wildlife management and research programs, habitat acquisition, wildlife management area development and hunter education programs. Each issue of Connecticut Wildlife *contains articles reporting on Wildlife Division projects funded entirely or in part with federal aid monies.*

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Seal Season Is Approaching in Long Island Sound

Written by Heather Medic, Coordinator for the Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program

Mystic Aquarium & Institute for Exploration (MAIFE) is a founding member of the Northeast Regional Stranding Network and has been responding to both live and dead marine mammal and sea turtle stranding calls since 1973. The activities of the Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program are focused along the coasts of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Fisher's Island, New York.

The Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program operates with a full-time Stranding Coordinator, a part-time Stranding Assistant, and a volunteer force of over 40. The number of volunteers has grown over the last few years and there still is a need for more volunteer support. Volunteers are trained to respond to calls from the public or local law enforcement, assist in maintenance of the stranding facilities, and care for in-house stranded marine mammals. Without the volunteers' perseverance and dedication, the rehabilitation process would not be possible.

The ultimate goal of the Stranding Program is to respond to each and every call to find out if the marine mammal or sea turtle is in need of assistance and to provide public education while doing so. Last year in Connecticut, the number of sighting calls (animals that do not come in for rehabilitation) increased to 121 from 64 the year before. All but one of the calls that came in last year in Connecticut were about seals, but only one seal from the state needed rehabilitation. Just because a seal is observed on land does not mean that the animal needs to be rehabilitated.

Stay at least 50 yards away from resting seals and limit your viewing time to avoid causing the animals undue stress and possible death. Unleashed dogs are a major cause of stress. Dogs that approach seals may be injured by the animals and could be exposed to diseases carried by seals.

Not All Seals Need Help

Many people do not know that seals, unlike other marine mammals, need to come up on land to rest. They can stay on land for up to 48 hours without eating or getting wet. Seals are semi-aquatic animals, which means they often spend a portion of each day on land. They haul out of the water for a variety of reasons, including to rest, give birth, and shed. While out of the water they will not eat. Seals store enough fat in their blubber layer to allow them to go for extended periods of time without eating.

H. MEDIC / MAIFE (2)

Individual harp seals, resting on beaches, boat docks, and lawns along Connecticut's shoreline, are becoming a more common sight in winter. These animals are rarely in need of rehabilitation. It is normal to see seals on land. They do not need to stay wet nor do they need to eat every day.

Seals are most commonly observed in groups, hauled out on rocks or sandbars in Long Island Sound. However, there are times when seals are seen alone. Ice seals, in particular, are almost always observed alone in this region and can be found on docks, floating ice, lawns, beaches, and even up rivers.

Four types of seals can be seen in Long Island Sound. Since the mid-1990s, two species of ice seals, harp and hooded seals, have been visiting the Sound during winter. They are called "ice seals" because they are from Canada and even further north toward Greenland, where they spend most of their lives on ice flows. Harp and hooded seals can be seen in New England from mid-January to early May. The "regional seals" are the harbor and gray seals. Both species make Long Island Sound their home from September through June, sometimes never leaving at all. However, the majority of seals do leave the area to breed in their northern territory in summer.

The regional seals keep their distance from people and haul out together in large groups. The ice seals are social in their northern territory, but are solitary when we see them in Connecticut. A regional seal usually will retreat to the water when approached, unless it is a pup. Ice seals typically are not afraid of people and usually will not retreat to the water when approached. Ice seals can be aggressive. Open-mouth displays and vocalizations are signs that you are too close, and the animals may bite if they feel threatened.

As the population of ice seals increases, more and more will be seen in this region. The population of harp seals in Canada is over 5.5 million and growing. Young seals that are not ready to mate tend to spread out to find a new territory when hunting for fish. Harp seals can be seen as far south as Virginia each winter. Last year there were more harp seals seen in Connecticut than in Rhode Island.

What You Can Do

The Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program wants to provide a quick response to callers' concerns about marine mammals and sea turtles. How can you help? People are encouraged to call the Program when they see a marine mammal or sea turtle. Staff and volunteers can then determine if the animal is

continued on page 8

Connecticut's State Wildlife Grant Wetland Bird Project

Written by Min T. Huang, Migratory Gamebird Program

A large number of Connecticut's wildlife species, unfortunately, have received very little research or management attention. Many of these species have exhibited declining population trends and some are even listed under the Connecticut Endangered Species Act. As Connecticut continues to become more urbanized, habitat loss and development pressure on these declining species continues to increase. Information is needed so that recovery or management plans can be developed for many of these species, thus preventing continued population declines and instead beginning the restoration of populations.

Wetland Bird Project

A wetland bird project was developed under the State Wildlife Grants (SWG) program to collect baseline data on a variety of priority wildlife species, some of which are listed under the Connecticut Endangered Species Act. The project focuses primarily on the needs of a diverse group of wetland birds (breeding rails and other secretive waterbirds, as well as wintering loons, grebes, and other diving birds) that occurs in Connecticut. The data collected ultimately will be used to augment any existing species data and to begin the development of recovery or management plans for these species. The DEP Wildlife Division has partnered with a number of non-governmental conservation organizations and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and U.S. Coast Guard to conduct this important work.

As part of this study, a statistically powerful survey methodology was developed for detecting breeding rails, grebes, and bitterns. Over the course of two years, breeding surveys were conducted at 46 marshes throughout Connecticut. The surveys detected such species as the sora, Virginia rail, clapper rail, king rail, pied-billed grebe, American bittern, least bittern, and common moorhen. Virginia rail and sora nests were monitored to determine nesting success. It was determined that daily nest survival rates were 96%; however, overall nest success was about five percent. Habitat assessments of 10 of the survey marshes indicated that invasive plant species, such as Phragmites and purple loosestrife, pose a big problem.

Wintering Diving Birds

Another project involves assessments of wintering diving bird use along the Connecticut coast. Little is known about the distribution and habitat use of wintering diving birds in Long Island Sound. The only systematic surveys presently conducted during winter are the Audubon Christmas Bird Count and the USFWS Midwinter Inventory (MWI). The Christmas Bird Count encompasses all species, whereas the MWI only indexes waterfowl. Long Island Sound is a critical wintering and staging area for migratory birds. Continued development pressures in the Sound, such as the construction of underground pipelines and proposed offshore oil terminals, may

P. J. FUSCO

A statistically powerful survey methodology was developed for detecting breeding American bitterns (above), rails, and grebes as part of a wetland bird project. These birds are secretive and often difficult to detect during standard biological surveys.

Survey results indicated that diving birds, such as horned grebes (above), pied-billed grebes, and razorbills were more prevalent in Connecticut during March than in other months.

pose serious risks to wintering birds, particularly if development were to occur in high use areas.

Ground, aerial, and boat surveys of Long Island Sound were conducted by the Wildlife Division from November through April. A total of 104,128 birds, comprising 41 species, were observed over the course of the survey effort. Rare species to Connecticut, such as Eurasian wigeon, king eider, northern gannet, and razorbill, were observed. Overall, wintering bird numbers were constant from December through February, but increased in March. Different trends were detected for different groups of birds. Diving birds (horned grebes, pied-billed grebes, razorbills) were more prevalent in March than in other months. Puddle ducks showed no trend in numbers during the course of the winter as their numbers were constant. Sea duck numbers were greatest in February, March, and April. Diving duck numbers mirrored those of sea ducks, with the greatest numbers present in February and March. Both common loons and red-throated loons were more abundant in February and March. Similar to puddle ducks, double-crested cormorants and great cormorant numbers were constant throughout the survey period.

The western portion of Long Island Sound (Housatonic River west to Greenwich Harbor) was the area that supported the greatest diversity of species throughout the wintering period. The greatest diversity of species was observed during February and March.

