January/February 2019

CONNECTICUT Wildlife

Wild Thoughts

In the hectic pace of our daily lives, it is often easy to get lost in routine. We do our own thing in the same way – it is familiar, may seem convenient, and can convey a sense of independence. From a conservation standpoint, it can also handicap us. This issue of Connecticut Wildlife *highlights the value we gain from new approaches, collaboration, and sharing what we have learned.*

The story of finding a maternity colony of little brown bats illustrates how using new techniques, persistence even when you do not have immediate success, and collaboration can lead to great things. When working with rare species, simply trying to locate them can be challenging. When they are active after dark, small, and pretty secretive, it can be even harder. Collaboration with partners allows you to have more people searching for that "needle in the haystack" and teamwork allows you to find small clues that can lead to key discoveries and opportunities to find new ways to advance species conservation.

Partnerships can also provide new ways to continue to do what we do. The cooperative wetland restoration project in Nehantic State Forest is a great example of how partnerships can help overcome the challenge of reduced staff and resources. Partnerships with groups like the Connecticut Waterfowlers Association and the Connecticut Chapter of Delta Waterfowl have generated a network of wetland enhancements throughout the state that benefit many wildlife species, not just waterfowl, and have helped Wildlife Division staff do what they do best – restore and enhance wildlife habitat.

There is also value in sharing what you know with others. This issue is filled with tips to help you have a safe and memorable spring turkey season, as well as how to take better photos of your successful harvest. There are tips to help you ice fish – whether it is your first try or you are looking to improve your technique.

Habitat management is something we view as routine, but it is often anything but that. You will learn how and why we manage forested habitats, what we need to consider, and how complex the decision process can be. It also highlights how we all learn from each other and how the experts in fisheries, forestry, and wildlife collaborate to manage our state's natural resources.

Hopefully, this issue will provide you with some useful tips, teach you a few new things, and, most importantly, serve as a reminder to step back and think about ways we can work together to accomplish great things, make amazing discoveries, and enjoy nature. We will all be better for it.

Jenny Dickson, Supervising Wildlife Biologist

Cover:

The wintering population of short-eared owls is considered threatened in Connecticut, but it is still possible to observe one of these beautiful owls along the shoreline in winter.

Photo courtesy of Paul Fusco

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PHOTO BY P. FUSCO, DEEP WILDLIFE

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DEPARTMENTS

Little Brown Bat Colony Discovered at White Memorial

Written by Snehal Mhatre, DEEP Wildlife Division

There was excitement in the air last summer as Kate Moran, DEEP Wildlife Division Biologist, and James Fischer of the White Memorial Conservation Center examined guano at a newly-discovered bat colony on the White Memorial property. Bats have suffered dramatic declines over the last decade due to the disease known as white-nose syndrome (WNS). Little brown bats (*Myotis lucifugus*) are one of the hardest hit species in our state, so the discovery of guano and a nearby maternity colony of little brown bats was legitimate cause for celebration – a celebration that for bat biologists can be as rare as the bats themselves. This promising find is both good news for the bats and a testimony to Mr. Fischer's diligence and stewardship in his role as Research Director at White Memorial.

The White Memorial Foundation is a non-profit organization started by Alain and May White that focuses on environmental education, conservation, research, and recreation. The White Memorial Conservation Center, based in Litchfield, functions as a museum and nature center. This 4,000-acre property consists of a variety of habitats, including fields, wetlands, lakes, old-growth forests, hardwood forests, as well as the shorelines of Bantam Lake and the Bantam River. The Conservation Center often collaborates with the DEEP Wildlife Division on research and monitoring activities.

S. MHATRE DEEP WILDLIFE

DEEP Wildlife Division seasonal employees Patrick Bailey and Bobby Greco setting up a bat house at White Memorial Conservation Center in Litchfield.

The White Memorial Conservation Center has been monitoring bats on the property for many years. Prior to 2007, before white-nose syndrome spread through the region, several bat colonies inhabited the property. Fischer reminisces about the good old days when little brown and northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) colonies consisted of several hundred individuals, and when these now rare species could be captured within minutes of setting up mist-nets. Only a few years after the WNS outbreak, little brown and northern long-eared bat colonies had essentially disappeared. Nevertheless, the staff at White Memorial remained vigilant and hopeful. They continued to monitor known roost locations throughout the property, including a big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*) colony occupy-

P. J. FUSCO

ing the green barn next to the Conservation Center and Museum.

In more recent years, the Wildlife Division and White Memorial have partnered in advancing bat monitoring efforts on the property. Having established a statewide acoustic monitoring program for bats in Connecticut, the Division was able to assist with training and equipment so that White Memorial could adopt a more high-tech approach to monitoring bats. Acoustic monitoring entails making audio recordings of bats' echolocation calls while they forage for night-flying insects. This method essentially casts a big digital net, and allows biologists to detect and identify bats that otherwise would go unnoticed. Eventually, the foundation purchased their own equipment and now monitors the bat population with two different types of microphones, specifically designed for mobile and stationary surveys.

Fischer and his seasonal interns had detected little brown bats with some regularity during these surveys, which created hope that maybe some little brown bat colonies had survived the devastation of WNS. Now the job was to figure out where. After poring over maps and data archives, several areas of interest were identified, which prompted Fischer and his staff to deploy bat detectors every night for several weeks straight. "You can't say you're fishing unless you have a hook in the water," said Fischer. After several hits and misses, he finally invited Division biologist Kate Moran to come on a site visit. Fischer led the way to a spot he had suspected when Moran suddenly exclaimed, "Hey, that's little brown bat guano!" This was, indeed, the eureka moment we all were hoping for – a colony of little brown bats had survived, at least for now, post WNS.

After the discovery, Patrick Bailey, a seasonal resource assistant with the Wildlife Division, kept tabs on the colony by doing weekly emergence counts until the bats migrated to their winter hibernation site. The highest count was over 90 individuals that gradually emerged over the course of an hour to hunt for insects in the night sky.

To boost the area's potential to host little brown bats, the Wildlife Division donated and helped install a large bat house in the vicinity, bringing the total number of bat houses on the property to 16. This important discovery underscores the value of partnerships and collaboration in conservation. Hopefully, this little brown bat colony will hibernate successfully over the winter and safely return to their summer home at White Memorial.

M. BERRY

(L to R) James Fischer and Sarah McQuade of White Memorial, DEEP Wildlife Biologist Kate Moran, and DEEP Seasonal Resource Assistants Patrick Bailey, Snehal Mhatre, and Bobby Greco after installing the bat house at White Memorial Conservation Center.

