

May/June 2020

CONNECTICUT Wildlife



From The Director

This year has definitely been one filled with change and challenges. We have learned a lot about pandemics, social distancing, and accomplishing conservation in unique ways. This issue of Connecticut



Wildlife reflects on many creative ways to both learn about nature—in your backyard, neighborhood, or on the street corner—and new ways to continue to come together to practice #ResponsibleRecreation, to help nesting birds, or to keep students engaged in learning about our environment and learning from each other.

There is perhaps no greater lesson we can learn from our natural world than the importance of diversity. Having a diversity of habitats and species creates vibrant, healthy, and resilient ecosystems. This diversity creates the beautiful landscape across Connecticut—coastal beaches, majestic ridgelines and river valleys, expansive fields, towering forests, and everything in between. The same is true of our society. Diversity makes us stronger and more vibrant. It is essential for us to treat one another with dignity and respect, embrace our cultural and racial differences, welcome new ideas, and develop authentic relationships within our communities and with each other. We must be willing to have honest discussions about racism and inequality—neither have a place in conservation or our communities.

We are facing many challenges in 2020. We continue to struggle with Covid-19 and the impacts it has had at personal, financial, and emotional levels. Our lives have changed in many ways in a short period of time and that change can be unsettling to us all. We cannot let fear hold us back from doing what we know is right, be it in society or for our natural world. We have taken comfort amidst chaos in the outdoors and in the diversity of nature. Perhaps it is time for us to gain strength from the diversity in our communities. We are stronger together. We can accomplish amazing things when we work together. Equality, justice, respect—if we embrace the true meaning of those words, I know we will find the right path to follow.

Jenny Dickson, Wildlife Division Director

Connecticut Wildlife

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The Connecticut River estuary is a significant migratory bird habitat, as is demonstrated by this flock of common terns. PHOTO BY P. J. FUSCO

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A bird of open fields and grasslands, the male eastern meadowlark is most often seen singing from a fence post announcing his territory. Discover more about this interesting bird on page 12.

Photo courtesy Paul Fusco

MAKING IT LAST

While you and your family enjoy Connecticut's beautiful beaches, keep an eye out for piping plovers – a bird once rare in our state that is now recovering. Share the shore!



Atlantic Coast Piping Plover Population Achieves Record High

Piping plovers have sat on nests and hatched chicks on Atlantic Coast beaches over the summer, including in Connecticut, on the heels of a successful 2019 season, according to numbers announced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The population of small, sandy-colored shorebirds climbed from 1,879 pairs in 2018 to a record high of 2,008 pairs breeding last summer from eastern Canada south to North Carolina.

The milestone marks nearly 35 years of conservation by many partners and the cooperation of beachgoers. The species has benefited from the widespread implementation of management practices, including installing symbolic fencing around nests, keeping dogs off beaches, posting caution signs, reducing predation, and asking beachgoers to modify their activities near birds and fenced areas.

“While we still have much work to do, the growth we’ve seen in the Atlantic Coast piping plover population, especially in New England, is the clearest possible evidence that we can achieve and maintain recovery,” said USFWS piping plover recovery coordinator Anne Hecht. “We are incredibly grateful for decades of ongoing dedicated conservation by all levels of government and other organizations.”

The plover’s status has dramatically improved since the species was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1986. Just 790 breeding pairs survived along the Atlantic Coast. By achieving more than 2,000 breeding pairs, the population is one step closer to meeting one of five science-based goals set in the USFWS’s recovery plan. However, the goal also requires that population gains

are evenly distributed across the range, which would reduce risks to the species from storms during the breeding season, oil spills, and predation. Numbers remain low in three of the four recovery units, and substantial declines have sometimes followed periods of growth. In 2019, Connecticut saw 57 pairs of piping plovers successfully fledge 98 chicks for a productivity rate of 1.72 chicks fledged per pair.

Additionally, recovering the piping plover is more than reaching a certain population size. Other recovery goals relate to maintaining chick production, instituting long-term management agreements with partners, ensuring genetic diversity, and maintaining wintering areas from North Carolina to the Bahamas where the birds spend almost two-thirds of each year.

“Because the plover relies on in-demand beaches, maintaining a healthy population will rely on long-term pro-

tection efforts and management by federal agencies, states, private landowners, and municipalities,” said Hecht.

The plover continues to be a rare bird. Partners are grappling with tough issues, including the loss of sandy beach habitat, artificially high numbers of predators, and ongoing disturbances that reduce survival of plovers and their chicks. Years of research confirm that when people or pets disturb plovers and other shorebirds, the birds are stressed, unable to feed, rest or raise families, and in some cases, die.

The latest analysis of the species’ status, completed in March 2020, calls for a number of actions to move the Atlantic Coast population closer to recovery. Recommendations include allowing beaches to respond dynamically to storms that create habitat, allowing naturally-created habitat to remain, and developing strategies to reduce threats from rising sea levels.



In 2019, Connecticut saw 57 pairs of piping plovers successfully fledge 98 young for a productivity rate of 1.72 chicks fledged per pair.

PHOTO: P. FUSCO

Make a Difference for Shorebirds and Other Wildlife

Litter in our open spaces has always been a problem, but this year it seems worse than ever. All of this litter being found on beaches and at state parks, state forests, and wildlife management areas is not only bad for the environment, it can also be deadly to wildlife. Some of the trash items being found include beverage bottles, plastic bags and wrappers, plastic cups, lids, straws, food containers, balloons, waste fishing line, and more. People should not be leaving these items behind and expect other visitors, or town and DEEP employees to pick up after them. Everyone should be recreating responsibly and take out what they take in – LEAVE NO TRACE.

Most Connecticut state parks provide dumpsters in central locations where visitors can put trash. Experience has shown that individual, smaller, and less secure trash cans become filled rapidly, with trash spilling outside and creating a mess, attracting predators and requiring more constant cleaning by staff.

Besides cleaning up after ourselves, there are other ways you can help reduce the amount of trash:

Instead of releasing balloons, find an environmentally friendly way to celebrate an event or memorialize a loved one. Balloons and their strings come back to the ground as litter and can be deadly to wildlife. Large balloon releases (10 or more in a 24-hour period) are illegal in Connecticut -- but no balloons should be released at all.

Carelessly discarded fishing line can seriously harm or kill wildlife. Animals can become entangled in, or ingest, the line, which can cause starvation, strangulation, and deep wounding. Wildlife usually cannot survive the injuries they sustain from entanglements. To prevent such incidents, the DEEP, along with numerous conservation partners, has installed monofilament fishing line recycling receptacles at inland and coastal sites around the state to encourage less waste line in the environment. The disposed fishing line is collected by volunteers and then sent to a company that recycles it to make underwater habitat structures for fish.