Apart from learning what species are in Long Island Sound and where, it is important to know what the birds are doing in specific areas. Thus, time budget surveys were conducted at specific sites throughout the winter. Horned grebes, red-throated loons, common loons, long-tailed ducks, and scoters were the focus of these time budget surveys. Overall, sea ducks spent approximately 40% of their time loafing, 33% feeding, and 10% preening. Differences in the activities of sea ducks between months were noted. During February, sea ducks devoted 61% of their time to feeding, whereas in March they spent 35% of their time feeding. Loons and grebes spent 12% of their time swimming, 5% preening, 34% loafing, and 45% feeding. Across months, no differences in the activity budgets of loons or grebes were apparent.

P. J. FUSCO (3)

Scoters and other sea ducks were the focus of time budget surveys. Overall, sea ducks spent approximately 40% of their time loafing, 33% feeding, and 10% preening.

Ground, aerial, and boat surveys of Long Island Sound were used to detect wintering diving birds. Double-crested cormorants (above) and great cormorant numbers were constant throughout the survey period.

The Wildlife Division plans to collect data for one more year on wintering diving birds, while also further clarifying some of the information gathered during the first year of work.

State Wildlife Grants are federal funds appropriated by Congress annually to state fish and wildlife agencies. The funds require a non-federal match and are distributed to states based on a land and population formula. Congress enacted the State Wildlife Grants program in 2001 as part of the Conservation Trust Fund.

Nesting Terns at Falkner Island

Since the 1960s, Falkner Island, a small, crescent-shaped piece of land just off the coast of Guilford, has been the site of the largest common tern and roseate tern colonies in Connecticut. This 4.5-acre island was once owned by the U.S. Coast Guard until it became part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Division of Refuges in 1985. It is now considered part of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge.

Over 3,000 pairs of common terns nest at Falkner Island along with the roseate terns. Their nesting success is monitored as well.

P. J. FUSCO (2)

Researchers at Falkner Island use this blind to observe the nesting activities of roseate and common terns.

The roseate tern colony on the island is part of a northeastern regional population that nests at various sites along the coastlines of Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York. This northeastern breeding population was declared endangered by the USFWS in 1987. With the passage of Connecticut's endangered species act in 1992, the roseate tern also was listed as state-endangered. The common tern is considered a Connecticut species of special concern.

Because of the endangered status of roseate terns, their productivity is continuously monitored at Falkner Island, as well as at other breeding sites in Massachusetts and New York. This past nesting season, 44 pairs of roseate terns fledged 36 young, compared to the 37 pairs that fledged 25 young in 2004. Predation of chicks by black-crowned night-herons has been the major cause of death to tern chicks over the years. This year was no different as five roseate tern nests were depredated by night-herons. Great black-backed gulls also preyed on some of the chicks.

Over 3,000 pairs of common terns nest at Falkner Island along with the roseate terns. Their nesting success is monitored as well, but final numbers are not yet available. In years past, productivity has been affected by predation of chicks by black-crowned night-herons and gulls. Common tern chicks are usually more heavily preyed upon than are roseate tern chicks because they are more numerous.

The enhancement of nesting habitat at Falkner Island has helped to provide additional nest sites for roseate terns and protection for the chicks. Each April, before the terns arrive, a work crew that includes volunteers organized by The Nature Conservancy places nest boxes in rocky areas and partially buries tires in gravelly areas. These sheltered nest sites provide both eggs and young chicks protection, mainly from predators like gulls and black-crowned night-herons. Each spring, when the birds return to nest on the island, a resident research team begins to observe and identify adults and to census roseate and common tern nests. At the end of each field season, the observation blinds are taken apart and the tires and nest boxes are removed from the beach so they won't be swept away by winter storms.

Connecticut Terns

The least, common and roseate terns all nest in Connecticut, while several other tern species can be found in the state during late summer or times of migration. Terns are strong, swift fliers with daring agility. They are well adapted to making their living over water, in search of their main prey, fish. Their typical style is to find their quarry by sight, get themselves into position for a strike by hovering over the target, and then dive head first into the water to catch small fish with their bill.

In Connecticut, terns nest on the ground in colonies that may hold from a few pairs to as many as a few thousand pairs of nesting birds. They will aggressively defend their colony from intruders and predators by fearlessly diving at them, pecking, and defecating on them. Terns nesting in colonies gain protection from predators and intruders through the active defense by all of the individuals in the colony. When large numbers of terns aggressively defend their colony, they have a greater impact defending their nests than would a single bird or smaller numbers of birds. However, their tendency to nest in colonies also makes terns more vulnerable when their colonies experience human disturbance or if there is a loss of nesting habitat due to development and recreational activities.

Federal Grants Awarded for Recreational Trail Projects

Sessions Woods WMA among 31 projects to benefit from grants

Nearly $670,000 in federal funds has been awarded for 31 projects across Connecticut to expand and improve trails for hiking, bicycling, cross-country skiing, and other recreational activities. One of the projects to receive a federal grant is the maintenance of the self-guided trails at the DEP Wildlife Division's Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Burlington, as well as Babcock Pond WMA in Colchester.

"These grants will fund improvements that will make it more fun and inviting for people to enjoy the great outdoors in Connecticut," said Governor M. Jodi Rell. "Connecticut is a beautiful state to begin with, and the natural resources available to the public are truly remarkable. The funding will help improve and expand the network of trails that brings people into parks and forests, through urban greenways, and along rivers and the shoreline."

The grants include $50,000 each to Hartford, Bridgeport, and Stamford to develop recreational and educational trails and pathways; grants to 14 other municipalities and six nonprofit organizations to create and repair trails and bridges; and funding to the DEP to upgrade and maintain trails in areas ranging from Kent Falls to Dinosaur State Park.

The grant money is made available through the National Recreational Trails Program of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration. The funds are awarded to applicants through a competitive process administered by DEP and the State Recreational Trails Program Advisory Committee, which represents a broad spectrum of trail users.

DEP Commissioner Gina McCarthy said, "The department was able to approve 23 important projects submitted by municipalities and private, nonprofit organizations, along with eight improvement projects on trails maintained by DEP in our state parks and forests. The projects we have selected will support everything from improved access to hiking and mountain biking to horseback riding and cross-country skiing. At DEP we are committed to reconnecting the people of this state to all of the great outdoor recreational activities Connecticut has to offer. This grant program helps us accomplish that goal." Most projects are expected to begin next spring.

P. J. FUSCO

A $5,000 federal grant will be used to maintain the hiking trails at the DEP Wildlife Division's Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area in Burlington. Natural Resource Educator Laura Rogers-Castro regularly leads interpretive walks along the trails for public programs, school groups, and other organized groups. The trails also are used daily and year-round by visitors to Sessions Woods.

DEP Trail Projects Slated to Receive Funding from Federal Grant

Several DEP properties, including two of the DEP Wildlife Division's wildlife management areas, will receive funding for the expansion and improvement of trails.

Session Woods Wildlife Management Area (Burlington):
The self-guided hiking trails at Sessions Woods will be maintained with the help of a $5,000 grant.

Babcock Pond Wildlife Management Area (Colchester):
A grant of $7,800 will be used to maintain a handicapped access trail. The trail will be cleared of debris and the trailside will be mowed. There are plans to purchase, compact, and roll four inches of crushed medium gravel on the trail.

Dinosaur Park State Park (Rocky Hill):
The Mesoziac Trail will receive new gravel, as well as new signage that will link the museum/park's trail. Old signage also will be replaced. This project was awarded a grant of $26,630.74.

Collis P. Huntington State Park (Redding):
A grant of $20,212 will be used to make improvements to an existing trail, including clearing, relocating, resurfacing, and regrading.

