

November/December 2020

CONNECTICUT Wildlife



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From The Director

It is hard to believe we are closing in on the end of 2020 – finally! This has been a year like no other. We learned to define “zooming” in a different way and have added new catch phrases to our lexicon – social distancing, mask up, community health, responsible recreation, and more. Our sense of normal operations has been flipped upside down and we have found new ways to work, learn, shop, and recreate.



We have also faced extreme challenges with the unprecedented loss of life that has occurred globally, and which has touched each of us deeply. Those losses have impacted the Wildlife Division on a very personal level and have also taken a toll within our broader DEEP family. Please know that our thoughts are with everyone who has suffered the loss of friends, colleagues, and loved ones.

This year, we have had some hard conversations about race, equity, and inclusion. While some efforts have been made to address our shortcomings, we can and will continue to do better. Our natural resources are a gift all of us can enjoy. Each and every one of us deserves the chance to take advantage of the many physical and mental health benefits time spent in nature provides. That has never been more important than it is now amidst the chaos of 2020.

This year has also given us some unique opportunities to try new things. We greatly expanded our online offerings to help parents meet new educational needs and provide families with fun backyard activities. We transitioned many of our public educational programs to online forums, allowing us to reach larger audiences statewide and create a library of programs that can be viewed whenever folks have the time to learn more about wildlife or related recreational activities. Community science projects have allowed the Wildlife Division to continue to collect important biological data with lots of extra help. To those who participated – thank you! For those who were unable to, do not worry, we have many more projects lined up and you will be hearing more about them soon.

We found creative ways to continue to provide hunter education classes in a streamlined, socially distanced, and fun way. Based on the feedback from students, those efforts were both successful and appreciated. We are already thinking about ways to continue to combine online content, virtual learning opportunities, and field days to make things even better in 2021.

Perhaps one of the best things to come out of 2020 has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of people taking advantage of the amazing outdoor recreational opportunities Connecticut has to offer. Hunting, hiking, fishing, birdwatching, or simply walking around in the sights, sounds, and scents of the outdoors are all ways we can recreate responsibly, practice social distancing for community health, and forget about everything else for a while. Collectively, we turned back to nature for the solace it provides. When everything else is uncertain, there is comfort in the rhythm of the natural world. As we head into 2021, I encourage you to take a moment to get outside and enjoy the beauty, grace, serenity, and diversity of our amazing natural world.

Jenny Dickson, DEEP Wildlife Division Director

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Long-tailed ducks gather on a calm morning. PHOTO BY P. J. FUSCO

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The Cooper's hawk is fast and agile, capable of flying through thick woods with amazing speed, dodging branches along the way, while in pursuit of its main prey, other birds. Discover more about this amazing hawk on page 12.

Photo courtesy Paul Fusco

If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them: *The interesting tale behind tying Connecticut's record northern pike*

Written by Kierran Broatch, a year-round angler and writer at TheConnecticutYankee.com

In the world of fishing, “little” falls outside the realm of possibility. Connecticut’s angling community was reminded of that fact this past August, when news broke of a massive northern pike caught from a place no one expected and tied a state record that stood alone for 40 years. So many pieces had to fall precisely into place for both angler and fish to cross paths at that very moment. The story almost seems too good to be true. *Almost.*

The Stars Align

The stars in this story began to align back in 1980 when the late Joseph Nett set a new state record with a 29-pound pike he caught while bass fishing on Lake Lillinonah. That also happened to be the same year the woman who would eventually tie Nett’s long-standing record was born.

Leslie Slater is a hardworking mom and talented angler from Barkhamsted. Fishing is in her blood. Slater’s favorite childhood memories were spent with family on Secret Lake in Canton and Red Cedar Lake in Lebanon, as well as saltwater forays in Block Island Sound. “I consider myself blessed to share that enjoyment with my family and even happier to pass it on to my own kids,” said Slater.



In August 2020, Leslie Slater earned a share of Connecticut’s state record for the northern pike with this 46-inch, 29-pound beauty.

PHOTO BY S. SLATER

These days, Slater, her husband Stan, and their two children, Mason and Faith, can often be found towing their Pro-Line center console to the shore and targeting fluke, black sea bass, and stripers. They also enjoy angling opportunities closer to home, like the annual Riverton Fishing Derby on the Farmington River.

When Tropical Storm Isaias hit Connecticut in early Au-

gust, the Slaters were one of thousands of families that lost power to their home. During the hot days that followed, fishing proved to be a great way to get out of the house and cool off.

As chance would have it, the Slater's boat needed some new parts so saltwater fishing was off the table. Instead, the family launched their kayaks in the nearby West Branch Reservoir, also known as Hogback.

Hogback, owned and operated by The Metropolitan District (MDC), is a deep, cool body of water located on the Colebrook-Hartland line. It is one of just a few locations in Connecticut that is home to rainbow smelt, an ideal forage species for larger game fish.

On that warm summer evening, Slater was drifting in her kayak over the deepest part of Hogback, jigging a Rooster Tail near the bottom 80-feet below. "That's what I had with me. I just dropped the lure I had on my pole down in the hole," Slater said.

Hoping to get the attention of a trout or maybe a bass, she came tight with the surprise of a lifetime. "It almost snapped my pole in half," said Slater. "I thought I had hooked bottom and was pulling up a log."

After a 15-minute tug of war, the "log" finally came into view and turned out to be an enormous 46-inch pike. "I lucked out because, literally, it just barely had it by the lip," noted Slater, describing two prongs of the lure's treble hook scarcely pierced to the outside of the pike's top jaw. Known for their razor-sharp teeth, the pike could have easily severed Slater's 15-pound test fishing line if hooked just about anywhere else.

With no net but plenty of adrenaline, Slater grabbed the huge fish under its gill plate and hoisted it into the kayak, shredding her hands in the process. Slater pointed the pike headfirst toward the bow of the kayak and used her legs to hold it down as she paddled back to shore to show her family. "Anybody that was there that day could just hear them squealing," said Slater, joking about Mason and Faith's ex-



Leslie with children Mason and Faith celebrating her memorable catch on the shore of Hogback Reservoir.

PHOTO BY S. SLATER

cited reaction to her catch.

Slater tried her best to revive the fish, yet its long battle from the deep proved too much. Only when it was obvious the pike was not going to survive did she decide to pursue a possible record. The Slaters went in or called at least six bait and tackle shops in the area, as well as a Stop and Shop and a gas station deli. They were met with amusing reactions from bystanders but no official weigh-in. Between power outages from the storm, pandemic-restrictions, and a lack of stores in possession of a state-certified scale, the Slaters threw in the towel and put the pike in their freezer.