Avoid releasing sky lanterns. According to the Connecticut Fire Prevention Code, the use of unmanned, free-floating sky lanterns and similar devices utilizing an open flame are prohibited. Not only do sky lanterns pose a fire hazard, they can travel for miles and then come down to the ground as dangerous litter. Sky lanterns are often marketed as “biodegradable” or “earth-friendly,” but that is not true. They are made with treated paper, wires and/or a bamboo ring and, once back on the ground, those items can also be deadly to wildlife -- just like balloons.

Recycle bottles, plastics, and cardboards instead of disposing of them in the trash.

Learn more at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP-Responsible-Recreation>.



The piping plover has benefited from the widespread implementation of management practices, including installing symbolic fencing around nests, keeping dogs off beaches, posting caution signs, reducing predation, and asking beachgoers to modify their activities near birds and fenced areas.

PHOTO: P. FUSCO

The USFWS and the DEEP Wildlife Division encourage beachgoers to practice #ResponsibleRecreation and follow specific steps to help piping plovers and other rare beach wildlife, including sea turtles, terns, American oystercatchers, and black skimmers:

- Walk close to the water on the lower beach, so birds can rest and nest on the upper beach. Signs or people usually alert you to these areas, but many normal posting

and fencing efforts were delayed or not undertaken this season due to COVID-19.

- Keep your distance while birdwatching so the birds feel safe to attend to their eggs and chicks.
- Leave pets at home when taking a trip to the beach. If dogs are permitted on beaches (most beaches in Connecticut are closed to dogs during the nesting season), keep them leashed and away from

birds. Keep your cats indoors.

- Remove trash and food scraps, which attract animals that might eat nesting shorebird eggs and chicks.
- Do not feed animals on or near the beach.
- Follow all other guidance on signs, and respect all areas fenced or posted for the protection of wildlife.

Kids Support Shorebirds

Children sometimes can be our greatest inspiration for positive behavior. These creative posters show a child's response when given the challenge to educate others about nesting shorebirds. Beachgoers appear to be drawn to these "signs" compared to more official signage. The positive messages from kids promote positive behavior from visitors at Connecticut nesting beaches.

For more information: <https://ct.audubon.org/news/colorful-way-help-keep-shorebirds-safe>

Audubon Alliance for Coastal Waterbirds:

Audubon Connecticut (National), Connecticut Audubon Society, Roger-Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History, Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection



Summertime Panfish Primer

Article and photos (except otherwise noted) by Justin Wiggins, DEEP Fisheries Division

Often overlooked and under appreciated, panfish, a group of freshwater fish, deserve some love! Populations are abundant in virtually every waterbody in Connecticut. They play an important role in the aquatic food chain as forage that large predators – such as northern pike, black bass, catfish, and walleye – rely on for growth. Panfish offer anglers a great fight for their size, are easy to catch, and are delicious and nutritious. They are the “first fish” that create life-long memories and inspiration for countless kids (myself included). What’s not to love about PANFISH?

“Panfish” is a term for the collective group of fish that include black crappies (aka calico bass), yellow perch, white perch, brown bullhead, and all sunfish species. Panfish likely got their name for how terrific they are in the frying pan!

As the sun gets higher and stronger throughout spring, water temperatures become warmer, triggering panfish movement from their deep winter holes



A small jighead with any sort of 1 to 2 inch soft plastic can be irresistible to panfish when they are feeding!



One of the very best things about panfishing is it is good ole' family fun!

into shallow water to feed. Sunfish and crappies begin to make “nests” for reproduction and guard those nests very aggressively. Yellow perch spawn soon after ice out, but will also be in the shallows near submerged weeds actively searching out food. Now is the time to go panfishing!

Fishing Tips

Fishing for panfish is simple but can be great fun as they are willing biters; you could catch dozens and dozens, and these fish fight surprisingly hard for their size. Fishing rods should be “light” or “medium-light” action so you can feel the subtle hits, and your line should be in the 4lb – 8 lb test range. A

Cooking Your Catch

Panfish are very versatile and can be either filleted or gutted, scaled, and cooked whole. There are many recipes for cooking panfish, but you cannot go wrong with a fish fry or crispy baked fillets! Here are two simple yet delicious techniques for your panfish fillets. First step is always rinse fillets well in cold water and pat dry.

Fried Panfish Fillets

- Season fillets with salt and pepper.
- Prepare a bowl of beaten eggs and a bowl of FINE cornmeal.
- Heat oil (vegetable, peanut, or canola) in a deep fryer or cast iron pan to 375 degrees F.
- It is critical to make sure your oil is the correct temperature. Have a thermometer ready.
- Dip fillets into egg, then cornmeal, then egg, then back into cornmeal, and into the hot oil.
- Cook 2-3 minutes until done and drain on wire rack.
- Enjoy with chips, coleslaw, and beverage of choice!



Hot Tip: Place fried fish on a wire rack in the oven at 180 degrees to allow oil to drain and keep fish warm while frying the rest.

Crispy Baked Panko Panfish Fillets

- Season fillets with salt, pepper, and Cajun seasoning.
- Soak seasoned fillets in buttermilk for up to 1 hour.
- Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Prepare a bowl of flour and a bowl of panko breadcrumbs.
- Dip fillets into flour, then back into buttermilk, then into panko breadcrumbs.
- Place panko breaded fillets onto baking sheet.
- Bake for 7-8 minutes. Flip half way through, placing a dab of butter on each fillet when flipping.
- Enjoy on a sandwich with French fries on the side!



Panfish fillets are mild, delicious, and very versatile! They make a great fish fry or fish sandwich. Catching your own dinner is extremely rewarding and gratifying.



A simple yet extremely effective strategy to catch panfish is live bait. A worm or small minnow will catch fish.

worm (for sunfish or perch) or small shiner (for crappies or perch) fished a few feet under a bobber is a simple yet extremely effective rig. Brown bullhead are nocturnal bottom feeders, so a simple nightcrawler fished on the bottom in the evening is your best bet.

My preferred panfishing method is using a small jig head (1/16th – 1/32nd ounce) rigged with a 1 to 2 inch soft plastic bait. “Tipping” your jig with a small shiner is another option, but not necessary. This presentation is often irresistible to panfish and many other freshwater fish species! Cast the jig out and slowly (very slowly) reel in, bouncing the jig along the bottom when fishing deeper water. When fishing shallow water, place a bobber a few feet above the jig and cast out and let sit, then slowly twitch and retrieve back. You will be surprised in what you may hook into as “bycatch” while fishing a small jig with soft plastic or shiner. I have caught small native brook trout to 10-pound channel catfish to 20-inch

smallmouth bass and everything in between using this method!

