March/April 2010

Connecticut Wildlife

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BUREAU OF NATURAL RESOURCES • WILDLIFE DIVISION

Eye on the Wild

As we wrap up this issue of Connecticut Wildlife*, it is still cold and snowy outside and we are wondering if spring will ever come. Whenever it is time to work on the March/April issue, I start looking forward to spring and one of my favorite events of the season – the migration of frogs and salamanders from their forest homes to nearby vernal pools where they breed and lay eggs. Being a transplant to Connecticut from first the Midwest and then the Rocky Mountains, my initial experience with this amphibian migration was a moment to remember. During the first spring at our house in Meriden more than two decades ago, I opened the back door on a warm, rainy night to find a slew of spotted salamanders waiting to come in. Walking outside, I found salamanders moving through the grass, across the patio, down the walkway, and into the road, headed for the large "swamp" across the street. Spotted salamanders were not the only ones making the migration; they also were joined by Jefferson salamanders (a Connecticut species of special concern), wood frogs, and spring peepers. Although I did not see as many frogs as salamanders, I could definitely hear them. On some warm, rainy nights the sound of wood frogs croaking and peepers peeping can be deafening.*

I had never seen Jefferson salamanders before and when I mentioned finding them to fellow biologist Julie Victoria, she told herpetologist Dr. Michael Klemens (author of Amphibians and Reptiles of Connecticut and Adjacent Regions*). He visited our "swamp" to verify that I had found a previously unknown population of this rare species. He explained that the steep, rocky area behind my house was a favored habitat of the Jefferson salamander. Knowing that, I've taken it upon myself to watch over these creatures every year during their migration. My biggest concern in the beginning was the journey these animals had to take as they left the woods behind the houses, traveled through the yards, and then navigated the road that separated them from their breeding pool. Fortunately, the road is a dead end with a handful of houses and is not heavily traveled. However, a good number of frogs and salamanders are still run over as they cross the road. So, there I am, out in the rain on those spring nights, with my flashlight, picking up frogs and salamanders and carrying them across the road during their trips to the breeding pool and then back to the forest. My neighbors thought I was a bit eccentric at first. But, as the years went by, they started watching out for the amphibians, too. When my kids were old enough, they also pitched in, along with their friends. It has become an annual event for all and, in the process, the kids (and even the adults) have learned about these fascinating animals and have come to appreciate them. This experience is not unique — each one of us should take the time to learn more about the natural world around us and do our part to conserve it for future generations.*

Kathy Herz, Editor

Cover:

The ring-necked duck is common in Connecticut during spring migration. It frequents freshwater marshes and ponds.

Photo courtesy of Paul J. Fusco

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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. Connecticut Wildlife *contains articles reporting on Wildlife Division projects funded entirely or in part with federal aid monies.*

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The Spring Turkey Hunting Season Approaches

By Michael Gregonis

The spring wild turkey hunting season is an event that many hunters look forward to on an annual basis. The 2010 spring gobbler season is no exception. This year's season has several changes that provide additional hunting opportunities. The season will start on April 28 and end on May 29. Private land hunters will be able to harvest 3 birds, while state land hunters can harvest 2 birds. New regulation changes have increased the spring season by one week and allow hunters to purchase both private and state land permits. Hunting licenses and turkey permits can be purchased on the DEP's Web site (www.ct.gov/dep/sportsmen-licensing) and at most town clerks, some sporting goods stores, and DEP offices. Hunters are required to have a 2010 firearms hunting license or a small game and deer archery permit to apply for a spring turkey permit.

P. J. FUSCO

Preseason scouting may make the difference between harvesting a turkey and just enjoying a day afield. Hunters should head into the field before the season to locate signs of turkeys and listen for gobbling activity. This extra effort helps increase your chances of success.

Season Outlook

Hunters should expect to see fewer jakes (males less than one year old) during the 2010 season because last summer's turkey brood survey indicated productivity on the lower end of the spectrum. Connecticut also has experienced several years of lower productivity, which have caused some declines in the overall statewide wild turkey population. Despite these factors, with preparation and persistence hunters should be able to find cooperative gobblers throughout the state.

Preparation is a Must

As is consistent with hunting for most species of wildlife, preseason scouting may make the difference between harvesting a bird and just enjoying a day afield. Hunters should head into the field before the season to locate signs of turkeys and listen for gobbling activity. This extra effort helps increase your chances of success.

Some signs that hunters should be looking for include tracks, feathers, and droppings; each of these signs can indicate sex and abundance of birds. For example, the track of an adult male turkey averages about 6 or 7 inches in length, whereas a hen track is smaller at about 4.5 to 5 inches. Breast feathers from turkeys that have recently been in the area also can help identify the sex of the bird. Male breast feathers have black tips while the female's are buffed-colored. Droppings from male turkeys are j-shaped and about 1.5 to 2 inches long versus droppings from females which are smaller and more compact than elongated. These signs are useful for determining number of birds, frequency of use, and travel corridors. It is as simple as knowing that the more signs that are observed in an area, the larger the turkey population.

Another important preseason scouting technique is locating and monitoring gobbling activity. Male turkeys announce their presence to hens by gobbling from a roost tree. Hunters can use gobbling activity to their advantage because gobblers will often roost in the same vicinity, if not the same tree, during spring. To locate turkey roosts, hunters should arrive at their hunting area an hour before sunrise, find a high vantage point on the property, and listen for gobbling activity. This type of scouting should be conducted on days with light winds and increasing barometric pressure. By locating roosting areas, hunters should have a good idea of where the gobblers are at first light, which will be advantageous for setting up a strategy for harvesting a bird when the season starts. Spending time in the field before the season starts can pay off with additional birds in the bag.

Mike Gregonis is a biologist with the Wildlife Division's Deer/Turkey Program

Spring Turkey Junior Hunter Days, April 17 & 24

Spring turkey junior hunter training days provide junior hunters with an opportunity to learn safe and effective hunting practices from experienced hunters. Licensed junior hunters may hunt for turkeys when accompanied by a licensed adult hunter 18 years of age and older. The adult mentor may not carry a firearm. The junior hunter must have a valid spring turkey season permit for state or private land. Those hunting on private land also must have written consent from the landowner. The adult mentor may assist in calling turkeys. Hunting hours for Junior Hunter Training Days only are one-half hour before sunrise to 5:00 PM. Harvested turkeys must be tagged and reported. Consult www.ct.gov/dep/hunting to learn more about tagging and reporting requirements.

Fish Habitat Enhanced Along the Shetucket River

By Brian D. Murphy

During the last decade, the DEP's Inland Fisheries Division has been actively adding Large Woody Habitat (LWH) to river systems as a component of individual stream restoration projects, particularly in rivers that are LWH deficient. Large Woody Habitat is typically defined by fisheries biologists as trees or logs with a minimum diameter of four inches and a minimum length of six feet that protrude or lay within a stream channel. Research has shown that LWH is an important natural component of a river's biological diversity and health. Large wood functions to create and enhance new instream fish habitats and also helps stabilize stream channels. In addition, wood helps collect organic materials, such as leaves and twigs, that provide an important food source for aquatic insects. In essence, LWH functions as a mini-ecosystem.

Shetucket River Project

The Shetucket River below the Scotland Hydroelectric Facility in Windham has been identified as LWH deficient. It was determined that this section of the river would greatly benefit from the introduction of LWH as part of overall long-term river management and restoration efforts. Two reasons for the LWH deficiency are: 1) LWH is collected and removed at trashracks associated with the hydroelectric facility, and 2) the facility, which regulates instream flows, operates in a peaking mode, thereby disrupting the transport and settlement of wood that would naturally be recruited into the Shetucket River. Currently up for relicensing with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the facility is proposed to be operated in a run-of-river mode in the future. Future run-of-river operation mode, which simulates a more natural streamflow regime, will be more conducive to the recruitment and retention of LWH.