Help Arrives

Three days later came Ed Machowski, a fisheries biologist with the CT DEEP Fisheries Division who has worked directly with northern pike for 32 years. Presently, he is one of two warmwater fisheries biologists responsible for the statewide pike management program and has a clear passion for the species. Machowski sprang into action after getting wind of Slater's catch and challenges obtaining an official



Faith Slater showing off a nice black sea bass from a family fishing outing.

PHOTO BY S. SLATER

weight. He took the frozen pike to the Berkshire Country Store in Norfolk, where owner Ryan Craig had a certified scale in his deli and the paperwork to prove it. Now, it was official – Slater’s pike weighed a whopping 29 pounds, tying Nett’s 40-year old record.

If it were not for the obstacles she faced in obtaining an official weight sooner, Machowski believes Slater would have had the record beat. “If Leslie could have gotten this on a certified scale the day she caught it, which she tried, I honestly believe, and I have had thousands of pike in my hands, this thing would have broken the state record hands

down,” Machowski said.

Machowski confirmed that the pike was a female and mused about what her weight might have been closer to spawning season. “The thing that amazed me was the girth on this pike was tremendous given the time of the year,” noted Machowski. “If this exact same fish was caught going into the beginning of 2021, it would have been 34-pounds-plus.”

The Mystery Behind the Pike

The gigantic pike had a good thing going before Slater jiggged a lure in front of it. “There is a tremendous smelt forage base in Hogback, so this big female was just sitting in the depths gobbling up smelt and, it just so happened, that a Rooster Tail got her attention too,” Machowski explained. “If you can feed without having to expend energy, it is the perfect world.”

Another thing that blew Machowski away was the fish’s growth rate. Pike scales have rings on them like you would find inside a tree that can help determine age. Slater’s pike was estimated at just six years old, which for its size is noteworthy. “This fish grew fast,” Machowski said. “It must have been a steady diet of smelt and suckers and a few trout that made her grow so quick.”

Hogback is not one of Connecticut’s four pike management lakes, nor is it among the locations where DEEP says pike are either self-sustaining or stocked by private organizations. So how did a record-sized pike end up there anyway?

Hogback, along with Colebrook River Lake directly upstream, are multi-purpose reservoirs. They were created on the West Branch Farmington River

in the 20th century as flood-control impoundments. Today, the reservoirs are used for recreation, such as fishing and boating, supporting downstream fishery habitat in the Farmington River, and generating hydroelectric power.

The two bodies of water are separated by the Colebrook River Dam. A hydroelectric power facility was added there in 1989. According to MDC, giant turbines located underwater on the upstream side of the dam make this “one of the country’s most unique hydropower facilities.” Water is able to pass through the turbines to generate power, yet fish like Slater’s pike cannot safely pass through when the

turbines are running. That is until the fall of 2019 when repairs and inspections were completed at the facility, removing the turbines for a number of weeks, allowing fish of all kinds to pass freely both ways from Colebrook and Hogback.

How that pike got into Colebrook and found its way into Hogback may be the most interesting element to this perfect storm of a fish story. If you have fished Colebrook long enough, you likely have heard rumors of northern pike being caught there. Slater landed some small Colebrook pike herself over the years and her husband remembers as a child witnessing trophy pike freshly-caught from Colebrook laying in the back of a truck bed at a local restaurant.

Between DEEP's own sampling results and other angler reporting, Machowski confirmed that pike have been in Colebrook for several years. "The fish came down from Massachusetts originally," Machowski noted. "They got into Colebrook Reservoir coming down through the Farmington system." Exactly what body of water they originated from is unknown, but Massachusetts, like Connecticut, has a robust pike management program.

It was only a matter of time before they found their way into Hogback. "This was the first pike I had heard coming from Hogback Reservoir, but it was not a surprise because of the nature of how things transpired the year prior with all the dam work," Machowski said.

It is also not surprising because pike are so resilient and can survive almost anywhere. "They can move between cold, deep areas and shallow, warm areas like no other fish," noted Machowski. "They are about as adaptable as you can get, in so many ways."

As for Connecticut's new pike co-record holder, Slater is savoring the whole experience. In September, after Mason and Faith's first day back at school, they came home and said, "Mom you're a celebrity!" Yet, after the fanfare subsides, the most important thing to Slater is sharing this wild adventure with her family. Mason has been researching different fish species and fishing techniques and Faith has been writing about her family's angling adventures. If they were not hooked on fishing for life before this, they certainly are now.



(Above) For the Slaters, fishing has always been a family affair. (Below) Mason Slater displaying a keeper tautog after a family day on the water.

PHOTOS BY S. SLATER



Watchable Wildlife

Sea Ducks

Diverse and Challenging



Article and photography by Paul Fusco, DEEP Wildlife Division

Fall and winter are great times for viewing wildlife, and some of the best opportunities come with the arrival of waterfowl, including the sea ducks. While Long Island Sound is not open ocean, many sea duck species find the conditions right for spending the winter. The Sound is a shallow water body that allows diving sea ducks to forage without some of the difficulty they often encounter in open ocean habitat with deep water.

Many species of waterfowl make use of the sheltered bays, coves, and harbors of the Sound that

provide a safe retreat in times of bad winter weather. Ducks, such as scaup, redhead, and goldeneye, are often found in these areas. True sea ducks can often be found farther offshore in the open Sound.

Long Island Sound is well known for its shellfish history. The abundance of oysters, clams, and mussels is the foundation of an industry that goes back hundreds of years. Shellfish also provide the attraction for sea ducks. Sea ducks feed by diving underwater for shellfish and other invertebrates found on the floor of the Sound. It is this plentiful food supply that helps make viewing these waterfowl possible.

Sea ducks spend portions of their life, usually winters, in coastal salt water habitats. They are often far off-

shore, but will sometimes venture close to shore to feed or take shelter. They all primarily consume animal matter, mostly mollusks and other invertebrates. All of our sea ducks breed in northern taiga, tundra, or Arctic wetland habitats. During spring and fall migration, some may be found at large inland bodies of water.

Flocks may be active but hard to identify to species due to distance and/or weather conditions. Taking note of flight characteristics and body shape can help narrow down the identification of hard-to-see birds. Plumage and field marks can be seen in good light when the birds are flying. Pay attention to white versus black markings. Some sea ducks exhibit certain behaviors which can help in identification from the field.



This male long-tailed duck in winter plumage shows a black breast and large dark patch near the face. Long central tail feathers are present on the male.

Identifying Sea Ducks

Long-tailed Duck

Adult male long-tailed ducks in winter are largely white with black wings and a large dark spot on each side of neck. They have a pinkish and black bill and long, pointed tail. Females and immatures are brown with a white belly and pale face. Long-tailed ducks fly close to the water in tight flocks that frequently twist and turn in a restless manner. They show topside and underside as they change formation, similar to sandpiper flocks.