Where to Fish

When searching for the fish, look where deeper water meets a shallow shoreline or shallow cove that receives a lot of sun – the water will be warmest here for attracting fish. Submerged aquatic vegetation, rocks, rock piles, and fallen trees are hotspots for panfish and many other fish. Panfish are schooling fish, so keep moving and once you find them, stay in that area. Having a boat, canoe, or kayak to stay mobile will help cover more water, but moving along shoreline spots is very effective as well. Panfish are abundant

in just about every lake, pond, and larger river in Connecticut, but you can search the *CT Is Fishy* interactive application to find a panfish hotspot near you!

Keeping Your Catch

Panfish are forage for many large fish and have evolved to reproduce at a young age and have lots of offspring, as many of them will be eaten. Because panfish populations tend to grow fast and replenish themselves quickly, there is no minimum length or creel limit (number of fish allowed per day) for panfish (exception is 7 inches minimum size and 30 white perch a day in the Connecticut River), but please only keep what you will eat! Let the real big ones go so they



When using a soft plastic and jighead to target panfish, experiment with different colors and size baits. Adding a small shiner to your jig can help entice finicky fish.

can spawn, and keep medium size panfish for dinner (this practice is called “selective harvest” – see an article in the September/October 2017 issue of *Connecticut Wildlife* magazine for more on selective harvest).

When keeping fish for the dinner table, the better care you take of the fish, the better they will taste. The best option is to place the fish directly in a cooler on ice. Second best is to keep fish fresh on a stringer or livewell in the water until it is possible to get them into a cooler on ice.



This nice stringer of bluegill, pumpkinseed, and crappies will make for a delicious and healthy dinner.

Popular Panfish

Bluegill (Lepomis macrochirus)

Introduced to Connecticut's waters in the late 1890s, this fish is now found in nearly every lake, pond, and large river. Bluegills are easy to catch as they are found along the shoreline feeding on aquatic insects, worms, and small fish. Bluegills build a "nest" in sandy/gravel areas for spawning in late spring. Males guard the eggs until the fry hatch and are able to swim away on their own. Bluegills have a dark blue flap on their gill cover, and are commonly misidentified as the pumpkinseed (which has a red spot on the gill cover). Bluegill sunfish average 8 inches, with those 10 inches or larger being a trophy size fish.

Pumpkinseed (Lepomis gibbosus)

The pumpkinseed is a native member of the sunfish family and arguably one of the most colorful and beautiful freshwater fish out there! Like the bluegill, the pumpkinseed inhabits the shoreline where it feeds on aquatic insects, worms, and small fish. Pumpkinseed sunfish are commonly misidentified as the bluegill (but lack the vertical bars on the side). Pumpkinseeds average 7 inches, with those 9 inches or larger being a quality size fish.

Calico Bass/Black Crappie (Pomoxis nigromaculatus)

Also called "papermouths" due to the very thin and fragile jaws, the black crappie was introduced to Connecticut in the late 1800s. It is a schooling fish that prefers to live around submerged structures, like trees, rock piles, weedlines, and other submerged objects. Black crappie feed on small fish, like minnows. It is highly sought after by anglers as it is one of the tastiest freshwater fish out there! Black crappies average 11 inches, with those 15 inches or larger being trophy size.

Brown Bullhead (Ameiurus nebulosus)

The brown bullhead is Connecticut's only native member of the catfish and bullhead family. Unlike most fish, it does not have scales. The bullhead is common, found in nearly every lake and pond in the state. It uses its barbells (chin whiskers) to search for food items on the bottom. The bullhead has a large mouth and will eat a variety of items. The most common way to catch bullhead is to fish with a nightcrawler, on the bottom, in the evening into nighttime. Patience is key. Brown bullheads average 11 inches with a 14 inch fish being quality size.

Yellow Perch (Perca flavescens)

The yellow perch is native to Connecticut. Like the black crappie, it prefers to live in schools and feeds on small fish and aquatic insects. Yellow perch are often found associated with submerged weeds. They have firm white flesh that is exceptionally tasty. Yellow perch average 10 inches, with those 14 inches or larger a quality size fish.



FISH PHOTOS: R. JACOBS / DEEP FISHERIES (5)

Timing is Everything

The Eastern Meadowlark

Article and photography by Paul Fusco, DEEP Wildlife Division

A bird of open fields and grasslands, the male eastern meadowlark is most often seen singing from a fence post announcing his territory. The clear, whistled *tee-yer, tee-yeer* song is a musical welcoming sign of spring that carries across the open landscape.

Meadowlarks are members of the blackbird family, relatives of grackles, red-winged blackbirds, and bobolinks. They have stout bodies, short tails, and strong legs and feet. They spend most of their time on the ground within grassy habitats as they hunt for insects and other invertebrates. In winter, seeds and fruits comprise a large part of their diet.

Description

Strikingly beautiful and well-camouflaged, the eastern meadowlark is



Extremely well-concealed, the nest of the eastern meadowlark typically has a woven grass dome with an entrance on one side.



immediately identified by its bright yellow breast marked with a heavy, bold black “V”. The back is mottled brown, blending into the surrounding habitat so well that it disappears against the dried grasses and soil. The bill is long, conical, and pointed, typical of blackbirds. The short tail has white outer feathers that are a good identifying field mark if a bird is flushed from a field and flying away.

Habitat and Range

The eastern meadowlark is most common in grassland habitat. In Connecticut, those habitats include hayfields and pastures with little woody vegetation and elevated singing perches, such as fence posts. Meadowlarks may also be found in the grass aprons and surrounding

areas at airports; and in winter, open coastal locations with grass fields.

The breeding range of the eastern meadowlark covers the entire eastern U.S., extending slightly into southern Canada in the north and into portions of Mexico to the south. In the Great Plains and further west, the eastern meadowlark is replaced by the closely-related western meadowlark. In winter, meadowlarks withdraw from the northern sections of their range, with some individuals remaining in coastal areas where there is proper habitat and food.

Behavior

While they prefer expansive grassland habitat, meadowlarks may also be found nesting in smaller fragmented grass habitats. These marginal habitats may be all that is left in some more highly-developed locations or areas of forest succession in the Northeast region.

A slight depression in the ground, sometimes a hoof-print in a field, are the beginnings of the nest. Once a site is chosen, the female meadowlark will use its bill to shape the ground into a nest foundation. The typical meadowlark nest is situated against a grass clump and composed of grass stems, often pulled, shaped, and woven into a domed roof. The nest is about seven inches tall, but varies according to the location. The ground-level entrance is open on one side and the entrance may be partially hidden by adjacent strands of grass, or, in some elaborate nests, strands of grass may be formed into a loose tunnel. This dome-type nest is highly concealed and very difficult for an observer or nest predator to locate.