Installing Habitat Structures

The Shetucket River habitat enhancement project entailed the installation of three constructed log jams and three floating log covers placed along the east side of the river, adjacent to Salt Rock State Park property. The Wildlife Division's Wetlands Habitat and Mosquito Management Program was responsible for the installation of these habitat structures using low ground pressure excavators. Construction management oversight was provided by Todd Bobowick, fisheries biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The construction of log jams in the river involved the careful group placement of multiple trees (branches included) to form an interwoven complex of wood simulating the formation of natural log jams. Each structure was comprised of 8 to 10 hardwood trees. Log jams were secured in place with soil anchor devices and wire rope and will remain in place providing woody habitats for an estimated 15 to 20-year period. Log jams were located in water depths between 1 and 4 feet extending away from the bank, but extending no greater than 25% of the low flow channel width. Given these width parameters, structures will not impact navigation uses within the river. It is anticipated that the structures may also trap mobile wood naturally recruited into the Shetucket River during high flow events.

Floating log covers are structures comprised of individual trees felled into the river at locations where there is no access for heavy equipment. These structures were installed in the river near larger boulders and bedrock outcrops, significantly adding to the complexity of instream habitats. These floating log covers, designed to float with changes in streamflow, were secured in a similar fashion as the log jams. They mainly provide overhead cover and velocity refugia (refuge from strong currents) for the fish community.

R. WOLFE, WETLAND RESTORATION PROGRAM

This constructed log jam in the Shetucket River in Sprague creates "Large Woody Habitat" that provides instream fish habitats and helps stabilize stream channels.

Fishing the Shetucket River

The Shetucket River supports a highly diverse fish community (23 species, 15 native) comprising both inland and diadromous species. Diadromous fish

E. THOMAS, DEP WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Donnie Hargreaves of the DEP's Wetlands Habitat and Mosquito Management Program constructs a log jam in the Shetucket River to create "Large Woody Habitat."

are migratory species that exhibit a life history strategy that includes movement between fresh and saltwater. The river is managed as a Trophy Trout Stream with a daily creel limit of 2 fish and an open season from the third Saturday in April to the last day in February. It is annually stocked by the Inland Fisheries Division with adult brown and rainbow trout and surplus broodstock trout ranging from 1 to 10 pounds in size. Many tributary streams to the Shetucket River provide important thermal refuges for trout; in particular, downstream of the Scotland Dam are Merrick Brook (Scotland) and Beaver Brook (Sprague). Areas within 100 feet of the mouths of these tributaries are closed to all fishing from June 15 to August 31. Occasionally, wild brown trout and native book trout that have moved into the river from these coldwater tributary streams can be found in the Shetucket River. In addition to a trout fishery, the Shetucket River supports an abundant smallmouth bass population. The bass are generally small (less than 8 inches in length); however, some individuals can exceed 12 inches in size. The Shetucket River also is managed as an Atlantic salmon broodstock fishery from the Scotland Dam downstream to the Occum Dam (Norwich). A total of 500 Atlantic salmon broodstock were stocked in this area of the river during 2009.

More complete fishing regulation information can be obtained in the 2010 Connecticut Anglers Guide at www.ct.gov/dep/fishing. Anglers can access the Shetucket River at several locations on state property in the Town of Sprague, including 2,300 feet of shoreline at Salt Rock Park Campground and 2,500 feet of shoreline at Mohegan State Forest.

Funding the Project

The Inland Fisheries Division received grant assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program to fund project implementation. Additional funding was provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The Thames Valley Chapter of Trout Unlimited also was supportive of this habitat enhancement project as the river is a popular fishing location for its members.

The Inland Fisheries Division has successfully completed many stream habitat restoration projects throughout Connecticut since 1995. More information on these projects can be found on the DEP Web site at www.ct.gov/dep/fishing (click on "habitat restoration" under Featured Links). A 6-page fact sheet about Large Woody Habitat management also is available on the habitat restoration section of the Web site.

With the completion and promotion of more successful riverine habitat projects, like the one on the Shetucket River, it is hoped that similar efforts will be undertaken by municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and private landowners in other rivers and streams that are deficient of Large Woody Habitat.

Brian Murphy is a Senior Fisheries Habitat Biologist with the DEP's Inland Fisheries Division

2010 Midwinter Waterfowl Survey Shows High Numbers of Canada Geese

By Min Huang

P. J. FUSCO

Counts of all puddle ducks during the Midwinter Waterfowl Survey were above their 5-year average, including counts of the American wigeon.

Every winter since 1955, the Wildlife Division has conducted the annual Midwinter Waterfowl Survey to obtain an index of long-term wintering waterfowl trends. This survey is conducted in early January throughout the Atlantic Flyway. The Atlantic Flyway is a bird migration route that generally follows the Atlantic Coast of North America and the Appalachian Mountains. The states and Canadian provinces that make up the Atlantic Flyway all participate in the survey. The survey is conducted from a helicopter in Connecticut and a census is obtained from the coast, the three major river systems (Connecticut, Thames, and Housatonic) and selected inland lakes and reservoirs.

Conditions for the 2010 survey were excellent. Many of the inland lakes and ponds were frozen due to prolonged cold weather in the weeks prior to the survey. When inland water areas freeze, waterfowl concentrate along the coast and on the major river systems. Clear skies and moderate winds on the day of the survey led to unlimited visibility and good flying conditions.

Counts of all puddle ducks were above their 5-year averages. The mallard count (2,500) was the highest in over 15 years, as was the count for American black ducks (3,200). American wigeon and gadwall counts also were above their respective 5-year averages. Following a recent trend, however, most puddle ducks were observed in urban sanctuaries where supplemental feeding by the public occurs. The Division discourages citizens from feeding waterfowl for a number of reasons, including increased risk of disease transmission and the potential for poor nutrition. The Division has published a brochure, "Do Not Feed Waterfowl," that outlines the potential hazards of feeding waterfowl. It is available on the DEP Web site (www.ct.gov/dep/wildlife).

The scaup count (800) was well below that of 2009 and continued to be lower than historical wintering numbers for Connecticut. The decline in the scaup population throughout North America continues to be of concern for biologists nationwide. Habitat changes on the scaup's breeding grounds may be a factor in the long-term decline of the population.

Mergansers were abundant but below levels observed in 2009 (900) and just under the 5-year average. The common goldeneye count (400) also was less than last year. Counts for bufflehead (1,100) and long-tailed ducks (200) were above those from last year and slightly above their 5-year averages.

Atlantic brant numbers (1,000) were lower than in 2009 and below the recent average. Canada goose counts (4,800) were high for this survey and the highest recorded in a decade.

Min Huang is the leader of the Division's Migratory Gamebird Program

Connecticut Midwinter Waterfowl Survey

Results for Major Species*

Species	2010	2009	Five-year Avg.
Atlantic Brant	1,000	1,700	1,400
Black Duck	3,200	2,900	2,000
Bufflehead	1,100	700	900
Canada Goose	4,800	3,500	3,300
Canvasback	0	100	100
Mallard	2,500	1,400	1,100
Merganser	900	1,800	1,100
Mute Swan	700	700	800
Long-tailed Duck	200	100	100
Common Goldeneye	400	800	800
Scaup	800	1,900	2,200

** rounded to nearest hundred*

An Assessment of Deer, Ticks, and 4-poster Devices

By Howard Kilpatrick

R. ALLYN

Deer visit a 4-poster device installed on Mason Island in Mystic. The device uses corn to attract deer and, as the deer feed, they rub their head and neck against a paint roller covered with a tickicide.