Long-tails are often active and somewhat animated in late winter as the breeding season nears. They can be seen flying up and splashing back down as males posture for attention



This large flock of black scoters has a few common eider mixed in. Note the white ducks, which are common eider males. Also note identifiable surf scoters in the water. Sea ducks are often seen at a distance, similar to this view, where a spotting scope is advised.

from females. Long-tails are the most vocal of the sea ducks. Their distinctive calls are sometimes given constantly. It is what gave these ducks their former name, “oldsquaw”.

Long-tailed ducks are more common in western parts of the Sound.

The Scoters

Three species of scoters inhabit Connecticut waters during winter. Flocks of scoters and eiders fly in loose irregular lines, usually close to the water – sometimes so close that from a distance the birds can be hidden from view by choppy waves.

Surf Scoter

Male surf scoters have solid black plumage, with the exception of white patches on the head and back of the neck. The male’s bill is large and appears swollen at the base. The bill is patterned with a bold orange, red, and white color combination. Females and immatures are brown with light cheek patches.

When compared to the other scoters, surf scoters are slimmer. Their head and bill have a blocky shape. In flight, surf



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Male surf scoters are black with white patches on the head and an ornate orange, red, and white bill. Surf scoters will often land on the water with wings raised above their head.

scoters lack any white in the wings, making them hard to distinguish at a distance from the black scoter.

Surf scoters have a notable habit of holding their wings stretched upright when alighting on the water as they coast to a stop.

Black Scoter

Black scoter males have solid black plumage. In flight, their underwing primaries show a silvery sheen. The male’s bill is orange-yellow and appears small when compared to the surf scoter bill. Females and immatures are brown with a dark cap and pale face. Neither



Black scoter drakes often posture with a raised tail.



Common eider hens in Eastern North America have warm brown plumage with evenly barred sides and scapulars.



King eider hens have crescent-shaped markings on the sides and scapulars. The head is rounder than in the common eider, and the bill appears to be stubby.



The common eider drake is boldly patterned with black sides, belly, tail, and cap. The back and breast are white.

sex has any white in the wings. The more pointed tail is slightly longer than the other scoters and it is often held cocked upright.

These fast fliers appear chunky in flight. They are the least common of the scoters in Long Island Sound.

White-winged Scoter

The white-winged scoter is the largest of the scoters. Males have black plumage, while females and young are brown. All show white secondary flight feathers when flying. Males have a small white eye patch and pale bill with a black knob. Females and immatures have two whitish cheek patches.

This is the most common scoter on Long Island Sound in winter, although these scoters are frequently far out and difficult to view from shore.

The Eiders

Two eider species can be found in Connecticut waters during winter. The common eider has been increasing in recent years, while the king eider is considered rare in Connecticut. Both eiders are more commonly seen in eastern parts of Long Island Sound

Common Eider

The common eider is the largest and heaviest of the sea ducks. Males are unmistakable in flight, showing a white back with black sides, belly, and crown. They have black primaries and a white forewing. Females and immatures have rich brown plumage that is barred with black and pale underwing linings.

When flying over water, common eiders often hold their

heads low with bills pointed downward.

King Eider

Adult male king eiders have a black back, belly, and primaries. At a distance, they appear white on the front side and black in the rear. They also have a unique pale blue head with orange forehead. Females and immatures have warm brown plumage heavily barred with black. They have pale wing linings, similar to common eiders.

Harlequin Duck

The harlequin duck is a small, uncommon sea duck. This duck is not found in the open ocean like other sea ducks. Instead, during winter, look for them along the rocky shorelines of the mainland and offshore rocks where they brave the crashing waves by diving to reach food. Harlequins are a type of “torrent duck”, whose members live in rough and turbulent waters. That includes fast-flowing streams during the breeding season and violent waves in winter. Harvested harlequin ducks often are revealed to have broken and healed bones due to their rough water life.

Harlequin ducks have a small bill. Males are dark slate blue and rust with white patches. Females are all brown with white patches on the head.

These ducks often occur in small groups. When flying, flocks are compact and move in synchronous unison. Sometimes, they can be viewed more easily from a pier or jetty.

Viewing Locations

Because sea ducks spend the winter on open water, viewing them can present challenges. When looking for sea ducks from the shoreline, the birds will frequently be far out into the Sound. Binoculars are required, and a spotting scope with stable tripod would be even better. Even with this equipment, identification can be difficult, especially when it involves immature and female birds.

So, the best vantage points for view-

ing will be those that jut out into the Sound. By looking at a terrain map, locations with the most promise can be identified. A site that offers a little elevation is good for viewing over the Sound. Many of the sea ducks are most active and feed at times when the tides are down as opposed to high tide. Lower tides reduce the depth of water they would need to dive through for food.

Some of the better locations for viewing sea ducks from shore are in the towns of Greenwich, Fairfield, Stratford, Madison, Old Lyme, and New London. Greenwich Point Park is open to the public during winter. This location is situated in the far western end of Long Island Sound. Typical sea ducks that may be seen there include the long-tailed duck and scoters. Penfield Reef in Fairfield has a stone bar that juts out into the Sound. Look for scoters and harlequin ducks there. Stratford Long Beach and Stratford Point have an abundance of shellfish for sea ducks to feed on. These

places are good for seeing long-tailed ducks and scoters, sometimes close to shore. In Madison, Hammonasset Beach State Park is a well-known birding location and it is possible to observe all of the sea ducks there. An overlook at Meigs Point offers a wide view of the Sound. Griswold Point in Old Lyme is a popular birding destination located at the mouth of the Connecticut River, on the east side. Avery Point and Ocean Beach Park in New London, which are located on the eastern end of Long Island Sound, are great locations for sea duck observation, in particular for finding



Black scoter pair in flight. Note the female's pale face. Males are entirely black with an orange knob on the bill.



White-winged scoter male is black with white secondary wing feathers and a small white marking near the eye.



Common eider pair. Note the extreme sexual dimorphism.

both species of eiders. The conservation status of many of the sea ducks is poorly known. Most of their populations have been in steady decline for many years. Wildlife managers are currently improving survey methods to increase understanding of the population dynamics of sea ducks.

both species of eiders. The conservation status of many of the sea ducks is poorly known. Most of their populations have been in steady decline for many years. Wildlife managers are currently improving survey methods to increase understanding of the population dynamics of sea ducks.



Surf scoter hens are brown with two pale patches on each side of the head.