Kent Falls State Park (Kent):
A graded river access trail will be developed with the help of a $25,000 grant. The trail will include interpretive signage, handicapped accessibility, correction of erosion, and an elevated walkway

Mashamoquet Brook Unit (Pomfret):
An existing boardwalk will be replaced with one that has concrete footings, pressure treated southern yellow pine stringers, and composite decking. This project was awarded a grant of $5,648.29.

Salmon River/Rails to Trails Appurtenances:
A $2,300 grant will be used to install signs and dog waste dispensers along the Hop River and Air Line State Parks.

The DEP was awarded a grant of $62,709 to undertake small maintenance projects on existing trails at DEP parks, forests, and wildlife management areas throughout the state.

The Connecticut Forest and Parks Association (CFPA), a nonprofit conservation organization, received a $6,000 grant to maintain the Blue Blazed Trails that traverse through state forests, parks and wildlife management areas. The funding will enable CFPA to purchase equipment and materials to repair or construct bridges, build and erect signs, and make the necessary improvements to the trails.

Building Shelter for Bluebirds

Once again, the DEP Wildlife Division is offering bundles of rough-cut lumber to **groups** for building bluebird nest boxes. For more than two decades, the Wildlife Division has offered rough-cut wood, nest box plans, and fact sheets to Connecticut schools, scout and 4-H groups, nature centers, conservation commissions, and similar civic organizations as part of the Bluebird Restoration Project.

The wood for building nest boxes will be distributed to **organized groups only** on a "first come, first serve" basis. Group leaders should send a postcard to the Wildlife Diversity Program, P.O. Box 1550, Burlington, CT 06013-1550. Requests must be received by **January 1, 2006**, and include the following information: group leader's name, group name, mailing address, daytime phone number and number of bundles requested (limit 2). Each bundle of wood will make approximately 20 nest boxes. Group leaders should be aware that the lumber comes as planks and all groups will be responsible for cutting the wood to the correct size. Only one request per group will be accepted.

If accepted, participants will be notified by late January when they can pick up their wood at the Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area, located on Route 69 in Burlington.

Although lumber is only available for groups, individuals interested in aiding Connecticut's bluebird population may obtain a bluebird fact sheet with nest box plans, box location tips, and nest box survey cards by writing to the Wildlife Diversity Program. Information also is available on winterizing existing nest boxes and providing food for bluebirds during winter and year-round. Survey cards for reporting box use and location are part of a statewide network that helps monitor bluebird population trends. The bluebird fact sheet and nest box plans also can be found in the wildlife section of the DEP's website at www.dep.state.ct.us/burnatr/wildlife.

P. J. FUSCO

DEP Wildlife Division Technician Geoff Krukar cleans out a bluebird nest box located at the Division's Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area. Organized groups are encouraged to participate in the Division's Bluebird Restoration Project.

Seals

continued from page 3

in need of medical attention, needs to be moved from a populated area, or is just resting. Seals, especially, are resilient and usually just need time to rest. Ice seals are on their own when they are only 12 days old, and the regional seals no longer need to be with their mothers after five weeks. Most of the seals that people see are just looking for a place to rest before their next big meal.

If you observe a seal or seals on land, limit your viewing time. Loud noises and quick movements are likely to scare or agitate the wild animal. All marine mammals are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 further protects sea turtles and whales that are endangered. It is illegal to touch, feed, disturb, harass, hunt, capture, or kill marine mammals and sea turtles.

Harassment occurs when your behavior changes their behavior. Stay at least 50 yards (150 feet) away from marine mammals and sea turtles. Warning signs of harassment are not what most people expect when they come upon a seal on land. If your presence causes increased vocalizations by seals; shaking or body tremors; a resting animal to lift its head with eyes on you; or a seal on the beach to eat rocks and sand, then you are too close. It is important to keep in mind that seals do not get cold. They have a thick blubber layer. So, when a seal is shaking do not put a blanket on the animal or put the animal in a warm car. This will only cause more stress, and stress can kill a wild animal.

MAIFE is a nonprofit organization that relies heavily on the assistance of private donations and grants to continue to provide rapid response and medical assistance to marine mammals and sea turtles. If you would like to help, donations are always welcome. To make a donation or to report a sighting of a marine mammal or sea turtle, please call the Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Program at MAIFE at 860-572-5955 ext. 107.

2005 Piping Plover/Least Tern Nesting Results

Written by Julie Victoria, Wildlife Diversity Program

DEP Wildlife Division staff and several volunteers spent another summer monitoring the nesting success of two state threatened shorebirds, the piping plover and least tern. (The piping plover also is a federally threatened species.) A research assistant assigned to the plover and tern project also spent many hours at shoreline nesting areas, monitoring plovers and terns, erecting protective fencing, observing nests, and educating beach visitors. The research assistant position was funded through federal aid from Section 6 of the federal Endangered Species Act.

Thirty-four pairs of piping plovers nested along the Connecticut coastline during the 2005 breeding season, six pairs less than last year. However, the number of young fledged (reached flying stage) was 55, which is one more chick than in 2004.

Colonial nesting least terns are usually found near or among piping plovers nests. Approximately 216 pairs of least terns nested in the state this season, an increase from the 158 of 2004. However, the number of young fledged was low at 70, compared to the 209 fledged in 2004.

P. J. FUSCO (2)

An adult least tern feeds its nestling a small fish. Only 70 least tern chicks fledged this year, compared to 209 in 2004.

The consistent number of piping plover chicks that have fledged every nesting season since 1986 is very encouraging and reflects the success of aggressive management by the DEP Wildlife Division. Specific and carefully researched procedures are used to protect nesting plovers and terns. Initially, beaches designated as breeding grounds are fenced off with string to discourage people and dogs from disturbing birds in the area. Educational signs, as well as "Keep Away" and "No Dogs" signs, also are posted around these areas. When individual plover nests are located, a wire "exclosure," with a top net, is erected around each nest. The exclosure is designed to keep dogs, house cats, skunks, raccoons, weasels, foxes, and avian predators from reaching the eggs.

Due to the flight patterns of least terns, individual nest fencing is not an effective technique for them. Consequently, walkers, anglers, and dogs often disturb these birds. This summer, the Connecticut Ornithological Society (COA) hired a tern warden to monitor activities at Sandy Point/Morse Point in West Haven. The warden was trained by COA and worked under the direction of the DEP Wildlife Division. COA is currently analyzing data collected by the warden and preparing a formal report to be released at a later date. However, the warden noted large numbers of people using the area.

Piping plovers and least terns prefer to nest on sandy beaches, but only a limited number of sites is available due to current shoreline development and recreational use. Mammalian and avian predators, attracted to beach areas by human litter, hamper nesting success, as do human disturbances which keep the birds off their nests, preventing them from attending young.

The Wildlife Division appreciates the cooperation of those who respected the fenced and posted areas during the summer nesting season. Thanks to the public education efforts of volunteers from the Division's Master Wildlife Conservationist Program, The Nature Conservancy, and Connecticut Audubon Society, beach visitors and dog owners at several sites were very cooperative. The Division encourages volunteer assistance and hopes to continue public education next season. Volunteers are being sought to assist next summer with public education efforts at several nesting beaches in the West Haven, Stratford, and Milford areas. For more information, contact Julie Victoria, at the Franklin Wildlife Management Area, 391 Route 32, North Franklin, CT 06254, or send email to julie.victoria@po.state.ct.us.

Thirty-four pairs of piping plovers nested along the Connecticut coastline in 2005, six pairs less than last year. Fifty-five young fledged, compared to 54 in 2004.

Masters of Melody - The Mimic Thrushes

Written by Paul Fusco, Wildlife Outreach Program

Northern mockingbirds are highly visible songbirds that frequently sing from elevated perches. They are renowned for their expert mimicry.