Females will lay three to seven eggs, with five being the normal average. The eggs are white with dark speckles and spots. Incubation lasts approximately 13 to 15 days, and young first leave the nest after about 12 days. At this time, they may have only weak flying skills and strength, so the young birds will remain on the ground in the grass where they continue to be fed by adults. This is a perilous time as they must avoid predators and mowing.

Conservation

During the time when much of Connecticut was farmland, eastern meadowlarks were abundant. Starting in the late 1800s, the landscape has gradually reverted from being dominated by farmland to being mostly forested today. As the land changed over to woodland and forest, hayfields and pastures decreased, leaving less habitat for the meadowlark. In Connecticut, the meadowlark has become imperiled to the extent that it is now listed as a state-threatened species, and its grassland habitat is considered by many to be endangered.



Meadowlarks may sometimes be found at shoreline habitats during mild winters in the northeastern United States.

Mowing

While mowing of fields pales in comparison to loss of habitat through development, the mowing of hayfields during the breeding season is also considered to be potentially damaging to grassland bird populations in Connecticut. For the farmer, grass (hay) cut in mid-June is the best quality and has the highest yield for feeding dairy cows and horses. Mid-June is also the peak nesting time for grassland birds, including meadowlarks. In fields that are mowed in mid-June, bird nests are usually destroyed and any survivors may be exposed to predation from crows and coyotes. In addition, most privately-owned fields are cut a second time in July, a time when fledging birds are normally beginning to leave the nest. Fields that are cut like this are considered highly likely to be population sinks for grassland birds. The birds expend their entire nesting season only to have their breeding efforts fail. With few young birds entering the population, the population will decline (sink).

When considering the impact of typical haying practices, along with the uncertainty caused by the effects of climate change on hay growth and the timing of nesting seasons, grassland birds face daunting challenges. By maintaining fields in the first place, farmers provide critical habitat by keeping grasslands stable rather than allowing them to revert to forest habitat. However, farmers and private landowners can make even more of a difference by altering the times of year they mow larger fields. By delaying mowing until after the breeding season or rotating fields on a one-third basis, a balance can be found between breeding habitat and economic interests that would further benefit the conservation of grassland birds in Connecticut.



Connecticut Envirothon

Written by Jean Laughman, DEEP Master Wildlife Conservationist, and Paul Benjuna, DEEP Wildlife Division

Do you remember being a high school student and starting to think about what you wanted to do for a career? Maybe it included a career working in the outdoors. Maybe you wanted to be involved in agriculture or habitat conservation. Or, perhaps you are already engaged in a fulfilling natural resources profession. Are you wondering who will carry on the sci-

educators from state universities and numerous industries. Student teams form through their high school environmental science classes or clubs. Each Envirothon team is supported by an advisor (often a public science educator) who provides guidance and study materials (and even sometimes pizza) during afterschool team meetings.

Throughout the school year, En-

of professionals who are employed in these and related fields.

The Forestry Workshop introduces students to a range of careers in forestry, including forest ecology, forest management tools, and, of course, identification of trees and shrubs commonly found in Connecticut. Students learn about silviculture basics from members of UConn's Department of Natural Resources and are also introduced to the role trees play to enhance agricultural practices by a member of the faculty at the Yale School of Forestry.

Jim Parada, a former forester with the DEEP Forestry Division and forestry workshop instructor, notes that he feels book learning and theory "come alive to many students when they get into the hands-on field work of natural resource management". He believes training provided through Envirothon participation fosters teamwork among the students. According to Jim, "They can talk to a forester or other resource professionals for guidance on how to move into higher education, a job, or business."

Most students start the Soils Workshop wondering what they will learn about "dirt". Thanks to information provided by members of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the UConn Soil Laboratory, teams learn about soil formation, as well as its function and properties. Students also learn to interpret soil data, use a Web Soil Survey, and learn how technology can provide information to help improve agricultural production. Members of the UConn Soil Laboratory provide soil samples to explain how soils differ in color, content, and properties. Debbie Surabian, Soil Workshop leader and the USDA and NRCS soil scientist for Connecticut and Rhode



Envirothon students survey the different horizons (layers) of a soil pit.

PHOTO BY C. RABINOWITZ

entific work you have begun?

While these two ends of a career-based journey may seem unrelated, they happen to meet at the same place for many Connecticut high school students: the Connecticut Envirothon.

The National Conservation Foundation-sponsored CT Envirothon serves as the gateway to a rewarding career in many fields associated with natural resources. CT Envirothon is a natural resource-based curriculum for high school students supported by people and resources from the state's five conservation districts, working professionals in natural resources, and

envirothon teams learn from natural resource professionals at theme-based workshops. These workshops, often held at colleges, wildlife management areas, environmental education centers, state parks, and agricultural centers across Connecticut, provide information and hands-on experience as an introduction to careers in aquatics, forestry, soils, and wildlife, as well as a nationally-directed current environmental topic. For many Connecticut high school students who are thinking about an environmental science-related career, Envirothon provides opportunities to get a firsthand look at the work

Island, notes that “students quickly learn that soils play an important role in supporting life above and below the surface”.

The Wildlife Workshop held at the DEEP Wildlife Division’s Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area in Burlington is organized and supported by Wildlife Biologist Peter Picone and Natural Resource Educator Laura Rogers-Castro. Programs by the Wildlife Division, Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES), and

wildlife rehabilitation professionals include the status of the state’s black bear and bobcat populations, ways to enhance wildlife habitats, bird banding techniques, updates on the status of pollinators, and the natural history of many native wildlife species.

The Aquatics Workshop, led by Kelsey Sodol, environmental associate at the Northwest Conservation District, provides an overview of Connecticut’s amphibians, fresh and salt water fish, freshwater mussels and other invertebrates, as well as invasive aquatic plants. Professionals from the Yale University Museum of Natural History, DEEP, the CAES, and the Northwest Conservation District provide samples that allow for hands-on examination of aquatic species.

The events of the year culminate in a day-long competition in May during which teams test their knowledge in each of the topic areas. The winners of the CT Envirothon go on to represent



Envirothon students examine the cross-sections of various tree trunks to learn about tree growth, and also interpret environmental factors that may affect tree growth.

PHOTO: CT ENVIROTHON

the state and compete for prizes and scholarships at the annual NCF-Envirothon International competition, held at locations across the United States.