Cooper's Hawk

The Bird that Steals the Soul from Others

Article and photography by Paul Fusco, DEEP Wildlife Division



A blue-gray back, rusty barring on the breast, and a dark crown are plumage characteristics of the adult Cooper's hawk. Cooper's hawks often show hackles on the back of the head and neck, somewhat resembling a crest.

It is fast and agile, capable of flying through thick woods with amazing speed. Short, rounded wings and a long tail give it the ability to dodge branches, accelerating with lightning quick bursts of speed in pursuit of its main prey – other birds. This fearless hawk is so determined that it will frequently crash into brush to get at its quarry. Known for its high-strung nature and powerfully aggressive hunting style, this medium-sized forest raptor is the Cooper's hawk. It is a raptor in the truest sense of the word, whose name in Latin means to ravage, steal and rob, as these birds do with impunity. Their legs and feet are strong and robust, giving them the strength and authority to carry out their bold attacks, which are swift and unwavering. This can be seen in the field when a Cooper's hawk attacks a smaller bird, carrying it off while the prey is still calling and struggling to break free, which has been likened to the hawk stealing the soul of its prey.

Connecticut has three types of forest hawks, known as accipiters. All are similar in appearance, differing mainly by size. The Cooper's hawk is the most widespread, while the smaller sharp-shinned and the larger northern goshawk are each less common. The Cooper's hawk is about the size of a crow, but because it exhibits sexual dimorphism (the male is much smaller than the female), proper identification can be difficult. A small male Cooper's can be confused with the female of its close relative, the sharp-shinned hawk. Sharp-shinned hawks are smaller, on average, than the Cooper's, but there is slight overlap between large female sharp-shinneds and small male Cooper's.

Rapid wing beats alternating with a glide is the characteristic flight pattern of all accipiters, including the Cooper's hawk. This behavior can be seen from a long distance, making the birds easy to discern from other types of hawks and falcons, especially during fall migration, when birders and researchers are collecting population data at hawk watch sites.

These raptors mostly hunt from either a perch or by coursing. When hunting from an inconspicuous perch, the hawk waits for prey to venture within striking distance before making a quick attack to chase it down. Coursing involves flying low through the woods or along a habitat edge looking to surprise an unsuspecting dove, blackbird, or similar small songbird. Cooper's hawks will often use an obstacle, such as a tree, building, or elevated portion of the landscape when coursing to keep from being seen. This allows them to burst upon the scene before their prey has a chance to flee.



Immature Cooper's hawks are brown with whitish underparts. The breast has fine streaking that gradually tapers off toward the belly.

Cooper's hawks will also hunt by running on the ground along an edge or into a thicket looking to flush any birds that may be hiding.

Nesting

Cooper's hawks typically nest in conifer stands within second growth woodlands, which is the predominant forest type in Connecticut. Nearby forest openings, wetlands, or fields provide places to hunt for medium-sized birds, including blackbirds, doves, blue jays, sparrows, and thrushes.

Their well-hidden nests are usually built in the upper portion of a tree within a dense canopy. Conifers are often chosen for increased secrecy. The typical clutch consists of four pale blueish or white eggs, which are incubated for about five weeks. Young fledge after 30 to 35 days.

The highly adaptable Cooper's hawk is widely distributed in Connecticut as numbers have been steadily increasing in recent years. Some pairs have been nesting in heavily populated suburban areas.

Conservation

While the term can be applied to other hawk species, the Cooper's hawk is the proverbial "chicken hawk" of American

folklore. This reputation was well-deserved among farmers who called it a "blood-thirsty" killer of poultry. This bad reputation resulted in all hawks being labeled "harmful vermin," leading to wide-scale persecution.

With a past that includes unrestricted shooting, paid bounties, pesticide poisoning, and habitat loss, these hawks have persevered and are no longer considered "harmful vermin". Today, all hawks are protected by state and federal laws, and understood to be a valuable and beneficial component of a healthy ecosystem. On occasion, their fearless and aggressive behavior can cause conflicts when the hawks depredate farm poultry.

Throughout winter, the Wildlife Division receives calls about hawks chasing small birds in backyards. Many times, these brazen pursuits result in fatal window strikes. The victims are often immature sharp-shinned or Cooper's hawks that were still in the process of refining their hunting skills.

Protecting large, unfragmented, and contiguous forest blocks will ensure these raptors have habitat for nesting and hunting. Few things are as dramatic and impressive as watching an accipiter in pursuit of its prey.



A California Wildfire Experience

Written by Paul Rego, DEEP Wildlife Division and member of the Connecticut Interstate Fire Crew

This year's wildfire season in California was historically devastating. Records were set for the most acres burned and the largest single fire in California's history. In late summer, more than a dozen fires were burning across the state. Other western states also experienced significant wildfire activity. The DEEP maintains the Connecticut Interstate Fire Crew (CIFIC), a corps of trained wildland firefighters, that has routinely provided personnel and resources to fight wildfires across the United States and Canada. With such a high level of fire activity in California, it was not surprising that two Connecticut modules, each consisting of 10 firefighters, were dispatched to California in August and September. In early September, I was a member of a module that drove cross country to the Hoopa Indian Reservation in Northwest California. There, we would aid in battling the Red Salmon Complex Fire which had grown past 100,000 acres and was a potential threat to small communities in the area.

During the drive, smoke from the California fires was apparent in the hazy skies more than one thousand miles to the east. But, once we arrived in the Hoopa Valley and came closer to the Red Salmon Complex Fire, the smoke filter transformed the sun into a dull, orange disc hanging in an orange-yellow sky – a sun that lacked the strength to cast a shadow. Occasionally, small amounts of ash drifted down.

During the first days, our assignment was to be on call to provide initial attack or first response to any new fires that started in or near the Hoopa Reservation. We camped in a field behind the Hoopa Fire Department's station but had the luxury of the station's indoor bathrooms and showers. Fortunately, local fire activity was very limited. Before

dawn on our first morning, we were called out to control a roadside vegetation fire that originated from a vehicle fire. On another day, we inspected the site of an extinguished fire that had burned on the edge of a residential area. Each of these fires burned less than an acre before they were contained. Even such small fires could grow rapidly in this dry terrain. By the end of the week, we were reassigned to work on efforts to limit the spread of the larger fire.

Due to its size, the Red Salmon complex had more than 500 personnel working to contain it. Like most of the wildland firefighters our module camped in tents. Spike camps, set up logistically to support smaller groups of firefighters, had been set up at strategic locations along the perimeter of the fire. Spike camps typically have portable restroom facilities, food service, and supplies (ranging from batteries to fuel to chainsaws). The smaller the spike camp, the fewer amenities. It is common for firefighters to work multiple weeks without access to a shower. Our camp was near the northwest extent of the main fire and set up on the grounds of an inactive rural elementary school and neighboring sun-parched pastures. Several resident horses and donkeys loitered around camp each day.