Numerous communities in Connecticut are concerned about the abundance of ticks and the risk of contracting tick-related diseases, such as Lyme disease, babesiosis, and ehrlichiosis. Many studies have demonstrated a close relationship between deer abundance and tick abundance. As deer populations increase, tick populations and the risk of contracting Lyme disease also increase. A 13-year study in Mumford Cove in Groton demonstrated that by reducing deer populations during the hunting season, the community saw less ticks and human cases of Lyme disease.

Recently, a "4-poster device" was developed to kill ticks on deer. The device uses corn to attract deer and, as the deer feed, they rub their head and neck against a paint roller covered with a tickicide. A cooperative study was initiated in 2008 on Mason Island in Mystic, Connecticut, to learn more about the effectiveness of the 4-poster device. Study cooperators included the Mason Island Community, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, and the Wildlife Division. The goal of the study is to test the effects of 4-poster devices on tick abundance, tick infection rates, deer herd health, and human cases of Lyme disease in the small, isolated community on Mason Island.

Data are being collected on tick and deer populations at both Mason Island (treated site) where the 4-poster devices are being used and Black Point (control site) where there are no 4-poster devices. Collecting data before and after treatment is initiated and from a treated and control site will allow researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of the 4-poster devices. Acorn production may influence deer use of 4-poster devices, therefore mast surveys are being conducted annually to quantify acorn production.

Tick sampling was initiated at Mason Island and Black Point prior to use of the 4-poster devices and will continue throughout the study. Ticks were sampled by dragging a piece of fleece on the ground along walking trails, stone walls, yard edges and through open forest at the treated and control sites. The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station examined all ticks to assess infection rates.

Spotlight surveys were initiated to assess the number of fawns produced per doe (deer herd health). Evaluating changes in the number of fawns produced per doe will provide insight into how supplemental feed, used to attract deer to the 4-poster device, may affect deer herd health. Spotlight surveys were conducted at Mason Island and Black Point before use of the 4-poster devices and will continue throughout the experimental study.

The Mason Island Association is annually surveying residents to record the number of human cases of Lyme disease in the community. This survey will be conducted throughout the study to assess changes in the number of human cases of Lyme disease in the community.

Five, 4-poster devices were deployed on Mason Island in October 2008. Tick sampling was initiated in June 2008 and spotlight surveys of deer were initiated in November 2008. Potential effects of the 4-poster devices on deer herd health were observable in fall 2009 (after first year of treatment) and potential effects on nymphal tick populations should be observable by June 2010 (after second year of treatment, due to the life cycle of ticks).

The 4-poster devices were active for 22 weeks (9 weeks in fall and 13 weeks in spring) during the first year of the study. Total corn consumption was 3,960 pounds, or 62.9 pounds of corn per day, during the 9-week fall period. Spotlight surveys were conducted at Mason Island and Black Point in November 2008 (pre-treatment) and November 2009 (post-treatment). The number of fawns produced per doe increased at Mason Island, but decreased at Black Point,

continued on page 13

Tick and fawn production at Mason Island and Black Point during the pre-treatment (2008) and 1-year post-treatment period (2009).

		2008			2009		
Site	No. Sites Sampled	Total Ticks Collected	% Ticks Tested Positive	Fawns Per Doe	Total Ticks Collected	% Ticks Tested Positive	Fawns Per Doe
Masons Island	37	44	30%	0.36	70	31%	0.86
Black Point	39	132	39%	0.71	135	26%	0.38

2009 a Better Year for Mast Production in CT's Forests

Written by Michael Gregonis

P. J. FUSCO

Research on mast is important because the availability of mast can influence annual productivity of squirrels, deer, bears, wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, and many other wildlife species. Mast is a word that biologists often use; however, many may not know what constitutes mast. In general, mast is the nuts and berries produced by trees and shrubs. All mast falls into two categories, hard mast such as acorns and hickory nuts and soft mast such as blueberries, wild cherries, and blackberries.

States from Maine to West Virginia are participating in a cooperative research project that tracks annual hard mast productivity, resulting in a single online database that is available to wildlife biologists and the public. The goal of this survey is to gather regional information regarding hard mast production, which will aid in the management of wildlife species in the northeastern United States.

The Wildlife Division initiated a field study in 2007 to assess hard mast production in each of Connecticut's 12 deer and turkey management zones (see map on page 17). This information, in conjunction with an ongoing acorn abundance assessment from the deer hunter survey, will provide more insight into annual acorn productivity throughout Connecticut's oak forests.

The 2009 survey was conducted from August 15 to September 1. Tweny-five trees from the white oak group (e.g., white, chestnut, swamp oak species) and red oak group (e.g., red, black, pin, scarlet oak species) were selected for sampling at 11 of 12 survey sites. Twenty-five trees were selected from only the red oak group at one site because an insufficient number of white oaks were available for sampling. Survey trees are numbered and marked with white paint indicating species from the white oak group and red paint for the red oak group. Marking the trees with paint and a metal numbered tag assists with locating each tree on an annual basis. The crown of each tree is scanned for 30 seconds with binoculars to detect the presence or absence of acorns to assess annual hard mast productivity. All trees are assessed to determine the proportion of sample trees that have mast, providing an index of productivity.

A productivity scale of 0 (scarce) to 6 (abundant) was used to rank mast abundance at both the regional and statewide level. The statewide index for the 2009 field mast survey was 3.2, whereas the index was 2.4 in 2008. The index for 2009 indicates that statewide acorn abundance was moderate to abundant. On a regional basis, acorn abundance ranged from a high of 5.0 in deer and turkey management zone 5, to a low of 1.0 in zone 8. The mast index in the remainder of the management zones fell into the moderate to abundant category.

Information provided by the mast survey also will be used to predict productivity in some wildlife populations, as well as the deer harvest. Past research has shown that in years with high acorn abundance, there is more food for some wildlife species (e.g., tree squirrels), thus creating conditions that enhance survival and increase production of young the following year. Information reported on the annual deer hunter survey demonstrates that the deer harvest increases in years of low acorn abundance. This increase in harvest can be attributed to deer moving more often from feeding to bedding areas and foraging for longer periods as they search for sparse acorns and other foods. Acorns are an important food for many wildlife species and can affect the size of populations and their vulnerability to hunting pressure.

Michael Gregonis is a biologist with the Wildlife Division's Deer/Turkey Program

Connecticut Hard Mast Survey, 2009

Zone	Site Location	Percent Acorn Abundance White	Red	Total	Research Mast Index
1	Housatonic WMA	24	36	30	1.8
2	Sessions WMA	24	96	60	3.6
3	Scantic River SP	0	64	64	3.8
4	Belding WMA	60	96	78	4.7
5	Yale-Myers Forest	68	100	84	5.0
6	Aldo Leopold WMA	0	96	48	2.9
7	Sleeping Giant SP	12	64	36	2.3
8	Cockaponset SF	1	33	17	1.0
9	Hurd SP	16	64	40	2.4
10	Franklin WMA	48	92	70	4.2
11	Huntington SP	44	72	58	3.5
12	Barn Island WMA	0	88	44	2.6
	Mean				**3.2**

Weasel Project Completed: *Results Shed Light on Distribution of Short- and Long-tailed Weasels*

By Christina Kocer

A two-year status and distribution study of short-tailed and long-tailed weasels in Connecticut was completed in 2009. Trapping efforts were conducted throughout the state at federal, state, and town-owned properties, as well as at several privately-owned properties. Three different types of live traps were used, including squirrel-sized Havahart® traps, PVC tube-shaped traps, and wooden box traps. Two kinds of bait (rabbit or mouse) also were evaluated for effectiveness.