A steady breeze blows across a sand dune on a brisk fall morning along the Connecticut shoreline. The wind rustles dried leaves in a thicket of beach rose and bayberry, while bittersweet and poison ivy vines entangle the shrubs with sprouts reaching toward the sky. The fading red leaves of poison ivy glow in the morning sun. A mockingbird hops to the top of a bittersweet sprout. The bird flashes its white wing and tail patches as it surveys its surroundings. It utters a harsh call note, *tchack*! Then it begins a remarkable set of song phrases. First a long series of richly varied and strong musical notes, followed by a perfect rendition of the slurred whistle *klee-er-ee* normally voiced by a black-bellied plover, then a series of notes that belong to a song sparrow.

Mimic thrushes are closely related to true thrushes, such as the robin and wood thrush. The mimics include mockingbirds, catbirds, and thrashers. These medium-sized, slender songbirds have long tails, strong legs and feet, and slender and slightly decurved bills. There are 31 species of mimic thrushes, all in the western Hemisphere. Three of those species can be found in Connecticut. All three use early successional shrub habitat and are frequently found in heavy thickets and vine tangles where they feed on invertebrates and berries.

Northern Mockingbird

Northern mockingbirds are robin-sized, pale gray birds with large conspicuous white wing and tail patches. They are historically a southern bird, and have expanded their range into the northeast over the last 50 years. Mockingbirds are now common and widespread residents in Connecticut. Some birds will withdraw from northern areas and higher elevations in winter.

Mockingbirds are one of our most familiar backyard birds. They have adapted well to urban and suburban habitats that can provide heavy thickets and shrubbery for cover and persistent berries and fruit for winter food. They are conspicuous, often seen perched in the open at the top of a thicket.

Among our most talented and prolific singers, a mockingbird's song is strong, melodious, and rich. Mockingbirds will sing day or night, spring and fall, and sometimes while in flight. Often they can be heard singing from an elevated perch on moonlit nights. Mockingbirds will repeat each phrase several to a half dozen times before the next phrase begins. This differs from the other mimic thrushes in that thrashers will repeat a phrase once or twice and catbirds usually do not repeat a phrase.

Mockingbirds are well known for mimicking the songs of other birds. The songs a mockingbird imitates give the listener a clue as to where the bird has lived. Birds that have lived along the shoreline will pick up the songs and calls of species like terns and shorebirds, while those that live inland pick up songs of other birds that live adjacent to the mockingbird's territory. Their imitations are so good that any birder could easily be fooled about the identity of the songster if the mockingbird went unseen. As well as imitating the songs of other birds, mockingbirds also have been known to imitate other sounds, including barking dogs and frogs.

Alert and fearless defenders of their territories, mockingbirds will attack cats, dogs, and even people that stray too close to their nest. They also will aggressively defend their feeding territories and can frequently be seen chasing other birds out of their thicket in an effort to claim its berries for themselves. Among their favorites are the berries of mulberry, blackberry, red

cedar, multiflora rose, Virginia creeper, poison ivy, and black cherry.

Gray Catbird

Named for its cat-like mewing call, the gray catbird is a common breeder in Connecticut with a statewide distribution. It can be found in dense thickets and thorny scrub and edge habitats. Tolerant of people, the catbird is frequently found nesting in dense hedgerows and shrubs in suburban backyards.

Catbirds are migratory and in winter they range south to Panama. Some catbirds will overwinter in Connecticut in mild areas, especially along the shoreline where they feed on the persistent berries of poison ivy, bittersweet, and multiflora rose.

The song of a catbird is long and varied, similar to that of a mockingbird or thrasher, but not as rich. It may contain sweet warbling notes and those that are raspy. The song is frequently interrupted by pauses and harsh squeaking notes. Catbirds will sometimes include phrases of other birds in their songs. Unlike the mockingbird and thrasher, catbirds do not typically repeat phrases in their songs.

Brown Thrasher

Brown thrashers are widespread breeders in Connecticut. Their distribution is statewide, but they are uncommon and local. They are more common in southern and western parts of the state than in other areas. Thrashers are short-distance migrants in the northern part of their range, which includes southern New England. Most birds move to the southeastern United States in winter; however, a few hardy individuals stick out the cold weather in milder parts of the state, especially along the shoreline.

While the two other species of mimic thrushes are doing very well in Connecticut, the brown thrasher is not. The species is not as adaptable as the others. It is not commonly found in urban or suburban habitats and its population is presumed to have suffered from the extensive loss of farmland habitat that has occurred here over the past century. Because of concern for the declining population and the lack of required early successional habitat, the brown thrasher is currently listed as a species of special concern in Connecticut.

Brown thrashers do most of their foraging on the ground, frequently under shrubs and vines. These shy birds can be harder to see than to hear as they throw aside fallen leaves and detritus with their feet and bills while searching for worms and other invertebrates. They usually nest on or very close to the ground under dense thickets.

Along with the mockingbird, the brown thrasher is among our most brilliant singers. Both birds have songs that are rich in tonal quality and volume. The thrasher's song is made up of a long series of loud melodious phrases that are strikingly musical and given in rapid succession. Although thrashers will sometimes imitate other birds' songs, they do so less often than the other mimic thrushes. Their song phrases are normally given two or three times.

P. J. FUSCO

The catbird has a tailored appearance with its dark sooty gray coloring, black cap, and chestnut coloring under the tail coverts.

The Brown Thrasher Is a State Species of Special Concern -- What Does that Mean?

The Connecticut Endangered Species Act defines a species of special concern "as any native plant or native nongame wildlife species documented by scientific research and inventory to have a naturally restricted range or habitat in the state, to be at a low population level, to be in such high demand by man that its unregulated taking would be detrimental to the conservation of its population, or has been extirpated from the state."

Brown thrashers are rusty brown above, with a white underside streaked with brown.

Purple Martin's Majesty

People have long sought to attract purple martins. These large, dark, glossy birds have a stronger communal lifestyle than most other birds and will nest in colonies of varying sizes. Nest sites were historically natural cavities. However, Native Americans discovered that if they hung hollow gourds in saplings or on poles, they could encourage martins to nest in their villages. Bird enthusiasts today continue this practice by putting up man-made apartment houses or gourds on their property to attract purple martins. As long as conditions remain favorable, martins usually will return to these same nest sites year after year. However, they may expand their range if suitable habitat is no longer available at a previously used site or if new sites or artificial roosts nearby attract younger martins.

P. J. FUSCO

The DEP Wildlife Division wants to know if you have a purple martin house, as well as nesting purple martins.

Description

Purple martins are often called "dark swallows" because of their purplish-blue plumage. Young martins and females are grayer and paler on their undersides than are the males. Females are often confused with the smaller tree swallow. The larger size (7.5-8.5 inches) of the martin and the grayness of its throat and breast distinguish it from the tree swallow, whose undersides are white. In flight, male martins can be distinguished from equally iridescent and similarly-sized starlings by their forked tail, longer wings, and typical swallow flight of short glides alternating with rapid flapping.

Food and Habitat

Like all swallows, the purple martin feeds almost entirely on flying insects. Large amounts of insects, caught in flight, are consumed daily. A popular misconception is that purple martins are a major predator of mosquitoes. Extensive studies of martin feeding habits have shown that mosquitoes make up a very small percentage of the martin's daily diet. Martins feed high in the sky and during the day; mosquitoes are found in low damp places during daytime or only at night. The diet of purple martins includes dragonflies, damselflies, mayflies, beetles, butterflies, moths, grasshoppers, bees, wasps, flies, and other flying insects. Because of their diet, martins are susceptible to starvation during extended periods of cool and/or wet weather, when insects may not be plentiful or active.

Purple martins inhabit both urban and rural areas. They prefer open, grassy habitats and forest openings near streams, rivers, marshes, ponds, or lakes. These openings provide a large "swoop zone" for the martins to catch insects. The most attractive backyard habitats include expanses of lawn or meadow near a large body of water. Although purple martins are known to nest in tree cavities, those that nest east of the Rocky Mountains, including in Connecticut, are now entirely dependent on man-made houses.