Our camp was relatively close to the section of the fire where we worked. The drive to the work area was a narrow dusty road of constant switchbacks and precipitous drop-offs. The topography was rugged and seemed to be more vertical



Flames from nighttime burnout operations on the Red Salmon Complex.

PHOTO BY P. MARCOUX

than horizontal. Our module supported "burn out" operations. A burnout establishes a barrier to stop an advancing fire. The barrier consists of a fireline or firebreak and an adjacent width of forest burned to remove fuels that an advancing fire would otherwise use to spread. Firelines might be dug by hand, created by bulldozers, or could be existing roads. We removed brush and limbs that were too close to the fireline and patrolled the burnout area as it was ignited to ensure fire did not "jump" to the wrong side of the firebreak. We also patrolled after the initial burning to eliminate lingering burning stumps, logs, or other smoldering fuel that could become more active and throw embers across the firebreak.

Burnouts are like long, relatively thin, controlled forest fires. They were conducted at night to take advantage of



These two photos show the residual dead timber left behind by the Cameron Peak Fire at different locations along the Cache la Poudre River, in Colorado. Take notice of the unburned trees in the second photo. A CIFIC member was assigned to the Cameron Peak fire as a fireline paramedic.

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN C. TORBIT

favorable weather, particularly winds. Accordingly, we worked from midafternoon past midnight. During the burnouts, we were close to the intense, blast furnace heat that forest fires can produce. One's face, less protected by clothing, was particularly susceptible so turning away or stepping back from the flames was necessary. The flames and burning were more dramatic during the darkness of night. Although the forest was dominated by conifers, some species were more flammable than others. When

these species ignited or "torched", all of the needles of a mature tree would burn from bottom to top in a matter of seconds. The roar of a torching tree could be heard hundreds of yards away.

Traversing steep topography while loaded with backpacks and hand tools challenged our fitness and hiking in rocky terrain with headlamps challenged our agility. Even the most experienced crew members thought this was the most rugged country they had encountered so far as part of the CIFIC.

Special Assignments for the CIFIC

Readers were introduced to the Connecticut Interstate Fire Crew (CIFIC) in the previous issue of *Connecticut Wildlife*. In addition to the two crews that were deployed to assist with wildfires in the western U.S., several specially-trained members of the CIFIC were dispatched separately for specialized duties.

Chris Renshaw led the 10-person Green Mountain Suppression Module #1 (GMF#1), as their Crew Boss. The GMF#1 was an interagency crew made up of primarily federal employees from the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs. Under Chris' leadership, this group was sent to the Pike National Forest in Littleton, Colorado, to work on initial attack and keep lightning strikes to from growing into large fires.

Rob Yost worked at the Cameron Peak Fire, in Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, Colorado, as a fireline paramedic. A fireline paramedic provides emergency medical care on an active fireline, in the medical unit and/or at other locations as directed. The Cameron Peak fire became one of the largest fires in Colorado's history.

Jill Scheibenpflug worked as a radio operator on the Grizzly Creek Fire and Wilson Road Fires in Colorado. A radio operator is responsible for receiving and transmitting radio and telephone messages between incident personnel, providing dispatch services at the incident, and documenting pertinent radio/phone traffic for the incident.

Matt Quinn mobilized as a Felling Boss to the August Complex in Mendocino National Forest, in Willows, California. Matt supervised felling resources, experienced sawyers who are trained and qualified to fell trees on an incident. Throughout his assignment, Matt's experience as a Heavy Equipment Boss was also used, and he was able to gain experience as a Task Force Leader trainee, as he works to become fully qualified. A Task Force Leader directs a combination of personnel, crews, and different types of Incident Command System equipment in performing tactical missions on a division, or segment of a division, on wildland fire incidents. The August Complex ended up becoming the largest fire in California's history.

In addition to several other specialized qualifications that CIFIC members hold, the CIFIC program also has the ability to support engines and engine crew mobilizations. Since 2016, the Forest Protection Program of the DEEP Forestry Division, which oversees the CIFIC, has sent engines to Tennessee, California, and South Carolina.

Great Thicket

A family's refuge for four generations, a wildlife refuge in perpetuity

Written by Bridget Macdonald, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Region

When Mabel and Walter McIntosh passed away, in 1973 and 1982 respectively, they bequeathed more than 100 acres of land to their descendants. The landscape of forests and fields, featuring rocky outcroppings, winding forest roads, and a series of ponds, was cherished by their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, who all played, explored, and camped on the property in childhood, and beyond.

But their granddaughter Marge J. McIntosh said the family inherited something even more meaningful from Walter and Mabel. A conservation ethic.

In June, Marge and her brother Bill closed on the sale of their family's property to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, contributing the first piece of land in Connecticut for the Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge. The property was acquired with funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, created in 1965 and permanently funded through a landmark bill signed into law on August 4, 2020.

Established in 2016, Great Thicket is something of an avant-garde refuge. Rather than protecting land in a single location, the Service aims to acquire up to 15,000 acres of shrub-



Bill and Marge's parents, also named Bill and Marge, reaffirmed Walter and Mabel's desire to have the family's land conserved.

Photo courtesy of Marge McIntosh

land and young forest habitat from willing landowners across focal areas in New York and New England.

The 78-acre McIntosh property lies at the edge of the Pachaug-Ledyard focus area in eastern Connecticut.

"This land is an important piece in a broader conservation mosaic," said refuge manager Richard Potvin. Because it's adjacent to lands protected by the state and other organizations, it connects to thousands of acres already in conservation.

"The Connecticut Audubon Society is thrilled to welcome Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge to the state," said executive director Patrick Comins. "The refuge will contribute early successional habitat for wildlife in this area, and strengthen our conservation community."

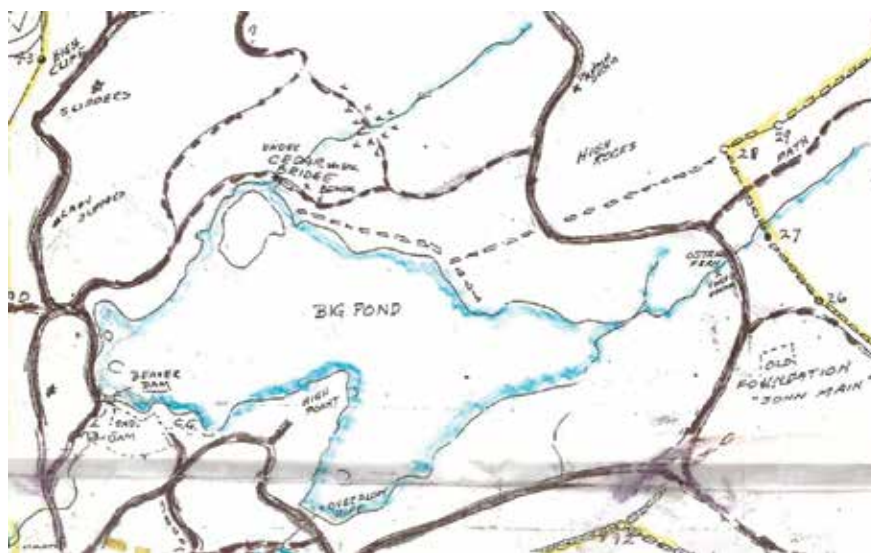
For the McIntoshes, it's a realization of a long-term vision for the land.