Between July and December 2008, 11 individual weasels were captured 19 times during 1,549 trap nights (one trap night was defined as one 24-hour period in which a trap was set).

An additional 40 weasel specimens were collected from fur trappers, designated wildlife rehabilitators, Nuisance Wildlife Control Operators, nature centers, and by collecting weasels killed by domestic pets and vehicles.

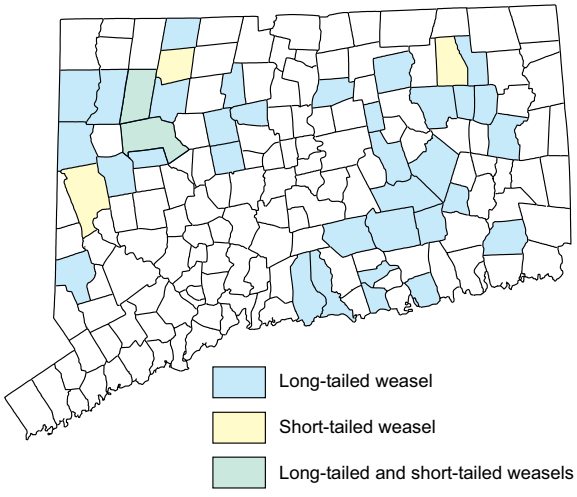
Short-tailed and long-tailed weasels are similar in appearance and difficult to distinguish, even when biologists are able to examine them closely in hand. Therefore, small tissue samples were collected for genetic analysis from every individual weasel encountered. Tissue samples were analyzed in 2009 and it was confirmed that 6 individuals were short-tailed weasels (all females) and 44 were long-tailed weasels (23 males, 17 females, and 4 unknown). Only 1 individual was unconfirmed.

Of the 11 weasels captured in traps, 1 was confirmed as a short-tailed weasel (female) and the remaining 10 were long-tailed weasels (4 males, 6 females). Initial captures of female long-tailed weasels were accomplished twice as often with rabbit bait than with mouse bait. However, once a female chose a particular bait type, all successive captures of that individual were made using the same bait. Male long-tailed weasels did not appear to exhibit a bait preference. No female weasels of either species were captured in PVC tube traps initially and no male weasels were ever captured in Havahart® traps. No animals were recaptured in wooden traps; however, PVC tube traps were more likely to capture a weasel as a recapture than as an initial capture. The wooden box traps were the only trap type used for this study that did not appear to exhibit a sex bias as they were successful in capturing both male and female long-tailed weasels equally as often, regardless of bait used. These data suggest that it may be important to incorporate a variety of bait and trap types throughout a study to reduce sex, species, and individual preferences and to increase capture success.

J. PACELLI, WILDLIFE DIVERSITY PROGRAM

Wildlife Division technician Christina Kocer transfers DNA into small plastic tubes as part of the species verification process. Because short- and long-tailed weasels are difficult to distinguish, genetic analyses were used to accurately differentiate the two species. All lab work was completed at the University of Connecticut.

Results of Weasel Distribution Study 2007-2008



Similar to historically described ranges for the 2 weasel species, long-tailed weasels were found throughout Connecticut while short-tailed weasels tended to be found in the north and western parts of the state. Limited data for short-tailed weasels were collected so the species' range may be underestimated.

Wildlife Division staff continues to collect weasel sightings from the public and specimens for future analyses. An additional 12 weasel specimens have been collected since the initial analyses were completed, so genetic analyses will resume in the future.

Christina Kocer is a technician with the Division's Wildlife Diversity Program

Sentinel of the Marsh - The Red-winged Blackbird

Article and photography by Paul Fusco, Wildlife Outreach Program

In late winter, as the coastal salt marshes of Connecticut begin to thaw, one of our best known birds begins to return to the state from its wintering grounds. Flocks of adult male red-winged blackbirds are among the first to arrive to the partially frozen wetlands across the state. Some are vanguards that will be passing through on their way further north, and some will claim territories for the upcoming breeding season. As winter turns to spring, their loud *"konk-la-ree"* song emanates from all corners of the wetlands across Connecticut as male red-winged blackbirds sing from the tops of reeds and cattails. Resident adult females and immature males generally appear in increasing numbers after the beginning of April.

Set off against the otherwise black plumage, the red shoulder patches of the male red-winged blackbird are truly stunning. When in full display, the birds will puff up their body feathers, spread their tail, and flare out their namesake epaulets to flash blazing scarlet patches. The epaulets are used as a territorial warning to other males during the breeding season.

Red-winged blackbirds are dimorphic in that the male and female have different plumages. While the male has all black plumage with red shoulder patches, the female is brown and heavily streaked. At first glance, the female actually looks somewhat like a large sparrow. The red shoulder patches are only found on the male. Young males are dusky brown with mottled streaking and show some red on the shoulders.

Range

Red-winged blackbirds are considered to be one of the most abundant birds in North America. They can be found coast to coast, from Alaska to eastern Canada, and south to Florida and down into Mexico. In Connecticut, they are found statewide and in large numbers. They have adapted well to development, and can be found in wetlands of even the most urban areas. In fall, they migrate from the northern parts of their range for the winter.

Habitat Use

Freshwater wetlands are the primary breeding habitat for the red-winged blackbird. The birds are most frequently associated with cattail marshes and marshes with shrubs and small trees. Cup-shaped nests are built in cattails, shrubs, and small trees, sometimes over water. Red-winged blackbirds also frequently nest close to the ground in thick grass fields, especially those that are close to wetlands. In coastal areas, they usually are not found in true saltmarsh habitats, but instead in brackish and wetland edges close to saltmarshes.

The red-winged blackbird is slightly smaller than a robin, and has a straight, sharply pointed bill. Males are black with red and buff shoulder patches.

Foraging occurs in open areas where the blackbirds primarily feed on insects, other invertebrates, and weed seeds. In agricultural areas, the birds feed on insects, grubs, and worms that are brought up by plows. Red-winged blackbirds consume an astounding number of harmful insects and weed seeds. The list includes, but is not limited to, cankerworms, grubs, caterpillars, weevils, grasshoppers, and weed seeds like panic grass and ragweed. In some farm regions, large blackbird flocks may become agricultural pests when they damage crops, such as rice and corn. The destruction mainly occurs in areas where grains are grown in great abundance. Overall, the damage caused by this species is outweighed by the beneficial service it provides to farmers and homeowners in the form of pest control.

Behavior

Red-winged blackbirds are aggressive. They will boldly

Cattail marshes are a preferred habitat for red-winged blackbirds.

attack larger birds, like crows, ravens, herons, and hawks, that stray into their territory, driving the potential predators away. On occasion, observers have reported red-winged blackbirds actually riding on the backs of these larger birds, pecking and jabbing while holding on.

Males have breeding territories that can be close to each other. Adjacent territories with common borders are good places to watch interactions between the birds. The males use various displays to defend a territory, including song with feather spread, bill-tilt, and flight song. At times, male red-winged blackbirds can be brutally aggressive toward each other. Territorial squabbles can be intense and may involve wrestling on the ground or in water.

Red-winged blackbirds typically forage on the ground by walking and pecking as they go. They may be seen hopping only on occasion. In flight, red-wings have an irregular flapping flight pattern. Flocks are loosely grouped and may be vocal.

Conservation

All blackbirds are native migratory birds that are protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, a formal treaty with Canada and Mexico. There are exceptions to their protection in that they may be killed when found "committing or about to commit depredations upon ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or when concentrated in such numbers and manner as to constitute a health hazard or other nuisance."

The birds begin to form flocks in late summer, which by fall, could grow to enormous numbers. Their flocks are frequently mixed with cowbirds, grackles, starlings, and rusty blackbirds. They may come into conflict with people in some areas because the huge flocks may feed on cultivated grain or rice. Also, large roosts may be a nuisance because of the noise and droppings.