Status in Connecticut

The purple martin is not as common in Connecticut as it once was. In fact, purple martin numbers have declined over much of their range. Up until the late 1800s, martin colonies were locally abundant in Connecticut. However, shortly after that time, the population began to decline due to competition for cavity nest sites with non-native, aggressive house sparrows and European starlings. Currently, the purple martin is designated as a species of special concern in the state. Most of Connecticut's nesting birds can be found at coastal locations, with a few found at inland sites.

Because of the purple martin's status, the DEP Wildlife Division is interested in learning more about breeding populations in Connecticut. Several homeowners and landowners throughout the state have established martin houses on their properties. Some of these houses are currently being used by martins, while others were used in the past or have not yet been occupied. The Wildlife Division's Wildlife Diversity Program wants to know the location of martin houses and what kind of use they receive. If you have a martin house on your property, you are encouraged to contact the Wildlife Division (see sidebar for more information).

However, if you don't have a martin house, but feel that you have the right kind of habitat for martins and want to put up a house, there is help and advice available. The Purple

The purple martin is not as common in Connecticut as it once was. Currently, it is designated as a species of special concern in the state. Most of Connecticut's nesting birds can be found at coastal locations, with a few found at inland sites.The DEP Wildlife Division is interested in learning more about breeding populations in the state.

Martin Conservation Association (PMCA) is a great place to start. This organization is devoted exclusively to the scientific study of purple martins, their biology, and habitat requirements. The PMCA website (www.purplemartin.org) contains information about maintaining and building houses (or where to purchase them), as well as how to attract martins and keep them coming back every breeding season. You also may want to contact the Purple Martin Conservation Association, at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Edinboro, PA 16444; (814) 734-4220.

Tips for Establishing and Maintaining a Purple Martin Colony

Whether you want to put up a martin house with several apartments or just hang some gourd nests, there are a few things you should consider before making the effort to attract purple martins.

- Place the martin house within 100 feet of houses or outbuildings.
- Place the house away from tall trees or tightly enclosed yards and allow a sufficient aerial flyway from buildings (approximately 50 feet).
- Martin houses should be mounted 15 to 20 feet above ground on poles that telescope up and down or on poles that allow the houses to be raised and lowered by a winch and pulley system. The use of stationary and tilt poles is not recommended. If you plan to closely monitor your martin colony throughout the nesting season, it is important to mark the mounting pole with a vertical alignment guide to insure that houses are correctly realigned. This will allow purple martins access to their nests at exactly the same location and prevent nestling abandonment by adults.
- Natural or synthetic gourds have proven to be the best and safest martin nesting structure. The swaying motion of the gourds discourages many competing cavity-nesting birds and a variety of predators. New synthetic gourds that allow for easy cleaning are a good choice. Along with wooden houses, gourds provide the best temperature stability for nesting martins. Regardless of the size or final design, the exterior of the martin house should be painted white to reduce heat buildup. The interior should remain unpainted. Information on purchasing gourds or houses may be obtained from the Purple Martin Conservation Association.
- All martin "landlords" should monitor their houses weekly for nest checks and to keep starling and house sparrow nests from becoming established. If a martin house cannot be raised and lowered or opened easily for cleaning, it is best not to install it. Consider using gourds instead.
- Do not allow competing cavity-nesters to claim the house first; returning martins will bypass already occupied houses even if some compartments remain empty.
- Check pole-mounted houses frequently for signs of insect parasites. "Checked" nests often produce more young. Monitoring the houses will not cause the birds to abandon the house, but a parasite infestation will.
- Check the ground below the house frequently for signs of predation (feathers, nesting material, eggshells, etc.). All pole-mounted houses should have a cone-shaped predator guard.
- Consider offering nesting materials like straw, small twigs, and wet mud from a location near the martin house.
- A tray of broken eggshells can provide a readily available source of calcium and grit to supplement the diet of growing nestlings.
- Do not allow shrubs or vines to grow up under the house or around the mounting pole.
- Prior to the nesting season, make sure that gourds and/or houses are cleaned, repaired, and painted (outside only with white exterior latex paint) and that all drainage holes are free of debris. Martin houses that are stored inside over the winter will last longer.
- If you have just one active house or gourd, do not completely remove and replace it unless the replacement is identical and in exactly the same location. If you want to move your martin house or replace it with a larger one, put both houses up and wait to remove the old one until some of the returning martins have accepted the new one. Adding additional gourds usually creates less of a disturbance to a returning colony.

If your martin house is not used the first year it is installed, do not be discouraged! Purple martins have a limited range in Connecticut and expand into new areas slowly. It may take several years before a martin house is occupied.

Report Purple Martin Nesting to the Wildlife Division

Do you have a purple martin house or nesting gourds? Are purple martins nesting there or elsewhere on your property? Do you know someone that does have nesting purple martins? If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then we want to hear from you.

In an effort to collect information on the distribution of purple martins in Connecticut, the DEP Wildlife Division is asking state residents to call or send an email with information regarding existing martin houses. The goal is to locate every potential nesting site for martins in Connecticut. As the project continues, there are plans to develop survey cards and/or a website link to allow for easier reporting in future years.

The information being sought includes:

- **Martin house location (street address, GPS, etc.)**
- **Number of houses and number of chambers per house or the number of gourds**
- **Number of chambers occupied by purple martins (if any)**
- **When houses or gourds were first put up**
- **How many years houses or gourds have been used by purple martins**
- **Height of each house off the ground**
- **How often house is cleaned out**

To report a purple martin house, please contact Geoffrey Krukar of the DEP's Wildlife Diversity Program at 860-675-8130, or send email to birdsurveys@po.state.ct.us.

FROM THE FIELD

CT's Moose Population Estimated at 100+

Maybe not as noticeable as Connecticut's steadily growing bear population, but the moose population has been expanding at its own slower rate. The DEP Wildlife Division keeps track of sightings and estimates that there are just over 100 moose living in the state's forests. The Division first began to record sightings in 1992. Before 1992, sightings were sporadic, about one every two or three years. By 1999, sightings of both males and females had increased markedly and, starting in 2000, there have been reports of cows with calves every year since then. The cow and calf sightings confirm that Connecticut has a resident, reproducing population. Last year, 59 moose sightings were reported. Plus, moose were in the news in 2004 as two different moose were found wandering in heavily populated areas of the state (near Interstate 95 in Old Lyme and Route 20 in Granby). Both moose had to be immobilized by the DEP and moved to more remote, forested areas of the state.

From February 17 to October, 2005, there have been 31 sightings of moose from 17 Connecticut towns. To date, there has been only one moose-vehicle accident reported in the state this year.

As a side note, the first case of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in a free-ranging moose was documented in Colorado in September 2005. CWD has been present in Colorado's free-ranging deer and elk populations since the mid-1980s. Prevalence in moose likely will remain extremely low because, unlike deer and elk, moose do not form herds or large social groups. Moose are typically solitary animals and generally only stay with other moose in cow-calf pairs. (CWD in moose is currently not a threat in Connecticut as CWD has not been documented in the state's deer population.)

CT Moose Sightings from 1992-2005

1992-1998 = about 4 sightings per year
1999 = 17 sightings
2000 =14 sightings
2001 = 25 sightings
2002 = 32 sightings
2003 = 35 sightings
2004 = 59 sightings
2005 = 31 sightings (as of Oct. 2005)

CAS Eagle Festival, February 18-19, 2006

The Connecticut Audubon Society will present the 7th Annual Eagle Festival on the Connecticut River on February 18-19, 2006. A complete guide to the Eagle Festival on the Connecticut River, listing boat tours, programs, and events, can be obtained from Connecticut Audubon by calling 1-800-714-7201. To find out more information about the Festival, visit Connecticut Audubon's website at www.ctaudubon.org.