This year, however, due to COVID-19, the CT Envirothon field day and international competition were cancelled. The Envirothon steering committee responded by doing something that has never been done in the program’s 28-year history; they offered an informal virtual competition to provide an opportunity for the students to complete this year’s Envirothon experience online. Twelve teams participated, and this new approach would not have been possible without the enthusiasm from the students and advisors. During the 2020 CT Envirothon Virtual Field Day Competition, Northwestern Regional High School had two teams that took first and second place in the combined overall competition, while Housatonic Valley Regional High School came in third place.

Susan Michael, a long-time advisor for the Coginchaug Regional High School team, summarized her experience with CT Envirothon. “Over the years, I have found that Envirothon opened the doors to environmental awareness and careers that the students wouldn’t likely have been exposed to. Many of my former Envirothon team members have found careers related to environmental science and sustainability. Others have maintained their environmental commitment through political and social action and stewardship.”

So, if you are a high school educator with a passion for science, consider starting your own Envirothon team at your school and help inspire the next generation of natural resource professionals! More information on the Connecticut Envirothon can be found at www.ctenvirothon.org.



A Journey into the Suburbs

Written by Anna Toledo and Michael Gregonis, DEEP Wildlife Division

Though the sight of a wild turkey is not wholly uncommon today, this was not always the case. The restoration of wild turkeys to the state was a hard-won battle that began in 1975, with 22 birds trapped in New York and released in northwestern Connecticut. Before the DEEP Wildlife Division undertook this restoration effort, the last wild turkey documented in the state was in 1813 in North Branford. During the initial restoration period, biologists thought that wild turkeys required 6,000 acres of contiguous forested habitat in order to thrive. This belief was dispelled during the reintroduction process, as biologists watched turkeys use and thrive in habitats that were previously deemed unsuitable. These new habitats included residential suburbs. Turkeys found safety from predators and an abundance of

food within the outskirts of urban sprawl, and they adapted readily to life among people – so readily, in fact, that the once extirpated wild turkey has now become not only relatively common but, in rare instances, a nuisance.

Human-wildlife conflicts are a fact of life in Connecticut, which is one of the most densely forested and densely populated states in the country. As wildlife habitat is reduced and fragmented by human development, wildlife is forced into close contact with people. For many species, this has led to a series of behavioral adaptations. For turkeys specifically, such adaptations include the use of garden areas for nesting and taking advantage of bird feeders for easy, high-calorie food that is available year-round.

As turkeys remain in close proximity to civilization, they develop a level

of “habituation”, becoming bolder and less wary of people. This can lead to a variety of nuisance complaints, including turkey droppings and scratching on lawns or gardens; roosting on houses; scratching vehicles; attacking reflections in glass windows and cars as a territorial display; and aggressive behavior towards people. This behavior occurs when a turkey considers a person to be part of the flock and it tries to establish dominance within the pecking order.

The root of much of this modified behavior is artificial feeding, whether intentional or not. Turkeys will readily pick through mulch piles and feast at bird feeders. Additionally, many well-meaning citizens will scatter bird seed for turkeys in winter and spring to supplement their diets and encourage them to remain in the area. While there

is nothing quite like witnessing the spring displays of tom turkeys or watching tiny poults hopping across a backyard, this supplemental feeding is not only unnecessary, but often detrimental. By encouraging turkeys to remain in close proximity to people while also associating them with food, much of the birds’ “wildness” is removed. Feeding turkeys over an extended period of time at one location makes them more vulnerable to both predators and disease. It also dramatically increases the likelihood that they will fall victim to domestic animal attacks or even vehicle strikes. However, only on very rare occasions will turkeys threaten human health and safety.



Once the original 22 turkeys released in 1975 established a stable population, trap and release efforts helped the wild turkey expand throughout Connecticut.

PHOTO: DEEP WILDLIFE

Kevin the Wethersfield Turkey: A Case Study

In 2017, a young male turkey took up residence in Old Wethersfield. At first viewed as a novelty, many of the neighborhood residents began to feed him. As he became established, citizens of Wethersfield and surrounding towns became attached to his presence and antics. “Turkey Mania” overtook the town, and a Facebook page was started to keep track of the comings and goings of the turkey. Eventually, the community named him “Kevin”.

Kevin’s “daily engagements,” as Wethersfield Police referred to sightings of the bird, became more frequent as the weeks passed by. Concern was raised regarding his proximity to several busy roads, including the Silas Deane Highway, Berlin Turnpike, and Interstate 91. His behavior also transitioned from merely ignoring people to creating a hazard to himself and others. On multiple occasions, he chased down mail trucks. He was known to stop traffic for extended periods of time by walking into the road and remaining there, despite attempts to scare him with car horns. Even though Wethersfield residents had the best intentions, Kevin was so used to people that he could no longer safely reside within the community. Due to severe public safety issues resulting from traffic flow issues, Wildlife Division Biologists and Environmental Conservation Police Officers were forced to intervene before someone, including Kevin, was injured. With a coordinated effort, DEEP staff managed to safely capture and relocate Kevin.

Kevin’s story is one of habituation, and it is a story that many animals across species have experienced with varying degrees of tragedy. Sometimes, the animals can be hazed away from an area and return to a normal life. In other instances, wildlife professionals must step in to rectify the situation. In some cases, the animal is able to be captured and relocated to an area that is more natural and safe. Under less positive circumstances, the ani-



MONICA JORGE / HARTFORD COURANT (2)

Turkey crossing signs popped up in Wethersfield to warn drivers that Kevin was likely to be in the road, causing traffic troubles.

mal may need to be euthanized. However, none of these situations are positive for the animal. Hazing and relocation cause extreme stress. Education is key to reducing the incidence of human-wildlife conflicts.



Kevin the Turkey created many hazardous situations during his time in Wethersfield. Don't feed wildlife; keep wildlife wild!

By following a few simple guidelines, we all can work together to keep wild animals wild:

- *Never feed wild animals. They have evolved and adapted to find food on their own, and providing supplemental food can lead to habituation.*
- *Never attempt to touch a wild animal. A network of certified wildlife rehabilitators exists to assist and care for injured animals, and other wildlife professionals are available to give technical advice for a variety of circumstances.*

- *Appreciate wildlife from a safe distance for both human and animal safety. By maintaining distance, a wildlife watcher can avoid causing the animal unnecessary stress while also appreciating its natural behaviors.*

Wildlife is one of the most treasured and valuable natural resources within our state. By following the guidelines provided, wildlife enthusiasts of all kinds can work together to ensure that these creatures remain a treasure rather than a nuisance.