Improving Habitat at Belding WMA

Two multi-phase projects will create young forest habitat

Article and photos by Jane Seymour, DEEP Wildlife Division

In fall 2018, work began at the Belding Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Vernon to improve wildlife habitat. Two multi-phase projects are planned to create young forest habitat and remove non-native trees. Young forest is a type of early successional, or early stage, habitat. The stages of forest succession include sand barrens, grasslands, reverting fields, shrublands, young forest, and mature forest. Each of these stages is important to different species of wildlife. Belding WMA has grassland, reverting field, and mature forest, but very little shrubland or young forest habitat. Sometimes referred to as "weedy" or "overgrown", early stage habitats are critical to the existence of many of our wildlife species. Without these habitats, species like the blue-winged warbler, New England cottontail, and ruffed grouse would disappear.

(Above) Oak seedlings, blueberry bushes, and small trees, like this native flowering dogwood that is struggling to survive in the shade, will benefit from the forest cut at Belding WMA. (Right) Oak seedlings can survive for years in the shade, but need sunlight to grow.

A Changing Connecticut Landscape

Before European settlement occurred in Connecticut, the landscape consisted of multiple stages of forest succession. Those stages that happen early in the process of succession were created or maintained by natural processes such as wildfires, beaver activity, and storms. A wildfire could create a grassland, providing habitat for species such as meadowlark, box turtle, and skipper butterflies. Beavers would create forest openings by cutting down trees. More trees were killed when they were flooded by the ponds created by beaver dams. When the beavers abandoned their pond in search of a new home, the dams would leak, the pond would drain, and a beaver meadow would form. Beaver meadows provided habitat for species such as bluebirds, tree swallows, and monarch butterflies.

As the forest grew back, these wildlife species would move on to a newly-formed habitat created by a recent wildfire or a new beaver meadow. The reverting field they left behind was now home to blue-winged warblers, American kestrel, and tiger swallowtail butterflies. These creatures, too, would move on when the habitat succeeded to later stages of succession. Early stage habitats are short-lived, but because these processes occurred frequently enough across the landscape, wildlife that use these habitats could always find a place to survive.

Today, wildfires are extinguished and flooding by beavers is curtailed. Most of the undeveloped land in Connecticut is now mature forest. Because grasslands, shrublands, and young forests are disappearing, many of the species that depend on them are also disappearing. Fifty-five species in Connecticut that use these habitats are now identified as being of Greatest Conservation Need (GCN) in Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan. Brown thrasher and eastern towhee populations have declined by 90% in New England, and 80% of shrubland species are experiencing declines.

To create the habitats these species depend on, DEEP managers mimic natural disturbances by cutting trees and setting prescribed fires in suitable areas. The projects at Belding WMA are using a forestry treatment known as a shelterwood harvest to remove nearly half of the mature trees and allow a new age-class of trees to grow under the partial shade and shelter of a widely spaced canopy.

Oak Regeneration

The first phase of this work will promote the growth of oak seedlings. The site of this project has two size classes of oak trees. Mature oaks create a forest canopy and shade the oak seedlings that lay in wait for the day when sunlight reaches them. Although they are small, some only a foot tall, many of these seedlings may be over 20 years old. Oak seedlings need light to grow, but can survive for years in the forest understory. They take whatever sunlight, water, and nutrients they can get to build up their roots. Once the forest is opened up after an event like a fire, hurricane, or forest cut, the seedlings use those stored resources to grow tall. In the absence of such an event, the seedlings will eventually die off.

Once the young tree seedlings are fully established following the shelterwood cut, the second phase of the project will be implemented. The majority of the mature trees that were left standing in the first cut will be removed to allow full sunlight to reach the growing seedlings.

As the young forest grows, seedlings and other small trees and shrubs will fill in to create a dense thicket habitat. Birds that use this stage of habitat include rose-breasted grosbeak, blue-winged warbler, hooded warbler, eastern towhee, chestnut-sided warbler, and brown thrasher. Many species of butterflies and other pollinators also need this type of habitat. Eventually, the trees that were once small seedlings will become mature trees that will shade the next generation of seedlings.

Native vs. Non-native

While Belding WMA has an abundance of native trees, parts of the forest are dominated by the non-native Norway spruce. Norway spruce provides evergreen cover for some species, but it is lacking an important aspect in sustaining wildlife. Nearly all of our terrestrial birds raise their young on insects. Plant-feeding insects depend on native plants for their food. Most non-native plants do not provide food for these insects. Therefore, when a large proportion of non-native plants is present, there may not be an adequate supply of insects to provide food for birds. Imagine that each tree is a bird feeder. Native trees are feeders full of food. Non-native trees are empty feeders.

Most of the mature Norway spruce trees will be removed to allow space for native softwood trees to grow. This will not only increase the available food for birds and other wildlife, but will also create young forest habitat through the multi-phased shelterwood cuts described earlier.

Donation for Conservation

Maxwell Belding donated the 282-acre Belding WMA and established a charitable support trust to support conservation activities on the property. His vision was to provide a diversity of wildlife habitats. These habitat projects will help fulfill Mr. Belding's conservation vision.

Prescribed Burns Planned for Pachaug State Forest

Written by Emery Gluck, DEEP Division of Forestry

Up to 346 acres of dead oak forest are slated to be burned over the next several years in Pachaug State Forest in Voluntown and Griswold by DEEP foresters, fire control staff, and State Park maintainers. Repeated droughts and infestations of gypsy moths and chestnut borers have killed over 90% of the oak trees. Many of the dead trees have become public safety hazards.

The rights to cut and harvest thousands of the dead and dying trees were sold to private loggers through a competitive bid process. This is the most cost-effective method for removing tree hazards from state lands, saving the State of Connecticut tens of thousands of dollars in removal costs, while also creating green products from a renewable resource. Many of the dead trees have already been harvested.

The primary purpose of the prescribed burns is to reduce public and firefighter exposure to hazards created by falling dead trees and potentially intense wildfire. DEEP has applied for a U.S. Forest Service grant to help defray the cost of mitigating hazard trees associated with the planned burns, and throughout high fire risk areas of Pachaug State Forest.

Another goal is to regenerate young oak and pine forests. Oak forests are not sustaining themselves under cur-

E. GLUCK DIVISION OF FORESTRY

Dead oak trees stand out among the live birch and maple trees in the mid-story near the prescribed burn area at Pachaug State Forest. The widespread oak mortality was caused by gypsy moth defoliation in the three years prior to when the photo was taken, combined with drought stress and a subsequent chestnut borer infestation.

rent natural conditions. In the absence of fire and other disturbances, the forest is generally too shady for young oaks to advance to the overstory. Historically, younger oaks thrived due to fires started by Native Americans or natural causes, and also because of abandonment of farmland, clearcuts, and chestnut blight. In the absence of these factors, less ecologically valuable birch, beech, and maple trees tend to flourish, leaving oak seedlings and saplings in the shade. Over time, without prescribed burns and other forest management, oak forests are expected to diminish greatly. This has been called an impending ecological crisis, as acorns are a source of high-quality protein for almost 100 species of wildlife. In addition, oaks host approximately 500 species of moths and caterpillars that attract more diverse and abundant bird populations than maple forests.