Correction! Annual Eagle Survey Scheduled for January 14

In the last issue of *Connecticut Wildlife*, the DEP Wildlife Division requested volunteers to help with the annual Bald Eagle Survey, in which many volunteers count eagles along standard, non-overlapping survey routes. **However, the date published was incorrect. The 2006 Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey will actually be conducted on Saturday, January 14, 2006, between 7:00 AM and 11:00 AM.**

If you would like to participate in the 2006 Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey, send a postcard with your name and mailing address to: Julie Victoria, Franklin Wildlife Management Area, 391 Route 32, North Franklin, CT 06254. You will receive an information packet about the survey in early December.

Shepaug Eagle Observation Area Opens Dec. 28

The Shepaug Bald Eagle Observation Area will be open to the public on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays from December 28, 2005, through March 15, 2006, from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM--strictly by advance reservation. All individuals and groups wishing to visit the site to view eagles must make a reservation for a particular date, as there will be a limited number of visitors allowed per open day.

Starting December 6, 2005, reservations for the Shepaug Eagle Observation Area can be made Tuesday through Friday, from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM, by calling 1-800-368-8954.

"Animals in Winter" Exhibit at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich

When winter's chill sets in each year, we turn up the thermostats indoors, but wildlife must adapt in other ways. How animals deal with winter and cold is the focus of the new exhibition entitled ***Animals in Winter: Survival at Zero Degrees***, which is organized by the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich, Connecticut, and on view there from November 19, 2005, through March 5, 2006. The exhibition highlights the Bruce Museum animal mount collection. Find out about animal migrations, what happens during hibernation, and how some animals are able to remain active. Touchable furs, hands-on activities, and examples help explain adaptations to winter and survival strategies. This exhibition is supported by the Charles M. and Deborah Royce Exhibition Fund.

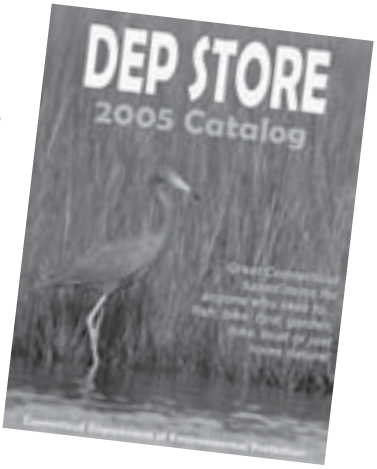
For more information, call the Bruce Museum at (203) 869-0376 or visit the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science website at www.brucemuseum.org.

Give a Gift of Wildlife!

***Connecticut Wildlife* Magazine:** A subscription to *Connecticut Wildlife* is the perfect gift for any wildlife enthusiast. Each recipient will receive a note card informing them of your gift. Just fill out the form on the back of this issue, send it in to the DEP Wildlife Division, and we'll take care of the rest.

Wildlife License Plates: Show your support for wildlife by displaying a wildlife license plate on your vehicle. Your license plate purchase provides much needed funds for nongame wildlife projects. See the back page of this issue for more information.

See What the DEP Store Has to Offer



You may not know it, but the DEP has its own bookstore where customers can purchase various books, maps, and software that focus on natural history, geology, outdoor recreation, and environmental topics. The main purpose of the DEP Store is to distribute information produced by the State of Connecticut's Geological and Natural History Survey and the DEP. However, the store also carries other publications and items that deal with local and regional environmental topics. To find out what the DEP Store has to offer, visit the DEP's Hartford office at 79 Elm Street, Monday through Thursday, from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM. (The store is closed on Fridays and from 1:00-1:30 PM for lunch on Mondays through Thursdays.)

If you can't visit the store in person, you may also request a catalog by calling (860) 424-3555 or (860) 424-3692, or by sending an email message via the DEP's website (www.dep.state.ct.us). The website also highlights the various books and products and gives you the opportunity to shop on-line.

There also is a satellite bookstore at the DEP Wildlife Division's Sessions Woods Conservation Education Center in Burlington, which is run by the Friends of Sessions Woods. The satellite store contains a sampling of the books sold in the Hartford store. Customers can purchase items from the satellite store on Mondays through Fridays, from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM, and during any Friends of Sessions Woods events.

Check Out these Books!

There is so much to learn about the natural history of Connecticut. But, where do you begin? Attending a public education program at the Sessions Woods Conservation Education Center or other outdoor facility is one way. Surfing the Internet, especially the DEP's website (www.dep.state.ct.us), is another. Sometimes just sitting down with a good book is a great way to start learning. The DEP Store can help you find the book that contains the information you're looking for. A few books are recommended to get you started. (Most of the books listed here are available at the DEP Store or the Friends of Sessions Woods satellite store. Friends members receive a 10% discount at the satellite store.)

Connecticut Wildlife - Biodiversity, Natural History, and Conservation

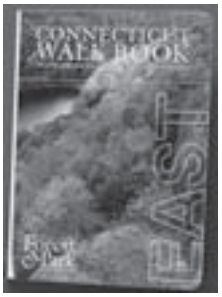
This lavishly illustrated book provides an extensive overview of the ecosystems of Connecticut -- its plants and animals and the far-reaching links between the state's wildlife and their habitats. It carefully traces Connecticut's daily, seasonal, annual, and long-term ecological cycles while highlighting natural community patterns, the dynamics of reproduction, and the behaviors of much of our flora and fauna. This book should be an essential part of any environmental library. Hundreds of photos and drawings; black and white. Available from the DEP Store and Sessions Woods satellite store for $39.95.

Discover Nature in Water and Wetlands

This book explores the properties, processes, and phases of water and the plant and animal life associated with it, from trees, cattails, and ferns, to dragonflies, salamanders, turtles, and beavers. With just a few essentials, such as a field notebook, hand lens, and bug box, readers will find both straightforward information and all kinds of activities to uncover the fascinating, diverse ecosystems that surround our ponds, swamps, and other watery places. Available from the DEP Store and Sessions Woods satellite store for $14.95.

Connecticut Walk Book East

This trail guide, published by the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, is the first of two 75th Anniversary volumes describing the statewide Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails. Whether atop a ridge or beside a quiet stream, the trails offer an enticing variety of hikes for every level of experience and age group. Within these pages are found updated trail maps; descriptions of two dozen Blue-Blazed Hiking Trails, from Guilford to Somers and Union to Voluntown; and detailed driving directions and parking information. Available from the DEP Store and Sessions Woods satellite store for $25.00.



Eastern Coyote

Over the last 150 years, the eastern coyote has spread from the grasslands of the western United States throughout eastern North America. With the eastern coyote now well established in Connecticut, this book describes its traits, habits, and natural history through text and photographs. Available from the DEP Store and Sessions Woods satellite store for $18.95.

The following books are currently not available at the DEP Store, but can be found at or ordered from your local book store. You may also contact the publisher, Stackpole Books, 5067 Ritter Road, Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-6921 (800-732-3669 or sales@stackpolebooks.com). These books are worth a look from any wildlife enthusiast.