Females with their heavily streaked brown plumage appear similar to a large sparrow.

While the overall population appears to be stable, in some parts of its range this bird's numbers are declining significantly due to habitat loss and the use of poison to stem crop damage. Draining and filling of wetlands, changes in farming practices, and suburbanization have all contributed to a reduction in the red-winged blackbird's habitat. According to information from National Audubon Society and the U. S. Geological Survey, red-winged blackbirds have declined in Connecticut by as much as 70% over the last 40 years. Strong inland wetland protections and enforcement of wetland protection laws are important for the conservation of these birds as well as other wildlife that depend on wetland habitat.

Landowner Incentive Program Projects Continue

By Judy Wilson

J. WILSON, PRIVATE LANDS HABITAT PROGRAM

Tom and Kathleen Jannke partnered with the Wildlife Division to reclaim this old field. This area, along with the existing pastures and seedling sapling habitat found on their land, will provide habitat for at-risk species, such as field sparrows, indigo buntings, woodcock, and chestnut-sided warblers.

The Wildlife Division's Landowner Incentive Program provides technical advice and cost assistance to landowners for habitat management that will result in the protection, restoration, reclamation, enhancement, and maintenance of habitats that support fish, wildlife, and plant species considered at-risk. This program has been made possible through grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which recognized the need to help states with the stewardship of their at-risk species. Landowners who have or are currently participating in the Program were required to submit an application to the Division. Applications were accepted from 2005 to 2007.

Because funding was limited, grants were awarded through a competitive process. The Division developed ranking criteria to ensure that these limited funds were distributed with maximum benefit to at-risk plants and wildlife. Some of the most important ranking criteria included presence of and benefit to at-risk species, presence and value of priority habitats, presence and integrity of imperiled natural communities, and total acreage of property and project. The Landowner Incentive Program provides up to 75% of the project cost, while the landowner, conservation organization, or other non federal grant source must provide the remaining 25% match. In some cases, landowners provide the matching funds through in-kind services, such as brush hogging, plowing, and harrowing.

Despite no new funding in the past few years, the Program continues to work using the original grants, but does face an uncertain future. Staff continues to execute contracts and prepare project proposals for all previously approved projects. Several projects were completed in 2009 and more will be implemented in 2010.

Pequot Fish and Game Club

The Pequot Fish and Game Club completed its second Landowner Incentive Program project to create additional early successional habitat on its 85-acre game club property in Newtown. Approximately 2.5 acres of maturing, low quality hardwoods were cut around an existing 2-acre field to increase the amount of early successional habitat. A special machine called a brontosaurus was used to cut the trees. As part of its match requirements, the Club will cut any remaining hardwoods that were too big for the brontosaurus. The site will regrow into seedling/sapling habitat, which will provide abundant nesting and foraging sites for species at-risk, like blue winged and chestnut-sided warblers, as well as improved cover for hunting during the fall season. This is the second Landowner Incentive Program project the club has undertaken as it expands the amount of early successional habitat it manages to approximately 10 acres. Those 10 acres include a warm and cool season field, reverting old field, and seedling/sapling habitat. The Club conducts an informal bird survey each spring.

Early Successional Habitat Project in Ledyard

Tom Jannke of Ledyard has been an active conservationist all his life and passionate about managing his land since he attended the University of Connecticut Extension Service's COVERTS program several years ago. This intensive workshop educates landowners, land trust stewards, and conservation group leaders about forestry, wildlife ecology, and habitat management principles, and how to apply them to their land. The workshop is co-sponsored by the DEP's Wildlife and Forestry Divisions.

Tom started by working with a consulting forester to write a forestry plan for his property and also received some technical assistance about plantings from Wildlife Division habitat biologist Ann Kilpatrick. He planted numerous native fruit-bearing shrubs in part of a field that was fenced off from a horse pasture. Under the Landowner Incentive Program, funding was used to hire the services of a state approved forestry contractor. The contractor cleared over-topping, low quality hardwoods from a 3-acre old field, leaving behind eastern red cedars and some white oaks. The red cedars provide year round cover and their fruits are a source of food for several species of birds and small mammals. The white oaks

provide acorns, which are sought after by a variety of wildlife. Tom went well over the required 25% match by hiring a local contractor to clear an additional area of woods that resulted in another 3 acres of seedling/sapling habitat. This project resulted in about 6 acres of newly-created early successional habitat that compliments the diversity of pasture, wetlands, and forest found on the Jannke property. This new habitat also adds to a much larger, adjacent area that is protected and managed by the Avalonia Land Conservancy, thus increasing the value of both properties to wildlife.

Marsh Restoration in Guilford

Neighbors Carolyn Cooper and Judie Fine from Guilford had read about a Landowner Incentive Program project to restore tidal marshes in North and South Cove, Old Saybrook, by treating the invasive common reed, phragmites, through a series of spraying and mulching treatments. By controlling the tall, thick stands of phragmites, native vegetation can once again grow and provide critical habitat to at-risk species like the blue crab and seaside sparrow. Over 250 landowners are participating in this multi-year project in Old Saybrook to control approximately 113 acres of phragmites located on over 250 acres of tidal wetlands.

Carolyn and Judie felt that a similar, but smaller, project could be conducted to restore a tidal marsh in Guilford. The Committee to Save Guilford Shoreline applied to the Landowner Incentive Program for funding to restore a 20-acre marsh on Seaside Avenue. Funding was awarded to the Committee in 2007 for 3 rounds of phragmites control treatments. The project would be done in partnership with the Wildlife Division. The Committee to Save Guilford Shoreline organized an informational meeting in August 2009 so that representatives from the Division could explain to project participants, residents, and other interested citizens the purpose of the Landowner Incentive Program and how and why phragmites control is implemented.

Approximately nine acres of phragmites is scattered in clumps of various sizes over the 20-acre marsh. The marsh consists of 17 parcels that are owned by 16 different landowners. Through the untiring efforts of primarily Judie Fine of The Committee to Save Guilford Shoreline, 14 landowners signed "letters of permission" to participate in the project. The first herbicide spraying was completed in September 2009. The treated areas were mowed over the winter to mulch the phragmites. The Division's Wetlands Habitat and Mosquito Management Program conducted the herbicide spraying and follow-up mowing.

Because of the positive support this project has received from the dedicated members of the Committee to Save Guilford Shoreline and the citizens of Guilford, along with documented benefits of restoring native vegetation to critical shoreline habitats, the Town of Guilford is planning to carry out phragmites control work on adjacent town-owned land at Jones Beach on Seaside Avenue and possibly several other sites. This is another example of how a small, but important, Landowner Incentive Program funded project can lead by example and result in a larger area of habitat being restored, enhanced, or managed for wildlife.

Judy Wilson is a biologist with the Wildlife Division's Private Lands Habitat Program

R. BLUM, PRIVATE LANDS HABITAT PROGRAM

Members of The Committee to Save the Guilford Shoreline, Judie Fine, Charles Magby (President), and Carolyn Cooper, pose in front of a stand of phragmites, an invasive plant. The Landowner Incentive Program has provided funding for the restoration of 20 acres marsh in Guilford by controlling phragmites.

4-poster Device

continued from page 7

from the pre-treatment to post-treatment period. Tick infection rates were similar at Mason Island and Black Point during both the pre-treatment and 1-year post-treatment period. Tick numbers from the pre-treatment to the 1-year post-treatment period were similar at Black Point but increased at Mason Island.

Preliminary data suggest that supplemental feed may increase the number of fawns produced per doe. The effects of the 4-poster devices on the tick population will not be detectable until June 2010. Additional years of data will provide more insight to the effects of 4-poster devices on tick populations and deer herd health. Communities considering using 4-poster devices will be required to obtain a permit from the DEP.