DIVISION OF FORESTRY FILE PHOTO

Similar to what is planned for Pachaug State Forest, the Division of Forestry set this prescribed fire in Nehantic State Forest in Salem and East Lyme to sustain oak trees. Retired Forester Rob Rocks is seen lighting the burn with a drip torch while Forester Ed McGuire monitors the fire.

The burns will weaken or top-kill shrubs and birch, beech, and maple saplings in the understory. They will also create a better seedbed for acorns to germinate and grow, and stimulate existing oak seedlings. More sunlight will reach those seedlings, as well. Additionally, the burns will target expanding patches of clonal ferns and sweet pepperbush. These native plants form dense understory canopies that prevent the establishment of oak and pine seedlings. These plants have expanded greatly due to increased sunlight when trees were defoliated by gypsy moths, increased rainfall, a lack of recent fires, and absence of livestock grazing. Exotic invasive Japanese stilt grass and mugwort are currently found along the roadsides, trails, and streamsides in the forest. Some work will be done to contain the invasive plants prior to the prescribed burns.

DEEP expects to burn 36 acres in 2019 and more in the following years. Some areas may require more than one burn. The time-frame is February to mid-May and Labor Day through the end of November. Late April and early May is usually when the main prescribed burns are conducted because the fuels are usually still cured and ferns and sweet pepperbush are most vulnerable to burns. Burns in the fall are less likely unless conditions are favorable. Nearby trails will be closed during the burns, and smoke should clear within a few hours after the burn is completed. The DEEP Division of Forestry has successfully completed 118 prescribed burns on over 1,500 acres since 1991.

Over time, without prescribed burns and other forest management, oak forests are expected to diminish greatly in Connecticut. This has been called an impending ecological crisis as acorns are a source of high-quality protein for almost 100 species of wildlife. In addition, oaks host approximately 500 species of moths and caterpillars that attract more diverse and abundant bird populations than maple forests.

Be Safe and Ethical While Spring Turkey Hunting

Written by Emily Evonsion, DEEP Wildlife Division, photography by Paul Fusco, DEEP Wildlife Division

As the 2019 spring turkey hunting season approaches (April 24 to May 25), the DEEP Wildlife Division emphasizes the importance of safe hunting practices. This information is presented in Connecticut's 2019 Hunting and Trapping Guide and formal wild turkey hunting clinics are held before every spring turkey season. Turkey hunting requires a great deal of skill and advance planning to be safe and successful. To guarantee a memorable spring turkey hunting experience, hunters must follow all safety recommendations and hunting regulations.

The Connecticut Conservation Education/Firearms Safety (CE/FS) and Wild Turkey Programs, in association with local sportsmen's clubs, sponsor two to three free spring wild turkey hunting clinics annually. These clinics are designed to prepare both novice and experienced hunters for the rigors of spring turkey hunting. They cover safety recommendations, calling techniques, spring turkey hunting tactics, and wild turkey life history.

Turkey hunting is a safe and enjoyable activity. However, hunters must remember that they share the woods with other hunters, as well as non-hunters. Therefore, safety and ethical behavior are critical. The actions of today's hunter will define the opportunities for those in the future.

Advanced Hunter Education

In addition to the Wild Turkey Hunting Clinic, the CE/FS Program offers free clinics on waterfowl hunting, hunter marksmanship, small game hunting, and venison processing. Learn more at *www.ct.gov/deep/hunting*.

Safety Recommendations for Spring Turkey Hunters

- **Before the hunt, pattern your shotgun to determine which shot size and shotshell loads provide the best pattern and effective range for your shotgun.**
- **Identify your target and what lies beyond before you pull the trigger.**
- **Stay in a fixed location and call birds to you. Never stalk turkeys or turkey calls. These movements and sounds may be another hunter, so it is important to be patient and not move.**
- **Do not assume you are alone in the woods. Always assume that any noise or movement could be another person.**
- **Position yourself in a spot that provides protection from an approaching hunter, such as a tree trunk at least as wide as your shoulders. For added safety, secure a four- to six-inch wide fluorescent orange band around the tree about six feet up. This band will alert other hunters of your calling position.**
- **Never move, wave, or make turkey sounds to alert another hunter of your presence. Your movements and noises may lead hunters to mistake you for a turkey. When another hunter approaches, stay still and yell out "hunter over here".**
- **Do NOT wear red, white, blue, or black while turkey hunting. These colors are found on the heads of gobblers and both toms and hens have black-colored bodies. It is best to wear a fluorescent orange vest while walking in and out of the woods and carry your harvested bird out of the field in a fluorescent orange carrier.**
- **The use of bait, electronic calling devices, and live decoys is prohibited.**
- **To call turkeys for another hunter, you must possess a valid Resident Game Bird Conservation Stamp and written consent of the landowner if hunting on private land. A hunter may harvest his/her limit and continue to call for other hunters.**
- **Taking turkeys by participating in a cooperative drive is prohibited.**
- **Shooting turkeys from a building or any other permanent structure is prohibited, as is the shooting of turkeys while they are roosting in trees.**

A Cooperative Wetland Project

Water control structure installed at Nehantic State Forest

Written by Kelly Kubik, DEEP Wildlife Division, photography by Roger Wolfe, DEEP Wildlife Division

DEEP's Wetlands Habitat and Mosquito Management (WHAMM) Program, in cooperation with the Wildlife Division's Migratory Bird Program, recently installed a new water control structure in Nehantic State Forest in Lyme. The structure was placed in an abandoned beaver flowage to allow precise water level management to occur on approximately six acres of low-lying habitat. The goal is to manage this site by raising water levels in late summer, maintaining those levels through the fall, and gradually lowering them in early spring to allow plants to germinate which are valuable to waterfowl and other wildlife. The project will not only benefit various wildlife species, but will also provide further waterfowl hunting opportunities on state lands.

Steve Rosa, with the Wildlife Division's WHAMM Program, uses an excavator to remove a small amount of material from the existing culvert in preparation for the installation of the water control structure.

The water control structure was generously donated to the Wildlife Division by the Connecticut Waterfowlers Association and the Connecticut Chapter of Delta Waterfowl. Over the years, both organizations have partnered with the Wildlife Division to protect and enhance wetlands throughout the state, recruit new hunters into the sport, and supply volunteers for many of our projects. More information about the Connecticut Waterfowlers Association and the Connecticut Chapter of Delta Waterfowl and how you can get involved with these organizations is on their respective websites: *www.ctwaterfowlers.org* and *https://deltawaterfowl.org/connecticut-chapter-new-london-ct*.

Weir boards within the water control structure will be adjusted at certain times of the year to optimize water levels for various wildlife species.

The WHAMM Program has proven to be an invaluable part of wetlands restoration work in Connecticut. The Program was established in 1994 and was one of the first programs in the country with specialized personnel and equipment dedicated to wetlands work. While the number of staff assigned to the WHAMM Program has declined in recent years, commitment to its mission of restoring and enhancing wetlands in Connecticut remains the same.