The Eastern Cougar

The question of whether wild eastern cougars still exist remains hotly disputed. This groundbreaking anthology brings together accounts from early explorers and present-day researchers, considers the evidence in the wild cougar controversy, and examines the social and environmental implications of recovery. $19.95

A Guide to Night Sounds

This handy collection of field recordings and species descriptions helps you to identify the various members of the nocturnal chorus, from crickets and owls to otters and porcupines. Illustrated with pencil drawings and full-color photographs. This book includes an hour-long audio CD that covers the nighttime sounds of 60 animals. $19.95

A Guide to Wildlife Sounds

This audio guide brings together the songs, calls, buzzes, rattles, and other sounds of 100 species to form a vivid aural portrait of animal life east of the Great Plains. It is illustrated with full-color photographs and includes an hour-long audio CD. $24.95

West Nile Virus Update for 2005

Written by Roger Wolfe, Wetlands Habitat and Mosquito Management Program

One can never predict from year to year how the mosquito season will be. The member agencies of Connecticut's Mosquito Management Program (DEP, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, Department of Public Health, Department of Agriculture, University of Connecticut) were a little concerned this past spring. The year started out very wet, and the 2004 mosquito season had ended with a relatively high number of mosquitoes that were positive for Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE), particularly in the southeastern part of the state. However, by early summer 2005, most vernal wetlands and red maple swamps that are home to the species of mosquitoes involved in EEE transmission had dried up and stayed dry throughout most of the summer. As a result, no EEE activity was detected in Connecticut this year.

Connecticut was fortunate to not have a confirmed human case of EEE. However, this was not the case in neighboring states. New Hampshire reported six human cases of EEE, including the deaths of a 20-year-old woman and an 80-year-old man. These were the first EEE-related deaths that New Hampshire has seen in 25 years. Massachusetts also reported four human cases of EEE (all in the Plymouth County region), including the deaths of a five-year old girl and an 83-year-old man. EEE also was reported in horses and emus* in Massachusetts. This deadly reminder demonstrates the need for an aggressive surveillance program to monitor for EEE and other mosquito-borne diseases and to take quick action when risk indicators are high, so as to minimize the chance of a human outbreak. This quick action includes diligently doing all you can to eliminate sources or mosquito breeding around your home and neighborhood, and to take seriously the warnings issued when this virus is detected.

Although Connecticut was spared from EEE, West Nile Virus (WNV) activity this year was a different story. The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven had tested over 111,700 mosquitoes this year (considerably lower than recent years due to drought) and detected 34 isolations of WNV from five different species of mosquito. These isolations were found in eight towns throughout lower Fairfield and New Haven counties. The Department of Public Health tested 75 dead birds that were collected from 14 towns. Twenty-one birds (including 17 crows, 3 blue jays, and 1 sharp-shinned hawk) tested positive for WNV. There were six confirmed human cases of WNV this year, including the death of an elderly man in New Britain. The other victims were residents of Stamford, Darien, Fairfield, Simsbury, and East Haven. The New Britain case is the second human death attributed to WNV since 2001.

Those afflicted by WNV exhibited symptoms from late August through September. This is consistent with virus activity in years past, demonstrating that the risk is highest in late summer and early fall. Therefore, during that time of year, residents should take proper precautions to minimize being bitten by mosquitoes. This year's six human cases of WNV compares to only one human case in 2004 and 17 cases in 2003. Since 1999, when WNV was first detected in Connecticut and the state began monitoring for the virus, there have been 48 reported human cases, including two deaths.

To learn more about WNV or to obtain downloadable fact sheets and links to similar sites, visit the Mosquito Management Program's website at www.dep.state.ct.us. Click on "Environmental and Health Updates" and go to "Mosquito Management Program." If you have technical questions regarding mosquitoes, their biology, and control methods, please call 860-642-7630.

(*Note: Emus, pheasants, and other non-native birds can be very susceptible to EEE and WNV. Although the risk of contracting EEE or WNV from handling an infected bird is very low, proper precautions (disposable gloves or similar) should be taken when handling sick or dead birds that may be suspected of having EEE or WNV. People cannot contract EEE or WNV by eating pheasants or other game meat that has been properly cooked. Contact your local health department or the Connecticut Department of Public Health if you find a suspect bird or have other questions regarding wild game consumption.)

Governor Rell Presents $6.8 Million for Open Space Grants

Governor M. Jodi Rell recently presented $6.8 million in grants to help purchase approximately 2,000 acres of open space in 24 cities and towns across Connecticut. Open space property that will be purchased with the help of these grants includes everything from open fields, forests, wetlands, bogs, and streams to timber rattlesnake habitat.

The 29 projects being funded under this year's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program, administered by the DEP, range from 1.9 acres in Stratford to 303 acres in North Stonington. In all, grants were awarded for the purchase of properties in Berlin, Canton, East Lyme, Essex, Farmington, Glastonbury, Manchester, Middletown, Milford, North Stonington, New Hartford, New Milford, Newtown, Norwalk, Oxford, Salem, Shelton, Somers, Southbury, Stratford, Suffield, Wallingford, Willington, and Woodbridge.

The open space grants move Connecticut closer to its goal of preserving 21% of the state's land (673,210 acres) as open space by the year 2023. Nearly $71 million has been provided to assist with the purchase of about 20,000 acres since the open space program was launched in 1998. The initiative includes 10% of open space to be state-owned, with the remaining 11% owned by municipalities, private nonprofit land conservation organizations, and water companies. To date, 70% of this goal has been achieved through the direct purchase of open space by the state and through state support for local acquisitions.

The Opportunistic, Omnivorous, and Odd Opossum

A Connecticut creature of the night that often gets a bad rap is the Virginia opossum. This cat-sized mammal, with its long, coarse, grayish-white fur, sharp-pointed, slender muzzle, short legs, and long, scaly, prehensile tail, is most times misunderstood and considered a pest. On the contrary, opossums can actually help maintain a healthy environment. They eat all kinds of insects, like cockroaches, crickets, and beetles, as well as worms, snails, fruits, and berries. They also feed on rats, mice, and carrion (dead animals). However, if you leave pet food outside or garbage unsecured, opossums will readily feast on those items, too. They feed primarily at night and use their keen sense of smell to find food.

The Virginia opossum is the only marsupial (pouched animal) found in North America. The species has been around since the age of the dinosaurs (for at least 70 million years) and it is one of the earth's oldest surviving mammals. Opossums were not found in Connecticut prior to the early 1900s. Due to their ability to adapt to different habitats and food sources, opossums have been able to expand their range from the southeastern United States to the northeast during the 20th century and are now found throughout New England.

Opossums tend to inhabit woodland areas along streams, ponds, lakes, or marshes. Farmland and woodlots are preferred over extensively forested areas. Opossums will use abandoned den sites of other animals, cavities in den trees, trash heaps, rock piles, brush piles, or buildings for shelter. They do not hibernate in winter, but will usually "hole up" during cold, adverse weather. In Connecticut, opossums can suffer from frostbite and may be missing the tips of their ears and tails.

Life Cycle

In Connecticut, breeding usually begins in early March and the gestation period lasts about 13 days. Opossums produce one to two litters each year. The average litter size is nine and the young are born blind and extremely helpless. The young are very tiny (about the size of a navy bean). The blind newborns crawl a few inches to the female's pouch, attach themselves to a teat and remain "locked" on to it for approximately 60 days. After 80 days, young opossums are weaned, leave the pouch, and typically can be seen riding around on the female's back. By 100 days of age, they are usually independent. The next litter is born about two weeks after the first litter is weaned. Opossums may breed during their first year.

P. J. FUSCO

Interesting Facts

Opossums are at home in trees. They use their prehensile tail (9" to 20") to help stabilize them when climbing. The tail also is well adapted for grasping and wrapping around things, but not for hanging. It is not strong enough to hold a hanging opossum for very long.

Opossum tracks are quite unique. There are five toes on each foot and the first toe on each hind foot is opposable, clawless, and thumblike. These "thumbs" help the opossum grasp branches when it climbs.

Due to their musky odor, opossums are usually avoided by predators. Occasionally an opossum will fall prey to a dog, fox, bobcat, large hawk, or owl. However, their biggest threat comes from humans and their automobiles. Few opossums live beyond one year.