Howard Kilpatrick is the leader of the Wildlife Division's Deer Program

Conservation at a Crossroads?

Declining numbers of hunters may spell trouble for habitat conservation

By Min T. Huang

Conservation of critical habitat has been at the foundation of wildlife management efforts in this country. With that purpose at hand, the North American wildlife management model – a user pay model – has become the most successful in the world. Forming the base of the North American conservation model are hunters and the hunting tradition. Since the early 1900s, hunters and those who embrace the hunting culture and a love of the outdoors have been at the forefront of efforts to conserve our precious wildlife heritage.

Participation in hunting, however, is declining, despite an increasing population in the United States. Nationwide, over the past 20 years, the number of hunters has declined 10%. Connecticut alone has lost a third of its hunters in the same timeframe. Approximately 1.5% of Connecticut's population currently hunts. Despite unprecedented hunting opportunities, hunters continue to drop out and new hunters are not being recruited at a high enough rate to replace those that are leaving. The reasons for this decline are many, and they vary across the country. Some of the more significant reasons that have been identified include the transient nature of societal values, increased demands on leisure time, an increasingly technological environment in which our youth focus their recreational pursuits, the proliferation of organized sports participation, and a growing ethnic population that has not traditionally had hunting as a cultural foundation. This declining trend, should it continue, may ultimately lead to the demise of hunting as we know it today.

The progressive loss of the hunting culture in our society and the myriad of benefits derived from that culture could result in far reaching negative impacts on North America's wildlife management program, which has historically relied upon significant participation and financial support from hunters. The loss of the hunting culture also could have negative economic impacts on rural America and result in an accelerated loss of open space.

Throughout our country, public agencies and programs involved with habitat conservation and wildlife management are largely funded by hunters through hunting license sales and excise taxes. One of the benchmarks in the conservation movement in the United States was the Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937 (also known as the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act). This monumental legislation levied a tax on the sale of firearms and ammunition. These funds are given back to the states for the purchase of critical habitat and for wildlife management programs. Since 1937, over $4.2 billion has been raised by hunters for state wildlife programs. In fiscal year 2010 alone, over $269 million will likely be allocated to the states through Pittman-Robertson for conservation. Approximately 62% of all Pittman-Robertson funds have been spent on land acquisition, with the remaining amount spent on wildlife management programs.

The acquisition of over 4 million acres of critical habitat and an additional 14 million acres of land conserved through easements and landowner agreements have benefited all wildlife, not just those species that hunters pursue. The protection of critical habitats in Connecticut, such as the Roger Tory Peterson Wildlife Area in Old Lyme, not only benefits waterfowl, wading birds, and shorebirds, but also endangered species like salt marsh sharp-tailed sparrows, a population in our state that has global importance.

Another way that hunters have fueled the conservation of habitat and wildlife is through donations and membership in various conservation organizations. In Connecticut, 57% of waterfowl hunters belong to one or more conservation organizations. These private, non-profit organizations are no different than their collective membership in their dedication for conservation. As an example, since the passage of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in 1986, over $4.5 billion has been spent on wetland habitat conservation across the continent. A large portion of this total has been spent by conservation organizations, such as Ducks Unlimited and Delta Waterfowl, whose funds are largely driven by hunters and private benefactors. Ducks Unlimited has spent over $73 million on habitat conservation in the Atlantic Flyway alone.

Hunters have traditionally been influential politically, and have been integral in the passage of important conservation legislation, such as the Conservation Reserve Program, which has saved millions of acres of farmland from development.

A telling example of the importance of dedicated funding for the conservation of wildlife and habitat can be observed in a recent report published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the conservation status of birds throughout North America. The majority of species that were hunted (e.g., waterfowl) and those species associated with wetlands as a group (about one-quarter of all birds) have been increasing over the past 40 years. This increase was due largely to the flow of dollars from hunting revenue. These funds are subsequently directed toward the conservation of wetlands. The North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the Federal Duck Stamp Program have generated billions of dollars for wetland conservation, with over 30 million acres of habitat being conserved throughout North America. Connecticut's Duck Stamp Program, funded largely by Connecticut waterfowl hunters, has raised over $1 million for wetland conservation in our state. On the other hand, in the absence of a reliable, dedicated source of funding, the majority of nongame wildlife species are not increasing, but instead are declining, in some instances to the brink of extinction.

So, as the hunting population ages and declines, what does that really mean for conservation in Connecticut and throughout North America? We are truly at a conservation crossroads. Those who enjoy the outdoors – whether it is for hunting, birding, spiritual renewal, or just peace of mind – have the obligation to ensure its viability for future generations. The hunting community has borne the financial brunt of this burden. Without new sources of dedicated funding and/or new groups stepping up to the plate to champion our natural heritage, the outlook is bleak. As an example, there is a growing concern and almost resignation throughout North America among wetland habitat managers that the current pace of development, changing land uses, and lack of funding will make it difficult to just maintain the current amount and function of wetlands in the future. Without an influx of funding and political

influence on wetland policy, this does not bode well for any wildlife species dependent on wetlands.

As state wildlife agency budgets shrink and operating costs continue to increase, tough choices will have to be made with regard to how limited dollars are spent on the resource. Should the Wildlife Division forego a monitoring program that provides needed information on system response to management activities, pass on purchasing a critical parcel of land, or not conduct basic inventory and distribution surveys? Although new sources of funding for wildlife conservation have recently been appropriated, they are just that, appropriations. They can be reduced (which has already happened to initial allocations) or taken away to fund something else.

Stemming the tide of declining participation in hunting is going to be difficult, but not impossible. Several national surveys indicate that there is a large pool of potential hunters. The social reality of everyday life, however, presents numerous challenges to recruiting those individuals. Becoming a hunter involves more than just firing a firearm or bow or going into the field to harvest game. Being a hunter is based on attitudes and involves development, over time, of an individual's perception of him/herself as a hunter and as part of the hunting culture. This development does not occur in a vacuum and requires a broad and deep social system of initiators, companions, and mentors. Importantly, not everyone in the hunting culture is a hunter. Long-term participation in hunting depends on development of a personal/cultural identity.

Providing and enhancing social support for hunters is the key to future hunting participation. Efforts to increase participation should focus on "becoming a hunter" and not on "going hunting." How someone develops a personal/cultural identity as a hunter is a long-term process involving a myriad of activities, and always occurring in a particular social context. Any individual can go hunting once or even multiple times, but development of a personal/cultural identity is necessary for long-term commitment and participation. We can take steps through existing hunter education and wildlife outreach programs to focus more on these "non-consumptive" facets of the hunting culture, as well as promote more participation by the non-hunting constituency. Many graduates of hunter education classes throughout the country never intend to hunt. Ensuring that hunter education and wildlife outreach programs emphasize the "non-consumptive" aspects of the hunting culture will likely foster a more sympathetic and better-informed non-hunting public.

Hunting and the hunting tradition have been a fabric of American culture since the settlement of the "New World." As we have learned that conquering nature provides far fewer benefits than those derived from living with nature, conservation was born. Hunters have been at the forefront of this movement. Despite the current declining trend in hunting, it is not too late for us to maintain and build upon an institution that is truly American.

Min Huang is the leader of the Wildlife Division's Migratory Gamebird Program.

P. J. FUSCO

As state wildlife agency budgets shrink and operating costs continue to increase, tough choices will have to be made with regard to how limited dollars are spent on the wildlife resource. Both game and nongame species, like the great blue heron, will be affected.