A Winter Specialty

The Short-eared Owl in Connecticut

Article and photography by Paul Fusco, DEEP Wildlife Division

Although short-eared owls are most active at dusk and dawn, they can often be seen hunting over fields and marshes during daylight hours. In fact, they are one of the very few species of owls that may be actively hunting during the day.

Unlike most other owls that prefer thick cover and forests, the short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*) is a bird of wide open landscapes. Habitats of grassland, marshland, farmland, and tundra are the places to find short-eared owls. Their range is nearly world-wide, making them one of the most widely distributed bird species. In Connecticut, large expanses of open habitat are in short supply and small in size. Therefore, the occurrence of short-eared owls is limited in the state, although the birds regularly show up in small numbers during migration and winter.

Short-eareds are medium-sized, measuring about 15 inches in length and with a 40-inch wingspan. Their plumage is tawny brown with bold, dark streaking. They have a dark wrist patch on the underwing and a pale buffy patch topside. Dark facial patches set off their bright yellow eyes. Males are generally paler than females, with older males being palest.

The wings are long and flight is buoyant, irregular, and "mothlike." An assertive, high-pitched bark is sometimes vocalized while in flight, often when interacting with other owls or harriers. Short-eared owls will often hover while hunting.

The short "ears" that give this owl its name are not ears at all, but rather elongated feathers above the eyes that help the owls blend into their surroundings. The ear tufts are so small that they are difficult to see and most times go unnoticed.

Behavior

Short-eared owls do not presently breed in Connecticut; however, in the mid-1800s they were considered residents, likely breeding in coastal salt marshes. In areas where they do breed, nests are built on the ground in a slight depression that may be sparsely lined with grasses and a small amount of down feathers. The normal clutch size is four to seven white eggs. However, during years when voles are plentiful, up to a dozen or so young may be raised. Incubation lasts approximately 21 to 24 days and young are able to fly after about 31 to 36 days. Young birds will remain in the vicinity

of the nest for up to six weeks, often hiding nearby in the grass.

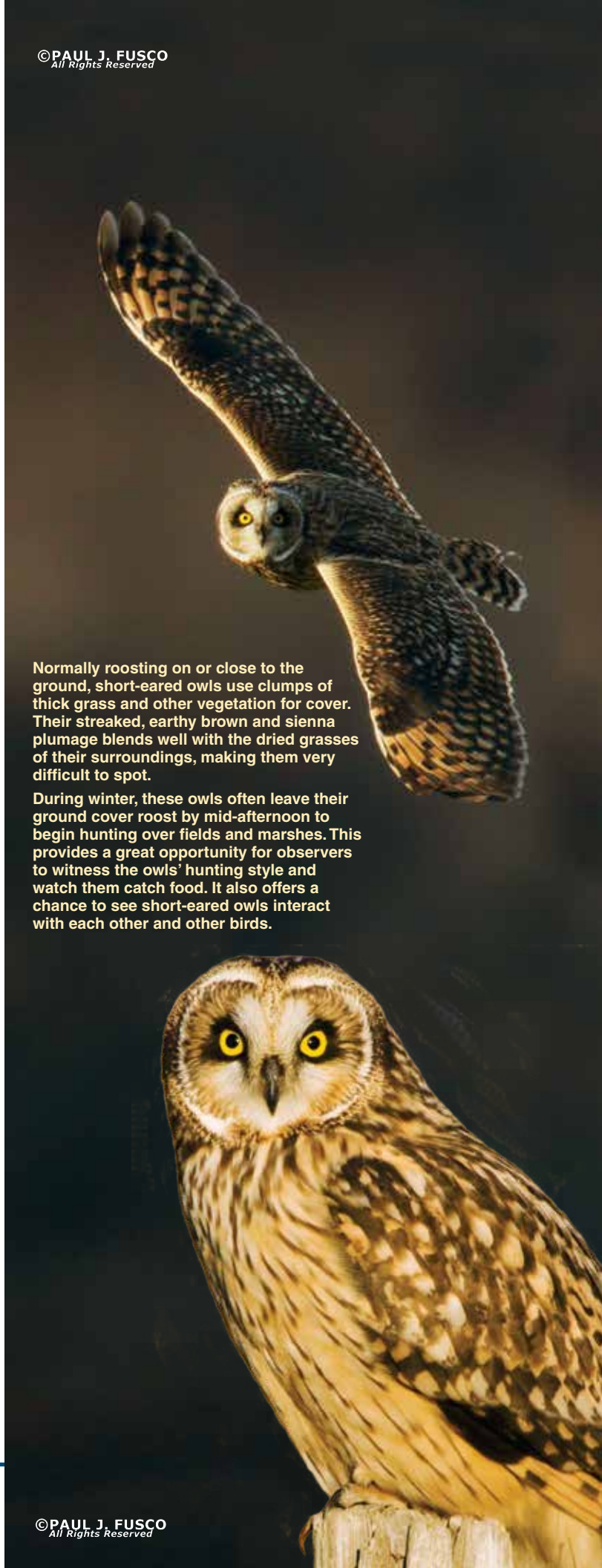
The favorite food of short-eared owls is mice and voles. By taking large numbers of these rodents, the owls provide a great benefit to people, especially farmers. Being somewhat nomadic, short-eared owls are known to gravitate to areas with high rodent populations, forming loose congregations that take advantage of the plentiful food source. In these situations, some owls may even remain in these areas to breed. While rodents are by far the most common food item, short-eared owls will also consume insect pests, such as grasshoppers and beetles, and small birds, including sparrows.

Conservation

Short-eared owls require large uninterrupted tracts of grassland or other open habitat. Open habitats are being lost to development, modification, and natural succession into forested habitat, resulting in less available habitat for short-eared owls and other species dependent on open habitats. Habitat loss has been the primary factor in the decline of short-eared owls in our region, and their presumed extirpation as a breeding species in Connecticut. The short-eared owl is listed as a threatened species (wintering) in Connecticut due to the low wintering population, limited suitable habitat, and the State's responsibility to protect birds declining regionally that may winter here, but nest in other states. Despite the situation in our state, the owl's global distribution is expansive and the overall population is sizable. Therefore, listing as a conservation concern is not warranted, even if the population is declining in some parts of the owl's range.

Most of Connecticut's wintering population of short-eared owls can be found close to the shoreline. The weather is moderate and snow cover is usually less along the shoreline than inland, which makes hunting easier. The largest and best quality shoreline habitats remaining in Connecticut are on public properties, including state parks, wildlife management areas, and national wildlife refuges. These properties are critically important to wildlife, particularly these owls, during the stressful months of winter. Protection and proper management of coastal habitats to meet the needs of wildlife are imperative for the conservation of these "eared" owls and other animals in our state. Winter is an especially vulnerable time for wildlife, including these birds. Daytime roosting areas are sensitive to disturbance, such as free-roaming dogs. If disturbance becomes more frequent or intrusive, the owls may abandon an otherwise safe place, forcing them into a situation that may have a less certain degree of survivability. They may also just abandon the area.