When frightened, opossums bare their 50 sharp teeth and hiss or growl. However, opossums are actually gentle and quiet animals that would rather avoid confrontation and be left alone. Being non-aggressive, opossums readily retreat to trees, brushpiles, or other available cover when pursued by humans or predators. A common defense mechanism is feigning death or "playing possum" when cornered or threatened. Some predators may think the opossum is dead and go away.

Solving "Problems"

Having a resident opossum in your yard shouldn't be a problem. This non-aggressive and nondestructive animal will not dig up yards, attack or threaten pets, or dig burrows. It may get into garbage or pet food that is left outside and will sometimes raid gardens to feed on vegetables, apples, and strawberries.

Opossums rarely pose a threat of transmitting rabies. They seem to have a high level of resistance to most wildlife diseases, particularly rabies. Raccoons, skunks, and unvaccinated dogs and cats are more of a rabies risk to humans than are opossums.

The best advice is to let opossums have their space and learn to live with them. However, if you really want to discourage this neighbor, there are a few things you can do.

Eliminate or secure food attractants. Bring dog/cat food in at night. Keep garbage covered and in a secure area (garage, shed). Pick up fallen fruit from under fruit trees. Protect gardens with fencing. (All of these measures may also reduce problems with raccoons, skunks, and even bears.)

Eliminate hiding places. Clear shrubbery and brush from areas near your home. Put fencing around hiding places under decks, sheds, and other structures.

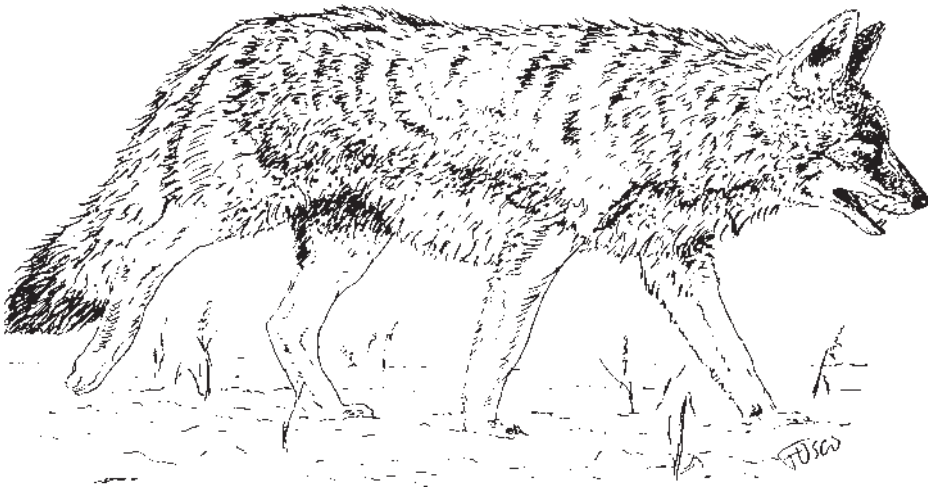
Keep your yard well lit at night. Opossums prefer darkness and usually avoid well lit areas.

In addition, the opossum is an important furbearer in Connecticut and "problem" opossums can be harvested by a local licensed trapper during the regulated trapping season. Contact the Wildlife Division's Sessions Woods office (860-675-8130) to find out more about the trapping season or visit the DEP's website at www.dep.state.ct.us.

Just for Kids

Coyotes

When the first settlers came to Connecticut, they didn't find coyotes! That's because coyotes were not here. It was not until the 1950s that coyotes were seen in Connecticut. Coyotes were originally from the western United States.



Coyote vs. Wolf

Wolves are seen in large groups with a leader. Coyotes usually are found only in smaller family groups.

Wolves are bigger than coyotes. Coyotes weigh between 20 and 40 pounds while wolves weigh between 55 and 115 pounds.

Connecticut Coyotes

Coyotes are adaptable. They can live in many habitats, including neighborhoods. They also are found in both the city and country.

Should you be careful if you see a coyote? Coyotes, like all wild animals, are best seen from a distance. Loud noises can often scare wild animals away. People should be careful not to leave food, such as pet food or table scraps, outside to attract coyotes.

Coyotes Are Canids

Coyotes are members of the dog group, or canid family, of mammals. Other canids include foxes, wolves, and dogs. Canids have sharp canine teeth for tearing meat.

What Do Coyotes Eat?

mice
woodchucks
birds
sheep
deer
rabbits
insects
fruits
berries
cats
chickens

Answer:
Coyotes eat all of the above

Wildlife Calendar Reminders

Dec. 28-Mar. 15 ..... Shepaug Bald Eagle Viewing Area open for the 2005-2006 viewing season (see page 14).

January ..... Donate to the Endangered Species/Wildlife Income Tax Check-off Fund on your 2005 Connecticut Income Tax form.

Jan. 14 ..... **Midwinter Eagle Survey**. Volunteers are needed (see page 14).

Feb. 18-19 ..... **7th Annual Connecticut River Eagle Festival** (see page 14 for more information).

Hunting Season Dates

Sept. 15-Dec. 31 .... Deer bowhunting season on state land bowhunting only areas and private land in zones 11 and 12

Dec. 1 ..... Beaver trapping season opens

Dec. 7-20 ..... Deer muzzleloader season on private and state land

Dec. 7-31 ..... Deer bowhunting season on private land in zones 1 through 10

Dec. 21-31 ..... Second part of the fall wild turkey bowhunting season on state and private land

Jan. 1-31, 2006 ..... Extended deer bowhunting season on private land in zones 11 and 12. A 2006 deer permit and private land consent forms for 2006 are required.

..... See the 2005 Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide for specific season dates, details and delineation of deer management zones. The guide is available at Wildlife Division offices, town halls, and on the DEP's website, www.dep.state.ct.us. The 2006 Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide will be available by mid-December.

Support Connecticut's nongame wildlife resources by donating to the Endangered Species/ Wildlife Income Tax Check-off Fund on your 2005 Connecticut Income Tax form. Your donation helps fund projects for bats, bluebirds, flying squirrels, and so much more! The DEP Wildlife Division thanks you!

Step Up to the Plate for Wildlife...

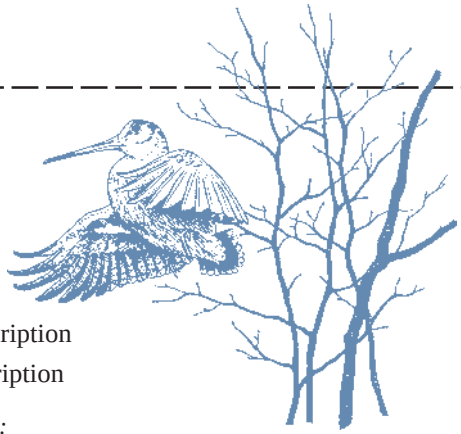
and show your support by displaying a wildlife license plate on your vehicle.

There are two great designs to choose from: the state-endangered bald eagle or the secretive bobcat.

Funds raised from sales and renewals of the plates will be used for wildlife research and management projects; the acquisition, restoration, enhancement, and management of wildlife habitat; and public outreach that promotes the conservation of Connecticut's wildlife diversity.

Application forms are available at DEP and Department of Motor Vehicle offices and on-line at www.ct.gov/dmv.

Connecticut Wildlife



Subscription Order

Please make checks payable to:
Connecticut Wildlife, P.O. Box 1550, Burlington, CT 06013

Check one:

☐ 1 Year ($6.00) ☐ 2 Years ($11.00) ☐ 3 Years ($16.00)

Name: _____

Address: _____

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Zip: _____ *Tel.:* _____

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P. J. FUSCO

The mating or rutting season for white-tailed deer starts in late October and extends through early January. In Connecticut, the peak of the rutting season is the last two weeks in November. Bucks scrape the velvet from their antlers in the fall. The antlers are used for sparring during the rut.

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