FROM THE FIELD

International Migratory Bird Day, May 8, 2010

The Power of Partnerships in Bird Conservation: Celebrate the partnerships that make bird conservation programs a success, along with the 20th anniversary of Partners In Flight. In 2010, International Migratory Bird Day focuses on the "Power of Partnerships" in bird conservation through its annual art and education materials. Twenty species of birds are highlighted on a poster to illustrate the conservation theme and represent species that benefit from partnerships and depend on our support to help their populations in the years to come. Visit www.birdday.org to learn more about International Migratory Bird Day.

PHOTO BY: P. J. FUSCO

Bill Hyatt New Bureau of Natural Resources Chief

Bill Hyatt was recently selected as the new Bureau Chief to lead the DEP's Bureau of Natural Resources. He now oversees the Divisions of Wildlife, Forestry, Inland Fisheries, and Marine Fisheries. Bill brings to the position 30 years of experience in natural resource management and a strong enthusiasm for the work that is done. He has worked for the DEP in positions of increasing responsibility since 1981; most recently as the Director of Inland Fisheries, a position he held since 2001. Under his direction, the Inland Fisheries Division has improved both the quantity and quality of fish raised at state hatcheries, increased the number of Trout and Bass Management Areas, created new walleye fisheries, established Trout Parks, and initiated an urban fishing program.

Bill has served on numerous boards, councils, and task forces over the years, including the Connecticut Institute of Water Resources, Connecticut Invasive Plant Council, Fisheries Advisory Council, and Executive Committee of the American Fisheries Society. Bill holds a B.S. in Ecology and an M.S. in Fisheries from the University of Connecticut.

40 Years of Earth Day

2010 marks the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, which was first celebrated in April 1970. Since the first Earth Day, great progress has been made in Connecticut to clean up our air and water, preserve open space, protect wildlife, and initiate statewide programs like recycling. The 40th anniversary of Earth Day on April 22, 2010, provides an opportunity to focus attention on these environmental successes, as well as on the challenges we still face. Working in cooperation with a coalition of environmental advocacy groups, the DEP is planning to celebrate this milestone. Details of the Earth Day "agenda" are still being developed, but you can expect to see events at the State Capitol, outreach to schools, outdoor activities, and more. The DEP plans to have a special "Earth Day" feature on its Web site that will provide information so that you can join in the celebration. Stay tuned — **www.ct.gov/dep/earthday**.

Your Questions Answered

Do you have a wildlife question you'd like to have answered?

Please send it to: Your Questions Answered, DEP - Wildlife Division, P.O. Box 1550 , Burlington, CT 06013; Email: dep.ctwildlife@ct.gov

My bird feeders were just raided and destroyed by a black bear. Can I continue feeding birds throughout the spring and summer?

Unfortunately, your best option is to remove your bird feeders. The Wildlife Division recommends that residents discontinue the feeding of birds from late March through November and also in winter if feeders are visited by bears. When bears leave their winter dens in late winter/early spring, natural foods are sparse and bears will seek high-energy foods associated with people, such as bird seed and garbage. This situation can lead to conflicts and potential safety hazards for both people and bears.

Bears typically avoid people, but food attractants near homes can cause them to become habituated to humans. Bears are attracted by bird seed, garbage, outdoor pet food, compost piles with food scraps, fruit trees, and berry-producing shrubs. Once a bear learns where to find human foods, it will return, looking for more. Even if feeders are made inaccessible to bears (by hanging them at least 10 feet above ground and 6 feet away from tree trunks), the scent of suet and seed may still attract bears. If bears lose their fear of people and develop a taste for human foods, they can become bolder and become persistent nuisances.

If a bear is observed passing through your neighborhood without stopping, you can either leave the bear alone and enjoy the experience or make loud noises from a safe distance to attempt to scare the bear away. If the bear stops to feed on trash, bird seed, or other human generated foods, remove those foods after the bear has left and advise your neighbors to do the same. In residential areas where bears are known to be present, the entire neighborhood must take recommended actions or bears will move from yard to yard seeking food. There are several recommended actions you can take to avoid attracting bears, the most important being to never intentionally feed bears. Garbage should be kept in an airtight container, with a tight lid, and stored in a garage or shed. Wait until the morning of collection before bringing out garbage. Add a few capfuls of ammonia to trash bags and garbage cans to mask food odors. Pet food should not be left outside overnight and livestock food should be stored in airtight containers. Do not put meats or sweet-smelling fruit rinds in compost piles. Lime can be sprinkled on compost piles to reduce the smell and discourage bears. Thoroughly clean grills after use or store in a garage or shed. The actions you take to avoid conflicts with bears should also reduce problems with other common wildlife species, such as coyotes, raccoons, skunks, and foxes. More black bear information is available on the DEP Web site at www.ct.gov/dep/wildlife.

Recent Changes Affect Deer and Deer Hunting in CT

By Andrew LaBonte

Many changes occurred during the 2009 deer hunting season, such as online permits and licenses, paperless tags, telecheck, and Internet reporting. Comparisons were made between permit sales and hunting season results in 2008 and 2009 in an effort to evaluate the changes.

A total of 59,161 permits were issued during the 2009 deer season. Permit sales have not been below 60,000 since 1993. Overall permit issuance in 2009 declined 7.6% from 2008 (64,060) and 4.4% from the 3-year average (61,859). Issuance for muzzleloader permits had the greatest 1-year decline (15%), followed by shotgun/rifle (7.6%) and archery (2.5%) permits. When the cost of permits increased on October 1, 2009, it was expected that permit issuance would decline. The archery season showed little decline, mainly because permits were purchased prior to the price increase. As expected, there was no change in permit issuance for landowner permits because they are offered at no cost. Of all permits purchased in 2009, 75% were purchased prior to the price increase. It is expected that permit issuance will continue to decline in 2010.

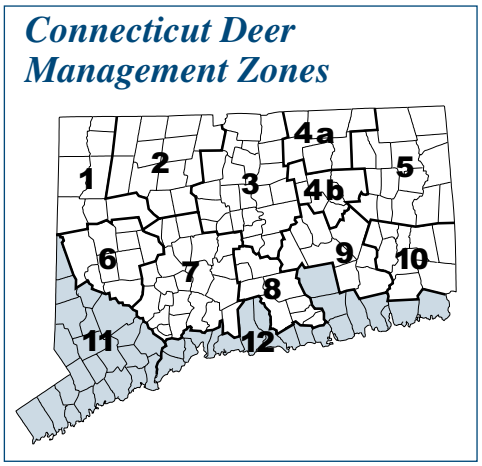
With a reduction in permit sales and an abundance of acorns, it was assumed that fewer deer would be harvested during the 2009 hunting season. A regression analysis comparing trends in deer harvests and acorn abundance was created to predict the harvest for the 2009 season. The expected archery harvest, based on acorn abundance indices, was approximately 3,097. Through the use of a new hunter reporting system in 2009, the actual harvest was calculated at 4,718 deer, a 31% increase over the reported harvest of 3,608 in 2008.

The reported archery harvest increased in deer management zones 1-10 between 15% and 116% from 2008 to 2009. The expected muzzleloader harvest in 2009, based on acorn abundance indices, was about 822. In deer management zones 11 and 12, where hunters are required to report harvested deer and bring them to a check station to receive a free replacement tag, reported harvest only increased 2-3% and the reported muzzleloader harvest only increased 6-7%. These results indicate that the reported harvest in zones 11 and 12 in past years is probably more reflective of the actual harvest than in zones 1-10. Previous research has indicated that when incentives for reporting harvested deer were provided to hunters, compliance with reporting increased. The increase in the reported archery and muzzleloader harvest in zones 1-10 may be due more to the convenience of the new reporting system than that of a true increase in harvest rates in 2009.