"It's so wonderful that this happened," Marge said of the sale, adding, "Especially because it was a complete stroke of luck."

Although conservation had always been the family's plan, serendipity made it possible.

A Refuge

It was August 1941 when Walter and Mabel first visited North Stonington, Connecticut,



The survey Marge's mother, Marge, illustrated for visitors to the property.

on vacation from their home in Trenton, New Jersey. They stayed at a farmhouse six miles from the village, and after three weeks, decided to set down roots. On the day they were planning to head home to Trenton, they started looking for a place of their own to spend summers and eventually retire. They found it the next day: a 125-acre property with a 150-year old farmhouse in bad repair.

Over the years, Walter, a former civil engineer, redesigned the property. He renovated the farmhouse. He laid out dirt roads, and actively managed the forests. He and Mabel gardened and raised sheep.

Soon after they retired to the farm in 1951, Walter began to design with wildlife in mind, initiating a project to dam an old cranberry bog to create a five-acre wetland with support from a state cost-share program.

“It was no more than five feet deep, but it was enough to provide open water for migrating waterfowl,” said Bill McIntosh. “It was his intention to do something with conservation from the start.”

That intention shaped how his descendants experienced the land. “When I was very young, I remember wood duck boxes out in the pond, and herons and ducks all over the place,” Bill said.

His sister Marge shared fond memories of pitching her tent at a campsite with a stone fireplace built by her grandfather at the pond’s edge.

For both of them, their grandparents’ land was a refuge.

“Our dad worked for IBM and we moved all over the place. We had no anchor,” Bill said. “But because my grandparents were always in North Stonington, it became a sort of home base.”

In the 1970s, Bill and Marge’s parents, also named Bill and Marge, retired to the farm and picked up the torch, caring for and curating the property.

“Mom took the original survey her father-in-law had done in the 1940s and illustrated it with anecdotal information,



Walter (top) and Mabel (bottom) McIntosh pose with a lamb in front of the farmhouse they retired to in North Stonington, Connecticut.

Photo courtesy of Marge McIntosh

like where lady slippers grew in the spring,” Marge said. Her mom would share the map with visitors, including members of the local flower club, to encourage them to seek out the landscape’s hidden treasures.

For her part, Marge searched out young chestnut trees on the property, monitoring them and reporting progress to the state, in hopes of discovering one that managed to resist the blight.

The chestnuts never lasted, but the family’s commitment to conservation flourished. Just as Walter and Mabel planted these seeds in Marge and Bill, they did so in their children.

“It was clear to us that this is what our parents wanted,” Bill said of conserving the land. “We were determined to do it.”

They needed to be. It took almost a decade to make it happen.

The Rabbit Hole

After their parents passed — Bill in 2003 and Marge in 2010 — Marge and Bill began to pursue the idea of conserving the family land. Although North Stonington would always have an important place in family memories, it was no longer the gathering place it had once been. Marge now lives on 40 acres in Vermont, and Bill lives in the mountains outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Their own children and grandchildren are dispersed throughout the country.

So Marge attended a conference in Vermont about conserving land, and started making inquiries with land trusts in Connecticut. But none of the prospects were quite right.

Nobody could guarantee that the land would be preserved in perpetuity. Year after year, she found herself at dead ends.

By 2017, Marge and Bill were resigned to sell the property on the open market. On a Thursday evening in March, Marge called a realtor in Connecticut to arrange a meeting early the following week. The realtor happened to mention that she had just gotten a contract on a nearby property that was going to be conserved.



A New England cottontail enjoying some thicket.

Photo courtesy of USFWS



Snapshots show progress in the building of the dam for the pond in the 1950s.
Photos courtesy of Marge McIntosh

A sense of stewardship sets aside critical habitat in perpetuity to benefit not only the family, and the wildlife, but also the public.

A conservation win in many ways.



A contemporary view of the pond.
Photo courtesy of Marge McIntosh

Although the realtor couldn't reveal any details about the property before the closing, Marge wondered to herself if a local land trust had purchased it, and started looking around online for clues. On the website of the Avalonia Land Conservancy, something caught her eye.

"There's this little, tiny post-age-stamp sized thing that says: 'Is your land in this area?'" Marge recalled. She clicked on it, and her heart jumped. "I thought it was, but I wasn't sure." She called Bill in New Mexico for a second opinion. He thought it was too.

The website explained that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was interested in acquiring land in the area for the Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge, and said willing landowners could contact Beth Goldstein, a realty specialist for the agency.

The next morning, Marge gave Beth a call. "I explained that I was trying to figure out if our land was in that area, and she said, 'Well, we've had a lot of inquiries, but I'll let you know.'"

An hour later, Beth called back. "Not only is your land in that area, but it's an acquisition priority for New England cottontail," she said.

Marge insisted they should meet soon. She had an appointment with a realtor on Sunday.

On Monday morning, Marge met Beth and two colleagues at her grandparents' land, and showed them the landscape that generations of her family had nurtured, and been nurtured by.

New Chapter

Now as part of the refuge, the land will help nurture a number of at-risk and priority species, including the New England cottontail, American woodcock, monarch butterflies, golden-winged warbler and spotted turtle. The alarming disappearance of the region's only

native rabbit inspired an ongoing initiative to restore populations and habitat in New England and eastern New York. About 13,000 acres of habitat has been created since 2011, and biologists estimate there are around 13,000 rabbits.

“Although we have not found New England cottontail on the McIntosh property, it’s close to known New England cottontail colonies,” said refuge manager Potvin. “It provides a travel corridor that rabbits can migrate through, helping to prevent isolation.”

The impoundment created by Walter in the 1940s adds value too. It provides a year-round water source for rabbits and other mammals, and riparian habitat for migrating waterfowl, just as he envisioned.

“My grandparents would be thrilled,” Bill said. “This is exactly what they would have wanted.”

Even though it will no longer be the family’s land, it will fulfill the family’s conservation vision.