Conservation During COVID-19

Building Bluebird Boxes with Students from Home

Written by Roger Wolfe, DEEP Wildlife Division; Box photos by David Barlow

For the past several years, Roger Wolfe (with the Wildlife Division's Wetland Habitat and Mosquito Management Program) has been helping Eastford Elementary School science teacher Candice Mead teach 3rd and 8th graders about bluebirds, as well as how to build bluebird nest boxes. Community volunteers help in the classroom as the 8th graders assist the 3rd graders with construction of the boxes. This has been a practice in Mrs. Meade's classroom as a means of having the older students work with the younger ones. The students who participate in this project are able to keep a nest box they built themselves. Some of the boxes have been erected on school grounds and adjacent properties to help attract bluebirds.

This popular program is a cooperative effort that involves DEEP and Eastford Elementary School staff, community volunteers, and an eager group of students. The DEEP Wildlife Division has been providing bundles of rough-cut lumber to organized groups (schools, Scout organizations, etc.) for almost 40 years as part of its Bluebird Restoration Program. The groups use the lumber to construct, install, and maintain bluebird nest boxes at state and local areas. This program has been highly successful in generating tens of thousands of bluebird boxes and helping restore bluebird populations statewide. The lumber comes from trees harvested on Connecticut state forests and is milled at the DEEP's sawmill in Portland, thus allowing Connecticut-

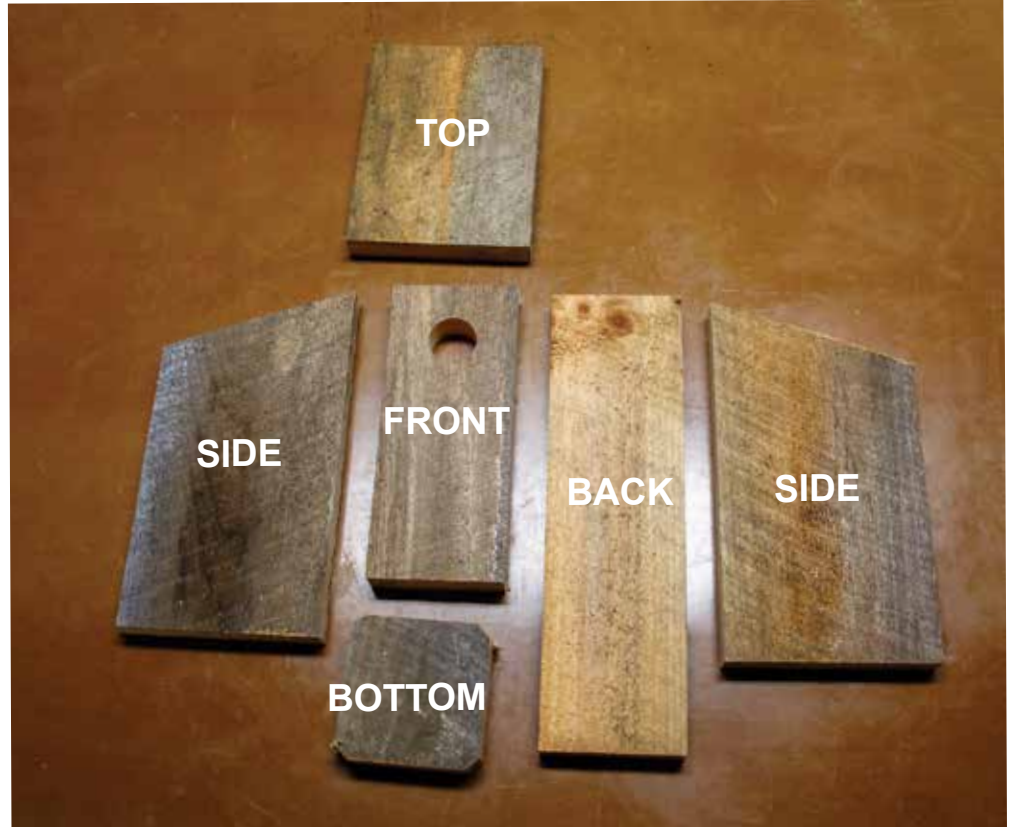
grown natural resources to benefit ongoing conservation efforts.

Eastford Elementary has been able to procure lumber for their project for several years now through the Wildlife Division and fortunately, bundles were supplied this year before Governor Lamont issued his "Stay Home, Stay Safe" order in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the students were not able to start building their nest boxes before finding themselves learning at home for the rest of the school year. This didn't stop the teacher, volunteers, and students from finishing their project. Roger provided Mrs. Meade with links to bluebird fact sheets on the DEEP website, as well as links to other birding websites.

Using that information, Mrs. Meade prepared informational packets for the students. Eastford resident David Barlow cut the lumber into measured pieces, pre-drilled the holes, provided nails, and put everything together in pre-made box kits, just as he has in previous years. This year, in addition to all this, he put together a series of photos and directions to help the students construct the nest boxes with their families at home.

Kudos to everyone who came together to keep this project going during a challenging time while also providing nest boxes for bluebirds.

Find bluebird nest box plans at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife>





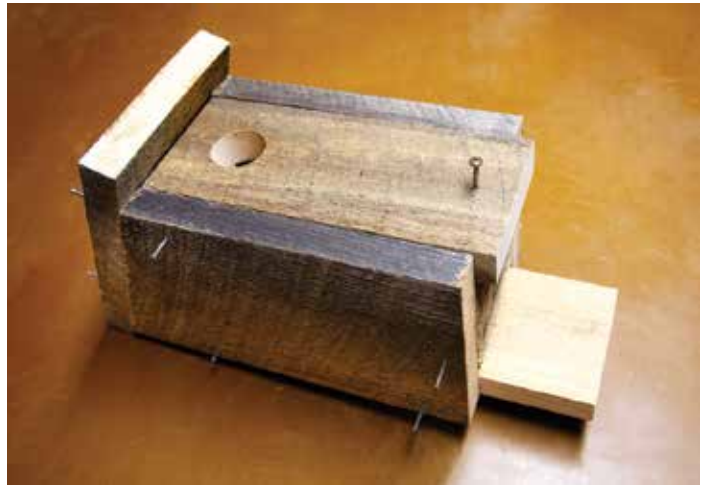
Begin by lining up the floor, back, and sides.
 Insert the floor board and nail the back and two sides to it. Do not nail the front board to the floor to allow the front to swing open.
 The corners of the bottom board are cut diagonally to allow any water that enters the bird house to drain out and also provide ventilation. The back board extends below the bird house so that the box can be mounted to a post outdoors.



Connecting the sides to the front and back: Match the corners of the front and back boards to allow the angled side boards to overhang as shown.
 Nails holding the front in place act as a pivot to allow the front of the bird house to open up for cleaning.
 Use pre-drilled holes to nail the bird house together. Hammer the nails down completely.