Hunters were required to bring their deer to mandatory check stations during the first 4 days of the 2009 shotgun/rifle season. A total of 2,547 deer were checked at these stations (an additional 134 deer were incidentally reported using the new reporting system), resulting in a 28% decrease from the 3,556 deer checked in 2008. Aside from the slight decline in permit sales and the abundance of acorns, reporting rates during the first 4 days of the shotgun/rifle season should have been similar because no change occurred in the reporting method. Thus, the actual harvest rate declined in 2009.

The expected shotgun/rifle harvest in 2009, based on acorn abundance indices, was about 7,209. The actual shotgun/rifle harvest was 4,948 deer using reports from check stations, telephone, and the Internet, a 31% decrease from 2008. Warm temperatures and an abundant acorn crop likely minimized hunter success during the 2009 shotgun/rifle season. Reported harvest during the 2009 landowner season (1,065 deer) was similar to the 2008 season (1,176 deer). Unlike the 3-week shotgun/rifle season, the landowner season runs from November to December and is less affected by periods of inclement weather.

The new reporting system appears to be a convenient and effective means for hunters to report their harvest and allow the Department to easily acquire accurate data. Hunter opinions about the new tagging and reporting system are being assessed and should provide insight about the changes in the near future. As we move forward, it is expected that hunters will appreciate the changes that were made to make hunting both rewarding and convenient.



Andy LaBonte is a biologist with the Wildlife Division's Deer Program

P. J. FUSCO

Connecticut Waterfowl Association Donates Wood Duck Nest Boxes

The Connecticut Waterfowl Association (CWA) has been a conservation partner with the Wildlife Division for many years. The organization's mission is "to preserve, reclaim, and enhance wetland and wildlife habitat in the state of Connecticut in a manner that promotes the wise use of our natural resources and the progress of society." Cooperative projects have included public awareness programs, youth hunting program participation, assistance with the statewide wood duck nest box program, and funding assistance to the Division for equipment and habitat enhancement projects.

Recently, 17 members from CWA, met at the Flaherty Field Trail Area in East Windsor to build 78 wood duck nest boxes. The organization donated 70 of these to the DEP to be installed throughout the state. The donated boxes will be used as replacement boxes in the Division's wood duck nest box program.

The Wildlife Division extends its gratitude to CWA for its cooperation on this valuable conservation project. The Division also looks forward to many future partnerships that will benefit wetland habitats and the species that use these important sites.

CWA members built 78 wood duck boxes, 70 for the state, on February 20, 2010, at Flaherty Field Trail Area in East Windsor. Members who participated include Jack Berlanda, Rich Chmiel, Frank Davis, Matthew Davis, Jim Gavin, John Larkin, Bruce Strickland, Sue Strickland, David Braatz, Tanner Braatz, Noah Braatz, Garratt Braatz, David Proulx, and David Elovich. Not pictured are Paul Capotosto (photographer), Tanner Steeves, and Roger Wolfe.

The Wildlife Observer

Do you have an interesting wildlife observation to report to the Wildlife Division?

Please send it (and any photos) to:

Wildlife Observations, DEP Wildlife Division, P.O. Box 1550, Burlington, CT 06013, or email: dep.ctwildlife@ct.gov

Bald Eagle Mirror Image from Burlington

Frank Rossi of Burlington was fortunate to capture this image of two immature bald eagles soaring through the skies this past December. These first year birds will not exhibit the distinctive adult plumage of a snow-white head and tail and brownish-black body until they are about 5 years old. Young bald eagles are often confused with golden eagles; however, they are grayer than the darker golden eagle, and the bill is much heavier. Also, the golden eagle's legs are covered with feathers while an immature bald eagle's lower legs are bare.

Report your observations of black bears and moose on the DEP Web site at www.ct.gov/dep/wildlife.

Wildlife Calendar Reminders

Late March..... Remove bird feeders from your yard to avoid attracting hungry bears that are emerging from their winter dens. Whenever a bear visits a bird feeder, take the feeder down immediately. To learn more about what to do if you encounter a black bear, visit the DEP's Web site (www.ct.gov/dep/wildlife).

March 15-19 ..... **National Wildlife Week**, sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation. An easy way to participate in this week-long event is by making time for outdoor play and interaction with the natural world. The National Wildlife Week Web site (www.nwf.org/nationalwildlifeweek) offers resources for kids, teens, parents, and educators to make spending time outdoors easier than ever.

March 28..... **Fifth Annual Benefit Dinner and Auction for the Mount Vernon Songbird Sanctuary**, 1:00-5:00 PM, at the Aqua Turf Club in Southington. Ticket cost is $55 per person. For more information, visit the Sanctuary's Web site at www.mvssanctuary.org. Reservations can be made by sending a check to Mount Vernon Songbird Sanctuary, 1024 Mount Vernon Road, Southington, CT 06489 or pay (credit card) by phone at 860-276-8433.

Late April-August .... Respect fenced and posted shorebird nesting areas when visiting Connecticut beaches. Also, keep dogs and cats off shoreline beaches to avoid disturbing nesting birds.

April 22 ..... Earth Day (celebrate the 40th anniversary, see page 18 for more information).

May 8..... International Migratory Bird Day. To learn more about this annual celebration, visit the Web site www.birdday.org.

Programs at the Sessions Woods Conservation Education Center

Programs are a cooperative venture between the Wildlife Division and the Friends of Sessions Woods. Please pre-register by calling 860-675-8130 (Mon.-Fri., 8:30 AM-4:30 PM). Programs are free unless noted. An adult must accompany children under 12 years old. No pets allowed! Sessions Woods is located at 341 Milford St. (Route 69) in Burlington.

March 21 ..... **Mushrooms**, from 9:30-11:30 AM. Join the Connecticut Valley Mycological Society, during their annual meeting at Sessions Woods, for a presentation on mushrooms. There will be a coffee hour at 9:30 a.m., followed by the speaker at 10:30 a.m.

April 11 ..... **The Friends of Sessions Woods Annual Meeting with a Program on Bats**, starting at 1:00 PM. This annual meeting at the Sessions Woods Conservation Center is open to all! Learn about Connecticut's bats and white-nose syndrome in a presentation by Wildlife Division staff. White-nose syndrome is a condition associated with the deaths of hundreds of thousands of hibernating bats in the northeastern United States. It was first noticed near Albany, New York, in 2007. Since March 2008, biologists and cavers have documented dead and dying bats at over 25 caves and mines in New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. What do we know about white-nose syndrome and how has it affected the bats of Connecticut? **A potluck dessert extravaganza will precede the presentation at 12:30 p.m. Please bring a dessert to share.**

Hunting Season Dates

April 28-May 29 ..... Spring Turkey Hunting Season

April 17 & 24..... Spring Turkey Junior Hunter Training Days provide junior hunters with an opportunity to learn safe and effective hunting practices from experienced hunters. Visit the DEP Web site (www.ct.gov/dep/hunting) to learn more.

..... Consult the 2010 Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide for specific season dates and details. The guide will available in April at more than 350 locations statewide -- including town halls, bait and tackle shops, DEP facilities, and commercial marinas and campgrounds. The guide is also on the DEP Web site (www.ct.gov/dep/hunting). Go to www.ct.gov/dep/sportsmenlicensing to purchase Connecticut hunting, trapping, and fishing licenses, as well as all required deer, turkey, and migratory bird permits and stamps. The system accepts payment by VISA or MasterCard.

Connecticut Wildlife

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Help fund projects that benefit songbirds, threatened and endangered species, reptiles, amphibians, bats, and other wildlife species.

Connecticut Wildlife

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Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection
Bureau of Natural Resources / Wildlife Division
Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area
P.O. Box 1550
Burlington, CT 06013-1550

P. J. FUSCO

A male common merganser makes off with his catch, trying to elude two hopeful pirates in hot pursuit.