“Now there will be somebody looking at it. Now there will be somebody caring for it,” Marge said. “Because it’s with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it means it will truly be conserved forever.”

As with the people of the Pequot and Mohegan Tribes whose ancestral homelands include the North Stonington area, and the colonial-era settlers who established a farm on the property in the late 1700s, the McIntosh family will always be part of the story of this land. Some of them literally.

On a high hill on the property, Walter built a gazebo on a stone foundation — a perch overlooking the landscape. He included a niche in the stonework for urns that would contain his and Mabel’s ashes when they passed.



The gazebo Walter built overlooking the farmhouse.

Photo courtesy of Marge McIntosh

When Bill and Marge passed, their children extended the stone ledge and added urns with their ashes as well.

“My grandparents and parents will always be there,” Marge said.

Preserved in perpetuity, with their land.

Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge

In 2016, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) finalized the creation of Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge, dedicated to conserving and managing shrubland and young forests for wildlife in New England and eastern New York. The approval of the refuge has enabled the USFWS to work with willing and interested landowners to acquire land in 10 target areas of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Rhode Island. The goal is to acquire up to 15,000 acres through various methods, including conservation easements, donations, or fee-title acquisition. Current refuge staff will manage all acquired lands within existing resources.

The strategic land acquisition of the McIntosh property in North Stonington in 2020 reflects ongoing efforts by the USFWS and partners, like the CT DEEP Wildlife Division, to change the trajectory for species at risk of becoming threatened or endangered, like the New England cottontail, by working together to protect habitat while there is still time. To learn more about Great Thicket National Wildlife Refuge, go to <https://www.fws.gov/northeast/refuges/planning/lpp/greatthicketLPP.html>, or contact Beth Goldstein at beth_goldstein@fws.gov.

Great Opportunities Available for Hunters Using Muzzleloaders

Written by Kyle Testerman, Wildlife Management Institute



W. CASSIDY

Hunting with a flintlock muzzleloader is a special way to connect back to the tradition of hunting in early America.

The outdoors provides opportunities for a great variety of recreational activities. While some activities are distinctly modern, blending technology with nature, other traditional activities have remained popular through the centuries. Hunting has been a part of human culture since the beginning of our existence and has become an important part of successful wildlife management practices in North America. While firearm technology has advanced since the time settlers arrived on the continent, some of the early forms of firearms are still being used for hunting, offering special opportunities for sportsmen and women to connect with the past and nature at the same time. These early firearms include the flintlock, matchlock, and cap

lock muskets, rifles, and shotguns that are often called “black powder guns” or “muzzleloaders” because they are loaded down through the muzzle of the gun using the ramrod. While many of these firearms now use black powder substitutes, which are safer, more reliable, and less corrosive, they all continue to be used as muzzleloaders.

Hunting with a muzzleloader provides a unique challenge for shooters in their pursuit of game. Compared to contemporary firearms, which use cartridges containing the primer, gunpowder, and projectile (bullet or shot), muzzleloaders must be loaded with each component separately before every shot. Muzzleloaders have limited range compared to other modern firearms, so becoming proficient loading

and shooting a muzzleloader takes extra practice and patience and requires the hunter to be closer to their target. The firearm must also be cleaned every couple of shots, so fine tuning your marksmanship takes time. These challenges can make hunting with a muzzleloader a more enjoyable and rewarding experience in the outdoors for many hunters.

Opportunities in Connecticut

While muzzleloader hunting can be more challenging, there are several unique benefits to using one of these traditional firearms. In Connecticut, excellent opportunities to get into the field with a muzzleloader exist. Legal muzzleloaders are allowed during the State Land Shotgun, Private Land



Some manufacturers have given muzzleloaders a modern make-over. This in-line muzzleloader still uses percussion caps like its predecessors, but is also equipped with a modern rifle scope.



P. BENJUNAS (3)

(Above) Pellets of black powder substitute, like the ones shown in this box, are easier and safer to use, and more reliable, and less corrosive than black gunpowder. The ammunition for muzzleloaders also varies from musket roundballs to copper bullets.

(Right) A muzzleloader must be loaded separately with a powder charge and projectile from the muzzle end of the gun. The ramrod is used to press each component down into the barrel.



Shotgun/Rifle/Revolver, and Landowner seasons. There also is a special muzzleloader season on state and private lands when no other firearms are permitted, which means less hunting pressure during those times. Additionally, no minimum acreage is required for hunting with a muzzleloader on private land (unlike rifles, which have

a minimum 10-acre requirement).

Muzzleloaders are a great choice for new hunters who do not already own firearms. Not only do muzzleloaders tend to be less expensive than other types of rifles, but they do not require a special license to purchase them, unlike other long guns (shotguns and rifles) and handguns. A new hunter using a muzzleloader can begin developing skills faster and get into the field for a longer season with less hurdles than new hunters using shotguns or rifles.

Give It a Shot

Hunting wild game animals for food using a muzzleloader has been part of our shared human heritage for centuries. Hunting with these traditional firearms connects sportsman and women to history, when our survival more closely hinged on harvesting game animals.

The antiquated nature of muzzleloaders makes them a great introduction to hunting with a firearm, as well as a way for experienced hunters to challenge their skills to take that one shot.

If you are interested in learning more about hunting with muzzleloaders or the steps needed to hunt a particular species in Connecticut, visit <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Hunting>. Be sure to read through and understand the hunting regulations for using muzzleloaders, which can be found in the current Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide (available online or in print).



Muzzleloader Fun Facts

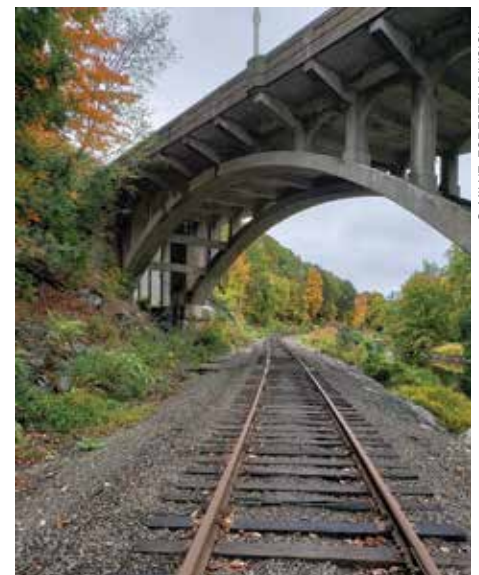
“Black powder” was coined in the 1800s to distinguish it from modern smokeless powder. Today, black powder substitutes used in muzzleloaders are simply called propellants.

“Muzzloading”, the sport of using a muzzleloader, got its start in the United States. In the 1930s, increasing in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. “Muzzleloader” is also the term applied to those who participate in the sport.