Short-ears can be one of the easiest owls to see. Their habits of hunting during daylight and perching in the open make it easy to observe and study these birds. It can be a thrilling experience to spot a short-eared owl sitting on a post in the late afternoon sun, turning its head to look at you with blazing yellow eyes.



Normally roosting on or close to the ground, short-eared owls use clumps of thick grass and other vegetation for cover. Their streaked, earthy brown and sienna plumage blends well with the dried grasses of their surroundings, making them very difficult to spot.

During winter, these owls often leave their ground cover roost by mid-afternoon to begin hunting over fields and marshes. This provides a great opportunity for observers to witness the owls' hunting style and watch them catch food. It also offers a chance to see short-eared owls interact with each other and other birds.

Focus of Long-time Waterfowl Survey Changes

Written by Min Huang, DEEP Wildlife Division

The Midwinter Waterfowl Survey (MWS) was one of the longest continuous surveys conducted in North America. All states in the Atlantic Flyway (AF) annually participated in this cooperative effort in conjunction with the Atlantic Flyway Council and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The results of this survey were used as an index of wintering populations and provided relative information on waterfowl distribution and habitat use. These data were used as measures of habitat condition and the relative success of habitat conservation and restoration programs.

The traditional survey area in Connecticut covered the entire coastline, the three major river systems (Housatonic, Connecticut, and Thames), and a sample of inland reservoirs within a 10-mile radius of the coastline. The survey area was divided into nine segments.

Due to budget cuts, the USFWS suspended their participation in this survey in 2015. The survey has traditionally been used for setting hunting regulations for two species, Atlantic brant and eastern tundra swan. To address that need, the AF states continue to fly the survey, but only concentrated on counting those two species. In Connecticut, we have not been surveying all waterfowl since 2015. Wildlife Division staff currently only survey the immediate coastline, concentrating on counting Atlantic brant. Conducted by air, the survey is dangerous, particularly in winter, and by only counting brant, the survey time has been cut in half. This results in both cost-savings and a potential increase in safety for the biologists doing the survey. What we lose by not doing the entire survey is a snapshot of wintering waterfowl population size, composition, and distribution.

Wildlife Division staff conducted the 2019 survey in late January using two Robinson R44 helicopters. The weather preceding the survey was cold, many coastal creeks were frozen and most inland waterbodies were ice-covered. Staff recorded 1,137 brant during the survey.

P. J. FUSCO

The Wildlife Division has not conducted the annual Midwinter Waterfowl Survey since 2015, but continues to count brant present along the Connecticut coastline. This year's survey was conducted in late January and 1,137 brant were counted.

Capturing the Moment

Tips for Taking Harvest Photos

Written by Paul Benjunas, DEEP Wildlife Division

Connecticut is home to approximately 30,000 licensed resident hunters, which accounts for roughly less than one percent of Connecticut's resident population. It is important to acknowledge the significant role hunters have in wildlife conservation efforts. The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Act provides funding for wildlife conservation by collecting revenues from the sales of hunting equipment (firearms, ammunition, bows, and arrows) and redistributing funding to state fish and wildlife agencies for wildlife research and management and hunter education. Make no mistake about it, Connecticut hunters represent a group that is passionate about the outdoors and devoted to ensuring the natural resources that support this tradition are available for future generations.

Social media currently provides an outlet for hunters to further share their passion of the outdoors and connect with others and share ideas. While Facebook and Instagram are great for posting photos, it is important to understand that the transparency of these outlets may result in a misunderstanding of the sport. One way to minimize misunderstanding of hunting on social media is to be aware of the vast audiences you may potentially reach when sharing harvest photos. You can help portray hunting in a favorable light by taking and posting harvest photos that demonstrate your dedication to wildlife and the outdoors.

With spring turkey hunting season right around the corner, following are suggested tips on how to take excellent harvest photos that will not only help capture those great moments, but also show respect for the animal.

Luke Emmons smiles brightly, posing alongside his beautiful buck on a crisp December afternoon. Submit your harvest photos to the Wildlife Division at *deep.ctwildlife@ct.gov*.

Tips for Capturing the Perfect Harvest Photo

- **Make sure the action of the firearm is open and empty, and the muzzle is pointed in a safe direction. For archery, make sure the arrow is unnocked and quivered or the bolt is removed and quivered if using a crossbow. Avoid laying the firearm or bow on the animal when one can instead hold it or simply leave it out of the photo. If hunting as a group or a team, make sure participants pose with their own harvest for each photo.**
- **Clean the animal. Remove excessive blood with a wet rag. Avoid having the animal's tongue hanging from its mouth, as this can present a major distraction and change the emotional tone of the photo.**
- **Position the animal for photos as soon as possible. It is important to capture a natural look before the animal becomes too difficult to position.**
- **If taking a photo with a deer, position the deer in a bedded position and have the hunter sit behind the animal. Avoid sitting or kneeling on the animal. Try to keep your hands off the deer to showcase it as much as possible (especially the antlers).**
- **Find a background that accurately captures the animal's natural habitat, and avoid taking photos of the animal on the bed of a truck. By choosing the right background setting, you can help tell the story of the hunt.**
- **Try to take photos in the best light possible. Morning or late afternoon will likely be the best times to take photos. If you are taking a photo when sunlight is directly overhead, try to avoid shadows, especially if you are wearing a cap. This will help make the photo more inviting.**
- **Take photos from a position that is slightly lower than the hunter and animal. Taking a photo from above may dwarf its true size. Also consider putting the animal on a rise or knoll.**
- **Try different angles. Taking multiple photos from different angles will help you capture just the right photo.**
- **Smile. It goes without saying that having a successful hunt requires time and energy. Be proud of your accomplishment!**
- **If you intend on submitting a photo for printing in a magazine, make sure you submit a portrait photo with a very high resolution. See you outdoors!**

Help us highlight your successes and also those of young and first-time hunters by submitting photographs to the DEEP Wildlife Division at deep.ctwildlife@ct.gov. The photos may be used (with written permission only) in publications and online.

Ice Fishing:

*Catching Memories You **Will Not Release***

Written by Mike Beauchene, DEEP Fisheries Division

About this time each year, the energy in my daughter Katherine builds to a fever pitch. An "Ice Fishing Fever" with the only cure being outside and literally on the water. Her passion for ice fishing began on a near perfect February day nine years ago, just before her second birthday when I too had a fever, the cabin variety. I decided to bundle up my soon to be "terrible two-year-old" and spend some quality family time on our favorite ice fishing pond, Howell's Pond, in Hartland – a picturesque little pond which never disappoints when you want to get away from the daily grind and feel like you are in the wilds of northern New England.