Attaching the roof: Nail on the roof using the pre-drilled holes.
 The roof overhangs the front and back (slightly).



Final assembly: Screw the front to the floor to keep it closed.
 Unscrew and swing open next year to clean out the old nesting material.



P. J. FUSCO

Family Backyard Habitat Projects

Written by Kyle Testerman, Wildlife Management Institute

This year, many residents are spending more time at home than ever before. Being home has led to more opportunities to enjoy the diversity of Connecticut's flora and fauna that share our backyards. Seeing wildlife around your home can be rewarding and may make you curious about what you can do to make your yard more attractive for some types of wildlife.

All wildlife needs sufficient habitat to survive. The four essential components of habitat are food, shelter, water, and space. Most larger animals will not find everything they need in just one place and must travel around an area, or territory, large enough to provide the components. While you cannot create every type of habitat found across the state within the confines of your yard, you can enhance aspects of the four components to make your yard more valuable for dozens of species, from beneficial insects to larger mammals. There are many projects and activities you and your family can do to improve your living space's wildlife value. Over the next several issues, we will highlight some easy projects, that with some advanced planning, can take less than two hours to complete. Some of these projects can be completed any time of year, while others are best saved for a particular season.

Install a Bird Bath

Installing a bird bath is quick and easy. Providing a source of clean water is a great way to bring many different species of birds to your yard, not just the ones that will eat bird seed. Birds not only bathe in the shallow water, but also drink it, so be sure to change the water every couple of days to keep



Milkweed serves as a larval host plant for monarch butterfly caterpillars. Butterflies lay eggs on the leaves, which develop into caterpillars. During development, these caterpillars only eat leaves from the milkweed plants before metamorphosing into monarch butterflies.

PHOTO: P. FUSCO

it clean and minimize mosquito breeding. Bird baths can provide an important source of water year-round, especially during the hot summer months and cold winters. Some commercially available models even come with electric heaters to prevent freezing, but a bird bath can be as simple as using an old frying pan. A few important points when choosing a bird bath and its location include:

- *Make sure it is not deeper than 2 inches and is shallower along the sides. Adding some flat rocks provides stepping stones and helps birds gauge how deep the water is.*
- *Set it up near natural shelter in case predators approach, but not too close that cats can ambush unsuspecting birds. Placing it near some trees or shrubs provides a staging area as flocks of birds take turns in the water.*
- *Put the bird bath where it can receive a mix of sun and shade throughout the day.*

- *For maximum enjoyment, place the bird bath within view of a window so you can see the visitors.*

Identify Plants in Your Area

One of the first things you can do is assess what plants are already living in your yard, both native and non-native. You can start by taking a walk around and identifying a few of the tallest trees. Are they needle-leaf evergreen trees, like white pine, hemlock, or cedar? Or, are they deciduous broadleaf trees that might have colorful fall foliage, like maple, beech, or oak?

Next, move on to identifying the smaller trees, shrubs, and bushes, and finally the understory plants that grow around your yard. The plants in your yard can provide two important components of wildlife habitat: food and shelter. Flowering plants from clovers on up to white oaks, and other seed plants provide a variety of food for wildlife. Flowers of plants (even some trees)

have pollen and nectar for pollinators. Ripened fruits and berries are consumed by birds, mammals, insects, and even reptiles like a box turtle. Leaves, twigs, and bark are consumed by insects and even moose, deer, and rabbits. Seeds and nuts are an important food source for many animals, especially during the colder months. Plants also offer shelter, whether through tree cavities, dense foliage, or exfoliated bark. Having a variety of plants of different ages, sizes, and types can help provide shelter and food for a greater number of species. Identifying all the plants in your yard can take quite a while, so start by identifying a few of the more common plants you see. Use a plant field guide or try a smartphone app which lets you quickly snap a picture and get an identification.

To learn more about the plants you have identified, visit <https://plants.usda.gov>. If you are unsure about a plant and cannot identify it yourself, post a picture to iNaturalist (www.inaturalist.org) and get community feedback.

Are there any standing dead trees, known as snags, around? Some animals are dependent upon snags and need several within their territory for suitable habitat. Snags provide cavities for nest and den sites for birds, mammals, and even some reptiles and amphibians. Insects living in the decaying wood are food for birds. If it is safe to do so, consider leaving up some snags instead of removing them. More information about snags can be found on the DEEP website at: <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife/Fact-Sheets/Snags-for-Wildlife>.

Take note of whether the plant species are native to Connecticut. Some non-native plants are used as ornamentals, many of which can be quite beautiful, but do not provide the same wildlife value as similar native plants. Some of these non-natives can be invasive, and if not kept under control, will spread, outcompete, and displace native plants.

If you identify some non-native plants you did not plant yourself, you might consider removing and replacing them with a similar native species.



Bluebirds are just one of the many species that congregate at bird baths year round.

PHOTO: K. TESTERMAN

The Nature Conservancy and Cornell Lab of Ornithology offer some tips about removing invasive plants at: <https://content.yardmap.org/learn/control-measures-invasive-plants/>.

Plant Native Shrubs and Flowers for Pollinators

After identifying some of the plants in your yard, you may have discovered there are not many native shrubs or wildflowers. To make your yard more attractive for butterflies, bees, hoverflies, and even hummingbirds, consider planting shrubs, like sweet pepperbush, northern spicebush, and azaleas, or herbaceous plants, such as cardinal flowers, swamp milkweed, butterfly weed, goldenrod, and New England asters.

It is important to know when each species blooms and try to pick a variety of plants that will bloom at different times, so there will be blooms from early spring through late autumn. Make sure you consider each plant's soil, sunlight, and water needs when deciding which plants will work best in your yard.

Many butterflies only lay eggs on specific plants, and if these host plants are not present, those butterflies will not remain in the area for long. Some example host plants include milkweed (monarch butterfly), spicebush (spice-

bush swallowtail butterfly), and even legumes like peas and beans (Eastern tailed-blue butterfly). Gardeners need to accept some feeding on the leaves of host plants by caterpillars.

If you do not have the space for planting shrubs or starting a flower garden, you can plant the bright blooms of some of your pollinators' favorites in one or more window planter boxes. The flower selection could bring your favorite butterfly, bumble bee, or even a hummingbird right to your front door.

For a larger project, consider doing multiple plantings for an entire pollinator garden and enjoy bright flowers and butterflies from spring through the fall. Visit <http://www.pollinator-pathway.org> to get more ideas about your garden. More information about native pollinators and the plants they need is at: <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP-Pollinators>.