“Tie”ing It All Together

What does forestry have to do with reducing greenhouse gases and mass transit? Plenty! One way to reduce emissions from cars is to encourage the use of trains for commuting and travel. Trains run on tracks that are supported by wooden railroad ties. Did you know there are 3,250 wooden ties per mile of train track? Ties are made from hardwoods, such as oak, birch, beech, and maple. Timber harvests on State Forests produce logs that are sawn into ties by local sawmills. The ties are treated with a preservative to last for decades. The carbon in the wood is locked up for a long time, helping mitigate climate change. It’s a win-win: local jobs sourced with wood, a renewable resource, while helping mitigate climate change. What could be better?



G. MILNE, FORESTRY DIVISION

Reynolds Bridge, Thomaston.

2020 Connecticut Bald Eagle Nesting Summary

P. J. FUSCO



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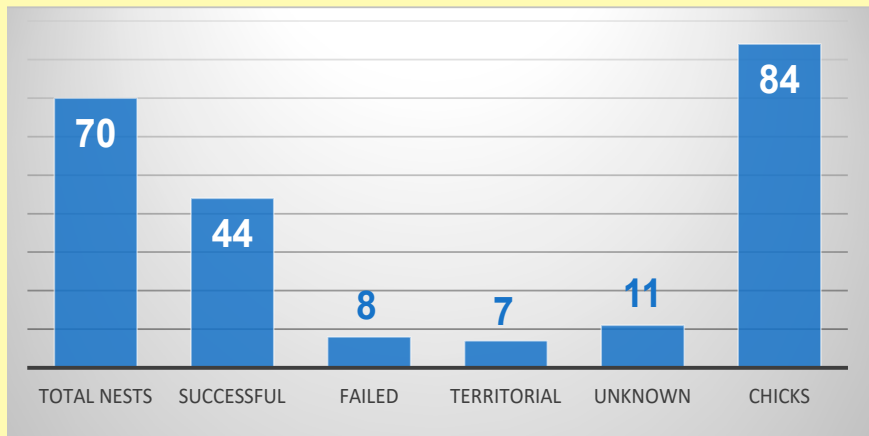


PHOTO COURTESY THE OBRIEN FAMILY



In Memoriam

The Wildlife Division mourns the loss of Patrick O’Brien, a former research assistant who worked with the Wildlife Diversity Program before moving on to work as a wildlife biologist for Westchester County (NY), followed by a position with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. During his time with the Wildlife Division, Pat primarily assisted with bat-related projects, conducting late night acoustic surveys, helping biologists survey for bats inside caves and tunnels, and working with Boy Scout groups to construct and install bat houses, including one at Black Rock State Park in Watertown. Pat was a motivated student who loved blending his knowledge and experience in the outdoors with his academic pursuits, completing a Bachelor’s degree at UConn and a Master’s degree at Central Connecticut State University. Pat was known for his relentless sense of humor, dedication to his work, and a passion for wildlife, fishing, and outdoor recreation. He will surely be missed by his friends, family, and colleagues.



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Conservation Calendar

Jan. 1-Apr. 15 Donate to the Endangered Species/Wildlife Income Tax Check-off Fund on your 2020 CT Income Tax form. Details on how to donate can be found at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Endangered-Species/Endangered-SpeciesWildlife-Income-Tax-Check-Off>.

2020 - 2021 Hunting Season Dates

Dec. 9 Opening Day of the Muzzleloader Deer Hunting Season on state and private land.

Jan. 1-31 Continuation of the archery deer season on private land in Deer Management Zones 11 and 12.

Jan. 9 - Mar. 31 Crow hunting season on Mondays through Saturdays.

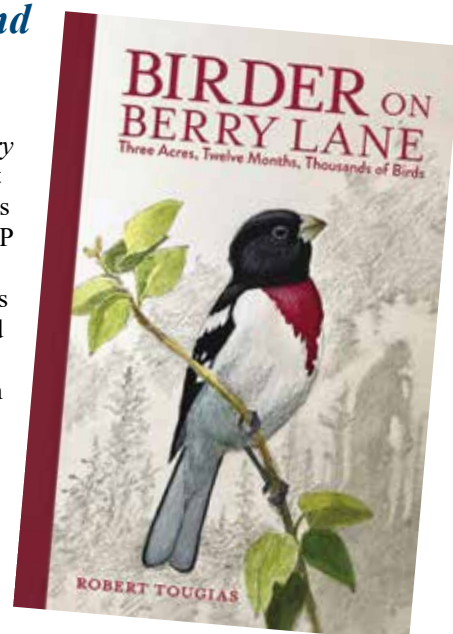
Consult the 2020 and 2021 Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guides, 2020-2021 Migratory Bird Hunting Guide, and 2020 Connecticut Fishing Guide for specific season dates and details. Guides are available at town halls and outdoor equipment stores, and also on the DEEP website (<https://portal.ct.gov/DEEPHunting>; <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEPFishing>). Go to www.ct.gov/deep/sportsmenlicensing to purchase Connecticut hunting, trapping, and fishing licenses, as well as required permits and stamps. The system accepts payment by VISA or MasterCard.

Look for printed copies of the 2021 Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide at town halls and outdoor equipment stores starting in early December. The Guide is also available on the DEEP website at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEPHunting>.

Birder on Berry Lane: Three Acres, Twelve Months, and Thousands of Birds

As many of us are spending more time at home during the pandemic, reading an entertaining book from a local author is highly recommended. A new book, *Birder on Berry Lane: Three Acres, Twelve Months, and Thousands of Birds*, by Connecticut author Robert Tougias, is the perfect choice. Tougias, who has lived in Colchester for over 20 years, takes the reader on a year-long adventure with the birds observed in his yard. According to DEEP Wildlife Division biologist, Michael Gregonis, “*Birder on Berry Lane* is structured much like a bird creates a nest, using the seasons to create a foundation and intricate life histories of bird species to provide nesting material – a practical reference that both novice and avid birders can use to follow the seasonal ebb and flow of birds in the eastern U.S.” Tougias’ purpose in sharing his experiences is to promote “a greater understanding and appreciation for the birds most of us see each day. After all, we cannot love what we do not know and we are far more likely to conserve what we care about.”

This attractive hardcover book is beautifully illustrated with 25 line drawings by local artist and birder Mark Szantyr, and it contains a glossary packed with specific facts on nesting, diet, and habitat for many frequently mentioned species. Copies are available at most large booksellers or can be ordered online.



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P. J. FUSCO

Harlequin ducks live on the edge. In winter, they are found near turbulent coastal waters, often near the rocks of jetties where they dive to feed on shellfish among the crashing waves.