We arrived just after lunch, the sun felt brilliant, the sky the purest blue, and the hemlock surrounding the pond dusted with a light coating of sugar-like snow. Walking out onto the pond, solidly frozen for about a month, we came across a few recently drilled holes, signs of others who know the magic of this little pond.

Katherine's favorite task was to be the "minnow catcher", taking a small aquarium type net and scooping out a minnow as I prepared the tip-up. With all six of our tip-ups fishing, we could take some time to make snow angels, look down through the ice to see what may swim by, and, of course, have hot chocolate and a snack.

After a couple of hours, we decided it was time to pack it up and head for home. Not a single bite that day, no indication there were any fish at all, except for the minnows on our hooks. But, what a day it was. The memory of our

Fishing on the ice is perfect for the young angler. There is no need to "cast" or the possibility of getting the line stuck in a tree!

PHOTO BY M. BEAUCHENE, DEEP FISHERIES DIVISION

Families enjoy spending time together on the ice. The CARE Program offers FREE learn to ice fish classes.
PHOTO BY J. MURTAGH, DEEP FISHERIES DIVISION

Key steps for ice fishing:

Step 1. Check for safe ice
Step 2. Cut holes in the ice
Step 3. Bait your lines
Step 4. Wait for the bite
Step 5. Reel in your catch
Step 6. Enjoy your meal or release your catch

Catching those smiles is just about as nice as catching the largemouth bass.
PHOTO BY D. FERRALOLO

first ice-fishing trip is still as crisp as the air on that February day. I also know Katherine enjoyed it as well, as she asks each year to go ice fishing together. We are now nine years into our annual tradition, and I hope to have it last for decades to come.

With access to over 180 lakes and ponds in Connecticut, ice fishing lends itself to be an inexpensive wintertime family activity that provides fresh air, exercise, quality time in the outdoors, and, if you are lucky, a nice fish meal! Ice fishing is very social (kind of like tailgating), and most anglers will be happy to share knowledge and tips with you. Here is an introduction to several tips about ice fishing, including safety, equipment, and how to learn to ice fish, FREE.

Safety

The most important facet of ice fishing is making sure the ice is safe (thickness of the ice). Check ice thickness near the shore as you make your way out. Ice thickness is not always uniform and may vary within a lake or pond. Currents, springs, and aquatic vegetation all affect how ice forms. As a rule of thumb, four inches of clear black ice will support one person on foot. It is good practice to carry a rope and flotation device, a whistle, and a set of "safety hand spikes" to pull yourself out of the water

With access to over 180 lakes and ponds in Connecticut, ice fishing lends itself to be an inexpensive wintertime family activity that provides fresh air, exercise, quality time in the outdoors, and, if you are lucky, a nice fish meal!

in the rare case of a breakthrough. Avoid going alone; bring a friend or your family to enjoy the day with!

Once you know you have safe ice, just walking can be tricky business. Ice can be slippery, so it is a good idea to use footwear that will prevent an accidental fall. Ice cleats or "creepers" are designed to slip over your winter boots and have built-in spikes to grip the ice.

Finally, stay warm. Dress in layers, avoiding cotton clothing. Your outermost layer should be wind-stopping. Waterproof insulated boots and thick wool socks will keep your feet warm and dry. Mittens are warmer than gloves, and a winter hat is a must. Sunglasses also will diminish the glare on those brilliant sunny winter days.

Equipment

To get started, all you need is a tool to break or cut through the ice, something to fish with, and something to attract fish. Start with basic equipment, and expand your ice fishing tackle collection as you figure out what you need.

Breaking the ice: Making a hole in the ice can be accomplished by using an ice chisel (or spud), a hand-powered auger, or a propane or gas powered auger. Hand augers are relatively inexpensive and light weight.

Keeping the hole open: A skimmer, or ice ladle, is the easiest way to clear ice chips and slush from the hole. Occasionally, the hole may freeze solid while you are fishing, no worries, use your skimmer to re-open the hole.

Angling devices: Ice fishing devices differ from traditional gear, as there is no casting involved. Simply drop a line through the hole, and you are in business. Two types of devices are "jigging rods" and "tip-ups". **Jigging rods** are short and sensitive, measuring only 20 to 30 inches long. The jig is tipped with live or imitation insect larvae, which

Mohawk Pond in Cornwall is picture perfect for ice fishing, especially as the DEEP Fisheries Division stocks it with large brook trout.
PHOTO BY M. CHERNISKE

are sold in small cups or jars that should be kept in a pocket to keep from freezing. The three most common are mousees, wax worms, or spikes. They are fished by jiggling a lure and bait up and down to create vibrations which will attract curious fish.

Tip-ups are offered in a variety of styles but all operate under the same principle. They are baited with a live shiner that is dropped through the hole to within a few feet of the bottom. A bait bucket is used to transport the shiners, keeping them alive. When a fish strikes the bait and makes a run, a spring-loaded flag pops up, letting you know that a fish has grabbed your shiner. You need to pull the tip-up out of the hole, set the hook in the fish's mouth, and pull in your catch hand over hand.

Optional but nice: A thermos filled with hot chocolate and some snacks will keep the kids happy and engaged!