When planned properly, these habitat projects can transform your backyard into a year-round oasis for native species. Improving backyard wildlife habitat creates exciting new opportunities to watch wildlife, without needing to travel. No matter how small your yard, you can create a valuable natural area with only a few hours of effort.

Look for the another set of backyard wildlife projects in the next issue.





State Close to Establishing National Research Reserve

The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) recently approved a network of state-owned properties and coastal waters in Lyme, Old Lyme, and Groton to be the site of Connecticut's first National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR). This is a major milestone in designating the area as the nation's 30th such reserve. The NERR System is a network of 29 coastal sites – including the Hudson River estuary in New York and Narraganset Bay in Rhode Island – designated to protect and study estuarine systems, the unique areas where rivers meet the sea.

Since 2016, the CT DEEP has worked in close partnership with NOAA, the University of Connecticut (UConn), Connecticut Sea Grant, and Connecticut Audubon Society, as well as numerous other organizations and individuals to submit a nomination. After an extensive review of possible locations, the team recommended the Connecticut NERR include the land areas of Lord's Cove Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Roger Tory Peterson Wildlife Area, Haley Farm State Park, and Bluff Point Coastal Reserve, as well as the surrounding open-water areas of Long Island Sound and the Thames and Connecticut Rivers. The proposed location provides critical habitat for birds, fish, and other marine and coastal species of plants and animals in the region; designation of the area as an NERR will help provide valuable opportunities to advance relevant efforts in environmental science, monitoring, education, and stewardship.

Established through the Coastal Zone Management Act, the NERR System represents a partnership program between

NOAA and the coastal states. NOAA provides funding and national guidance, and each site is managed on a daily basis by a lead state agency or university with input from local partners. Designation of a site in Connecticut would provide access to a variety of resources, including municipal trainings on coastal best management practices, K-12 programs to directly engage students and teachers in hands-on science, and expanded opportunities for environmental research.

Designating a new site as a NERR is an involved process that can take years to complete. The acceptance of the nomination represents a significant milestone, but more work is required before a CT NERR can begin operation. Over the next 18 to 24 months, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) required by the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) must be completed, along with a management plan to outline how the CT NERR will operate. Both the EIS and planning steps will require input from stakeholders to ensure a successful outcome.

Once Connecticut has been officially designated to host the nation's 30th NERR, UConn will take on the overall management role as defined through the management planning process. The CT NERR will also operate in close partnership with DEEP, continuing a long-standing tradition of environmental partnership between these two organizations.

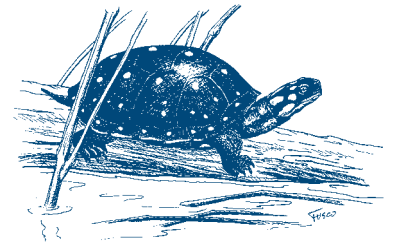
More details on the CT NERR process is at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Coastal-Resources/NERR/NERR-Home-Page>. Information on the National NERR System is at <https://coast.noaa.gov/nerrs/>.



NOAA recently approved a network of state-owned properties and coastal waters in Lyme, Old Lyme, and Groton to be the site of Connecticut's first National Estuarine Research Reserve.

PHOTO: P. FUSCO

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Conservation Calendar

Although there are no planned public events at this time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, you can find all kinds of virtual environmental and community science activities to participate in.

Virtual learning, self-led, and community science projects can be found at the following websites: www.ctbirding.org; www.ctwoodlands.org; <https://whitememorialcc.org>; <https://ctbutterfly.org>; www.ctaudubon.org; www.audubon.org; www.birds.cornell.edu; and your local land trust.

Find a listing of **Discover Audubon Events** on birding, community science, and other topics at <https://www.audubon.org/events>.

From June through August, participate in the DEEP Wildlife Division's **Annual Wild Turkey Brood Survey**. During this time, volunteers record all of the hens and poults (young turkeys) observed during their normal travel. Observations of male (tom) turkeys are not requested for this survey. Results from this survey allow biologists to determine turkey productivity and reproductive success by estimating the average number of turkey poults per hen statewide. To participate, volunteers should use the Wild Turkey Observation Form found on the DEEP website and submit a tally of results to the Wildlife Division shortly after the end of the survey period (June 1-August 31; it is not necessary to begin the survey on June 1. All sighting reports are welcomed). The form can be found at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife/Community-Science-Volunteer-Opportunities-CT-Wildlife-Division#TBS>.

Get Outside Activities for Families to Do at Home

While Connecticut residents "Stay Home, Stay Safe" to help minimize community spread of COVID-19, it does not mean they have to stay inside. This challenging situation provides an opportunity for all of us to get reconnected with nature and the Connecticut outdoors. There are a variety of outdoor and nature education opportunities and resources that individuals and families can take advantage of now and into the future. Best of all, many of these experiences can occur in neighborhoods or backyards.

The DEEP Wildlife Division put together a list of **25 Wildlife Activities You Can Do at Home**. Activities range from starting a bird list for your yard to planting a garden for pollinators to listening to wildlife sounds, and more.

A *Just for Kids* section on the DEEP website features educational pages with activities, fun facts, and coloring pages for kids and families to learn about wildlife together.

There also are ways to learn about nature, while bringing the outside in. For one, viewing a live camera of a bird nest or a feeding station provides the opportunity to see, up close, the lives and habits of animals we often have to view from afar. A suggested list of live wildlife cameras, including ones from our state, is on the DEEP website. Many of us are connecting personally and professionally while practicing social distancing through video calls. You can show your support and passion for the Connecticut outdoors by downloading free Zoom backgrounds that feature our state's natural resources.

Many wild animals rely on trees for homes and food, and the celebration of Arbor Day in April highlighted trees and all of the great things they do. The DEEP Division of Forestry created a special webpage, **Arbor Day 2020 - Online and At Home**, for students and families to celebrate trees at home, in our yards, in our towns, and online year-round. It features tree-related activities, such as planting a tree in your yard and discovering trees online and outdoors near your home.

New and exciting opportunities for indoor fun, online experiences, and outdoor adventures are also featured on a Family and Youth Resources webpage in the Environmental Education section of the DEEP website. Selections include Tree School, a Dinosaur State Park Virtual Tour Series, and information on upcoming webinars.

To learn more, go to <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Natural-Resources/Outdoor-Learning-Resources>.



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A red-shouldered hawk chick stretches its wings even though it is not quite old enough to fly. Fledglings usually fly from the nest about 42-49 days after hatching. Red-shouldered hawks will return to the same nesting territory and may even use previous nests. The old nests are refurbished with new sticks, moss, lichens, and fresh greens.

PHOTO: P. FUSCO