Learn How

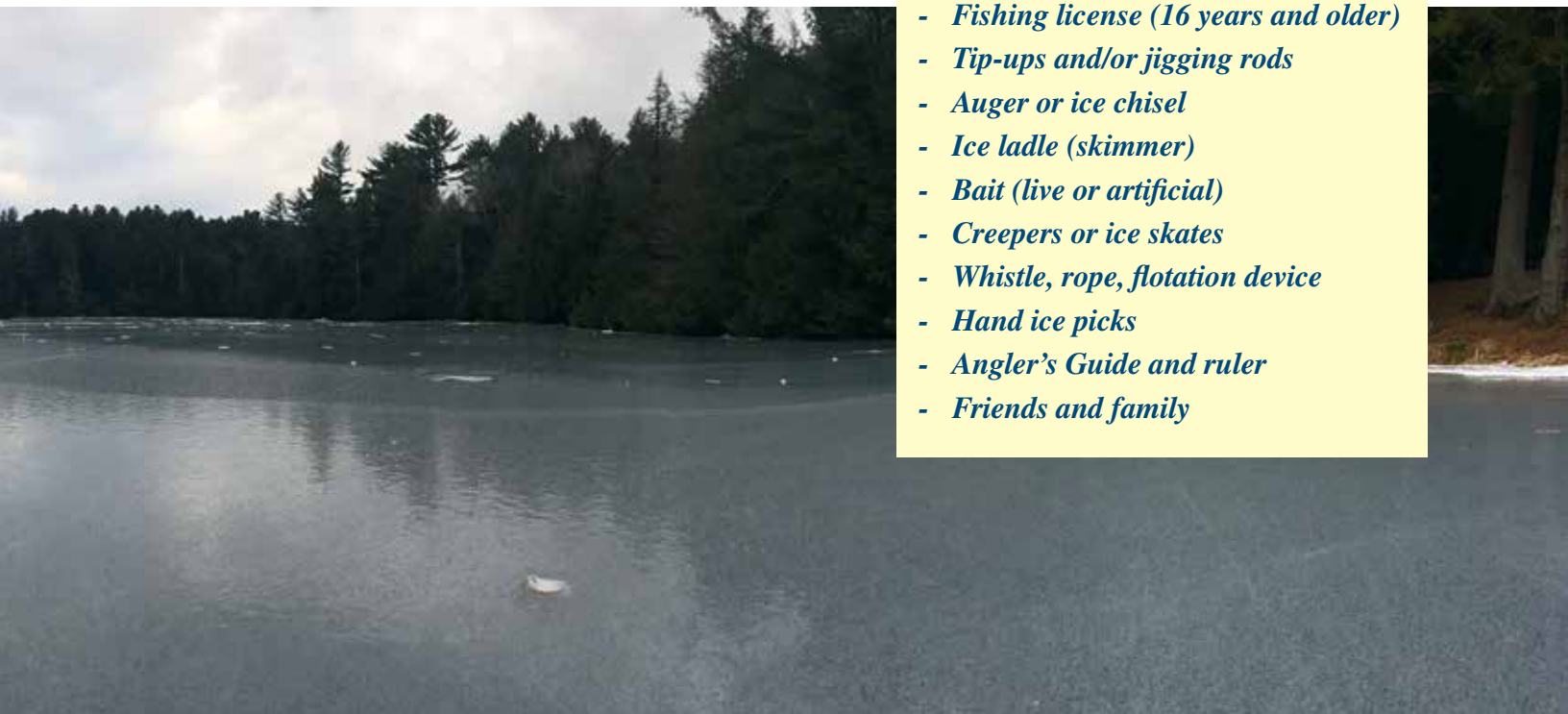
The DEEP Inland Fisheries Division's **Connecticut Aquatic Resources Education (CARE)** Program conducts FREE family ice fishing classes around the state. These classes are designed to introduce the beginner to ice fishing and will discuss topics in detail. Find a list of upcoming CARE classes and view our *LEARN TO ICE FISH* video at *www.ct.gov/deep/care*.

Every February, the Division participates in the annual *No Child Left Inside*® **Winter Festival**! Make an effort to participate in one of these free events. Sign up for the monthly electronic newsletter, *CT Fishin' Tips*, to stay up-to-date on fishing events, activities, and news. Go to *www.ct.gov/deep/fishing* to sign up.

Tip-ups are very easy to use. Place a live minnow on a hook, add a small amount of weight, and suspend the bait just above the bottom. When the fish takes the bait, the "flag" will pop up. Run over to the hole and land the fish by pulling in the line hand over hand.

Basic Ice Fishing Checklist

- *Fishing license (16 years and older)*
- *Tip-ups and/or jigging rods*
- *Auger or ice chisel*
- *Ice ladle (skimmer)*
- *Bait (live or artificial)*
- *Creepers or ice skates*
- *Whistle, rope, flotation device*
- *Hand ice picks*
- *Angler's Guide and ruler*
- *Friends and family*



Winter Warriors:

White-tailed deer and the negative impacts of supplemental feeding

Written by Jennifer Kilburn, DEEP Wildlife Division, photography by Paul Fusco, DEEP Wildlife Division

In fall, deer grow a special winter coat and begin to store fat. The winter coat has hollow guard hairs for insulation with a finer undercoat for warmth, which help deer retain body heat, thus reducing energy demands. Fat reserves put on by deer in fall provide energy and heat over the winter. In addition, deer decrease their metabolic rate during winter, reducing food requirements to about half of their summer requirements. All of these factors contribute to substantially decreased winter energy demands, which can be met with limited natural browse and supplemented with fat reserves.

In locations where a severe winter is an annual event, deer may migrate to wintering areas with thicker overhead cover and more available natural winter browse or even move into urban areas where more ornamental browse is available. These adaptations help deer survive severe winters. Even when food is abundant, deer use their fat reserves and lose weight over winter. Deer in relatively good condition can fast for several weeks without harmful effects. Some deer, especially the young and old, may die during harsher winters, as these animals may have insufficient fat stores going into winter or are unable to find food and also compete with larger deer for available food.

Negative Impacts

Deer are ruminants, meaning they have a four-part stomach with microbes (bacteria) that help digest woody vegetation. Deer acquire specifically adapted microbes over a period of time that digest specific food material. For example, during spring as the green-up of vegetation slowly occurs, deer will gradually begin to use the new food source as the season progresses.

When deer eat food that has not been a regular part of their diet, such as large quantities suddenly placed out during severe winters, the specific microbes are not present to help with digestion. Deer will eat any readily available handouts during winter, thus they may fill their stomach with indigestible material. It has been documented over several years that deer have died with stomachs full of food (hay and corn) that was placed out during harsh winters as an emergency food source when limited natural foods were available. Food sources rich in carbohydrates have been known to cause acidosis (grain overload) and enterotoxemia (overeating disease), which can be fatal. In addition, feeding deer during winter can artificially congregate deer into small areas, damaging natural vegetation and habituating deer to humans, thus increasing their use of urban areas and the destruction of ornamental landscape plantings. Although bovine tuberculosis (TB) or chronic wasting disease (CWD) have not been documented in Connecticut's deer population, winter feeding may artificially congregate deer, increasing the potential for transmission of diseases.

Welfare and Concerns

Severe winters cause people to be concerned about the welfare of white-tailed deer and their ability to survive the harsh conditions. Whether an individual deer can survive winter depends on its physical condition going into winter, the severity of winter, amount and quality of food sources, and the animal's energy expenditures. White-tailed deer have biological adaptations that help them survive through winter. Although winter-related starvation can occur during particularly harsh winters, trying to save deer by supplementally feeding them is not the solution. DEEP discourages providing supplemental food for deer during winter. Feeding deer often makes them more vulnerable to starvation, predation, disease, and vehicle collisions.

Baiting vs. Feeding

Baiting deer during the hunting season is different than feeding deer during a harsh winter. Baiting is a technique used by deer hunters where food materials are put out to attract animals to a specific area to position them for better shot placement, potentially increasing hunter success. One of the goals of the DEEP Wildlife Division is to maintain the deer population at levels compatible with available habitat and land uses. Baiting is a management option allowed only in Connecticut's urban deer management zones, where populations need to be reduced. This management option is typically introduced when deer have other food sources available to them, and deer are able to slowly acclimate to limited amounts of bait being placed on the landscape.

The information contained in this article was modified from educational materials produced by the Michigan and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources.

FROM THE FIELD

Save the Date: 2019 Connecticut Volunteer Water Monitoring Conference

In celebration of the 20th anniversary of Connecticut's volunteer water monitoring program and Citizen Science Day 2019, DEEP invites you to join us for an exciting day of learning, collaboration, and inspiration! The CT Volunteer Water Monitoring Conference will be held on Friday, April 5, 2019, from 8:30 AM - 4:00 PM at Three Rivers Community College, in Norwich. Who should attend? Anyone currently conducting volunteer water monitoring in Connecticut; nonprofit organizations and municipal commissions wanting to start a new local water monitoring program; water experts willing to share their knowledge with volunteers; teachers seeking to better integrate water monitoring into their courses; and anyone else with an interest in water issues in Connecticut. More information on the conference can be found on the DEEP website at *https://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?a=2719&q=606274&deepNav_GID=1654*.

Comings and Goings at the DEEP Bureau of Natural Resources

- Rick Jacobson recently left his position as Director of the Wildlife Division to replace Bill Hyatt as the new Chief of the Bureau of Natural Resources.
- Justin Davis with the Marine Fisheries Program was promoted to Assistant Director and will oversee the Program.
- Kate Moran, a biologist formerly with the Wildlife Division's Wildlife Diversity Program, has joined the Bureau Chief's office in Hartford to help administer our federal grant programs.
- The Wildlife Division has welcomed Keith Hoffman as a Firearms Safety Representative with the Conservation Education/Firearms Safety Program, Matthew Shannon as a Wildlife Biologist/Botanist with the Natural Diversity Data Base, Michael Ravisi as a Wildlife Biologist with the Wildlife Diversity Program, and Will Cassidy as the new R3 Coordinator. (R3 activities seek to create new participants or increase participation rates of current or lapsed outdoor recreationists.)
- The Fisheries Division has increased its ranks with the addition of Aaron Aubin and Dave Piera as maintainers at the Quinebaug Valley Hatchery, Renee St. Amand as a Fisheries Biologist with the Fisheries Statistics and Management section of the Marine Fisheries Program, Kevin Job as a Fisheries Biologist with the Diadromous Fisheries Program, and Matthew Goclowski as a Fisheries Biologist with the Habitat Conservation and Enhancement Program.
- The Division of Forestry has welcomed Timothy Batchelor as the Western Connecticut Fire Control Officer, Nathan Piche and Jeremy Clark as State Lands Foresters, Nicholas Zito as the Forest Practices Act Forester, and Andrea Urbano as the Central Connecticut Service Forester.

Habitat Improvements at NU Skiff Mountain WMA

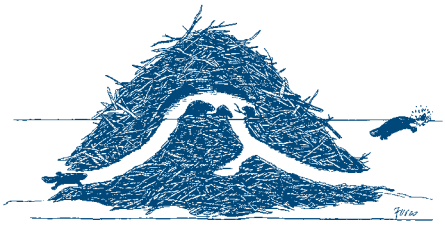
The Wildlife Division's Habitat Management Program is creating young forest habitat at NU Skiff Mountain Cooperative Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Sharon for species such as the American woodcock and ruffed grouse. This WMA is also a popular pheasant hunting area. While the clearing may seem unsightly at the moment, it will not be long before it is covered with low, thick vegetative growth, providing cover and protection for many species that rely on this early successional habitat. Learn more about the Connecticut Young Forest Habitat Initiative at *www.ct.gov/deep/YoungForest*.

P. BENJUNAS (2)

A tracked machine with a specialized mulching head is used to masticate, or mulch, older trees and over mature shrubs so they can vigorously resprout and regrow to provide much needed food and cover for a variety of wildlife dependent on young forest habitat. This specialized equipment can effectively and efficiently mulch trees up to about 8 inches DBH, and selectively target certain trees or stands of trees while leaving highly desirable trees, such as apple trees, untouched.

Once trees are mulched, the site is open to full sunlight, which stimulates dense regrowth of seedlings, sapling, shrubs, grasses, and broad-leaved plants. Within four to six years, the site should regrow enough to support young forest dependent species, such as woodcock, ruffed grouse, and chestnut-sided warblers.

CONNECTICUT Wildlife



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Please make checks payable to:
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Help fund projects that benefit songbirds, threatened and endangered species, reptiles, amphibians, bats, and other wildlife species.

Order on-line with a credit card through the DEEP Store at: www.ct.gov/deep/WildlifeMagazine

Conservation Calendar

Jan. - April .....Donate to the Endangered Species/Wildlife Income Tax Check-off Fund on your 2018 Connecticut Income Tax form. Learn more at *www.ct.gov/deep/EndangeredSpecies*.

Programs at the Sessions Woods Conservation Education Center

Programs are a cooperative venture between the Wildlife Division and the Friends of Sessions Woods. A complete list of programs can be found at www.ct.gov/deep/SessionsWoods. *Please register by sending an email to* **laura.rogers-castro@ct.gov** *or calling 860-424-3011 (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 17 .....**March Mushroom Madness**, starting at 9:30 AM. The CT Valley Mycological Society (CVMC) welcomes members and non-members to their annual meeting at Sessions Woods for an enlightening indoor presentation on mushrooms. The meeting provides an opportunity to talk with others interested in the field of mycology and view some of the resources available to learn more about mushrooms. The CVMC meeting includes a coffee and refreshment half hour beginning at 9:30 a.m., followed by the program at approximately 10:00 a.m.

April 28 .....**Venomous Reptiles with Rainforest Reptiles**, starting at 12:30 PM with a dessert potluck, as part of the Friends of Sessions Woods Annual Meeting. Please register for this popular program at **laura.rogers-castro@ct.gov** or by calling 860-424-3011.

2019 Hunting and Fishing Season Dates

April 13 .....Opening day of the trout season at 6:00 AM.

April 13-20 .....Junior Spring Turkey Hunter Training Days (excluding Sunday). More details are at *www.ct.gov/deep/JuniorHunter*.

April 24-May 25 .....Spring Turkey Hunting Season

*Consult the 2019 Connecticut Hunting and Trapping Guide and 2019 Connecticut Angler's Guide for specific season dates and details. Guides are available at DEEP facilities, town halls, and outdoor equipment stores, and also on the DEEP website (***www.ct.gov/deep/hunting; www.ct.gov/deep/fishing)**. *Go to* **www.ct.gov/deep/sportsmenlicensing** *to purchase Connecticut hunting, trapping, and fishing licenses, as well as required permits and stamps. The system accepts payment by VISA or MasterCard.*

Become a Connecticut Coverts Cooperator

The dates for the 2019 Coverts Project have been set for September 12-15 and applications are currently being accepted. Join land trust members, educators, and landowners for a three-day forest and wildlife management program. Make new friends and learn from a wonderful group of experts all while eating amazing food in the beautiful Great Mountain Forest in Falls Village, CT. Learn more at https://www.ctwoodlands.org/environmental-education/connecticut-coverts-cooperators.

Sign up to receive *Wildlife Highlights*, a free, electronic newsletter for anyone interested in Connecticut's wildlife and the outdoors! *www.ct.gov/deep/WildlifeHighlights*

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P. J. FUSCO

This common merganser is attempting to eat a very large, but tasty sunfish.