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Winter Reveals the Shapes of the Doug Rayner Wildlife Refuge

On a cold Saturday afternoon before the snow, I took a break from the obligations of work and home to explore the Doug Rayner Wildlife Refuge. As a volunteer for the BCLT Diamondback Terrapin Project, Rayner Wildlife Refuge or Nockum Hill as it is referred to, is a special place I visit regularly in the summertime. It is a place filled with habitats to explore from the overgrown farm-field edges bursting with wildflowers and tussocks of delicate grasses to the tall meadow, mudflats, marshland, and the ribbon of forest that embraces the land as it slopes into Hundred Acre Cove. It is a place that seems wild and out of the way even as the sounds of County Road across the cove encroach on my escape.



I have seen this place in the heat of summer, and well into the golden days of fall but this walk was my first time exploring the refuge in December and as I

walked briskly down the wide path leading to the sand pit (where I've seen mother turtles trudge to dig safe nests and baby turtles break free to hide among the leaf litter), I was struck by how the season had revealed the structure of this place. As someone who revels in the details, I had missed the bigger shapes of things that were now laid bare. Now I noticed the monotone canvas with its fine lines of trees and paths leading to the sandy high ground. Bluebird nests that fade into the living field now stand like mile markers across the field and the land seems still and quiet.

So full of life in the summer, this place is still a home, even as some local inhabitants are sleeping it out. A lucky family of crows claims this place as their own but likely shares the shrinking food pantry with grey squirrels, fox, coyote, rabbits, and wild turkey to name a few. Exploring the forest floor on the walk down to the water's edge reveals curious holes and dark alcoves that seem likely dens or refuges for small creatures.

The landscape opens up as I reach the shore. Phragmites to my right are bleached and blown thin. Their brittle stalks create a hollow rustling sound and lighten the scene with their milky-straw color. I walk down the path and beyond the bench to the sand and see the delicate footprints of deer. Their half-moon tracks give the impression that something strong and elegant has passed through this place.

The tan marsh grasses are frozen into the shapes the wind makes as it blows across



the water and the water is dark where it isn't cloudy and white with ice. The temperature has made this tidal zone solid and again reveals its hidden shapes. What looks flat and whole is really a labyrinth of intricately sculpted turns and tunnels from where fiddler crabs patrol the shoreline in warmer weather.

I walk on a bit and, amidst all the browns and greys, I find a stroke of color. Purplish-blue Ribbed Mussels tethered to the flat are unable to escape the cold, and instead wait patiently for the tides to wrap them up again. Another find, a large piece of driftwood dotted with empty barnacles looks like old teeth on a twisted skull. This place is still an adventure and as the afternoon wanes it looks stark and beautiful in grey-tones.

I am excited to have seen the Refuge now and reminded of what a legacy the people that worked to secure and protect this place have given to the wildlife and human inhabitants that live here. If you have not visited this special, wild place, be sure to plan a trip to explore Rayner Wildlife Refuge with friends or family. Just follow George Street to the end, park and follow the path!

Article and photos by Amy O'Donnell

Save The Farm!

Thanks to everyone for supporting the Save the Farm fund drive. We had a huge December, easily meeting our \$50,000 match challenge. To date, we have raised a whopping 85 percent of all funds needed to acquire the farm. The remaining task is to raise \$30,000 by February 20. We call it the "30 by 20 Challenge." If we get there, the Vendituoli farm on Federal Road will be protected for good and the farm will become a community asset.

We are optimistic we'll prevail and the farm school has ordered seeds and other supplies in preparation for the spring plantings. The Barrington Farm School is putting together a schedule soon and information on how you can visit the farm.

Please send any questions or ideas to Tim Faulkner at tcfaulkner5@gmail.com or call 401-330-6276. Donate at www.BLCT.org or mail to BLCT, PO Box 324, Barrington, R.I., Attention "Save the Farm"

BLCT Terrapin Project Wins Grant to Support Research

The BLCT Diamondback Terrapin Project has received a Sophie Danforth Conservation Biology Grant funded by the Conservation Programs of the Rhode Island Zoological Society. The Terrapin Project will utilize the grant funds to expand its conservation monitoring of the diamondback terrapins within the Rayner Wildlife Refuge on Hundred Acre Cove. Project participants will begin collecting new data on the hatchling population in the spring; new surveys of the adult population will commence in the summer.

Check back in the spring newsletter for a full report of the 2017 Terrapin efforts. We made big strides this year, and are looking forward to 2018!

Volunteers are Key to Stewardship Efforts

BLCT has stewardship and maintenance responsibilities for more than 73 properties – a huge responsibility it could not fulfill without help from many volunteers. BLCT's volunteer coordinator, Dr. Victor Lerish, does a fabulous job of maximizing various types of volunteer labor for the benefit of BLCT's properties.

The Tuesday Trails Team meets, weather permitting, on the second Tuesday of each month to do trail maintenance and construction, remove trash and invasive plants, and undertake beach cleanups. During 2017, the Tuesday Trails Team ran 9 events at 5 BLCT properties and the Osamequin Nature Preserve. Between 8 and 13 volunteers helped with each event, contributing a total of 169 hours to these efforts. Big thanks to the following volunteers for their commitment and hard labor over the past year: **Susan Beck, Ellen Berren, Peter Burke, Peter Dennehy, Jerry Gonville, Richard Greene, Mary Grover, Susan Hoagland, Victor Lerish, Rich MacKay, Alicyn Murphy, Cindy Pierce, Al Pointe, Tom Pezzullo, Ed Schlottland, Karl Stephens, and Helen Tjader.**

The Eagle Scouts are another valuable source of volunteer labor. There have been several Eagle Scout projects centered on Land Trust properties,

including one at St. Andrews Farm involving invasive plant clearing and trail maintenance in addition to hauling out litter and junk from the site.

In August, BLCT hosted a team from RI Audubon's Youth Conservation League on an all-day project at Pic-Wil Nature Preserve. The 7 students and their group leader collectively worked 48 hours removing invasive plants and continuing the forest management work that has been ongoing on that property.

The Environmental Club at Barrington High School collaborated with BLCT on a shoreline cleanup at Osamequin Nature Preserve in September.

BLCT looks forward to continued collaboration with volunteers throughout 2018. Volunteering provides an opportunity to be outdoors, to learn about local habitats, including best practices in managing these diverse properties, and to mingle with like-minded members of the community. Future plans include offering some weekend projects similar to the Tuesday Trails Team outings to accommodate interested volunteers who would prefer to help out on weekends. For more information, check out the BLCT website at <http://blct.org/blct/volunteer> or e-mail Victor Lerish at volunteers@blct.org.





Winter Birds of Barrington

Winter is peak time to see a variety of ducks and geese that travel to the Northeast from breeding grounds from as far away as the Arctic. Narragansett Bay and the coves and rivers accessible from many BLCT properties are good places to find both dabbling and diving ducks. Diving ducks -- such as mergansers, scaup, redheads, scoter, bufflehead, and goldeneye -- swim underwater in search of food, diving for invertebrates and fish. Dabbling ducks like mallards, teal, pintails, and gadwall do not dive underwater, but feed on surface vegetation, tipping ("dabbling") only the upper half of their bodies below the surface. Unlike divers, dabblers also forage on land for seeds.

There are other differences between dabblers and divers, such as wing shape and the position of the legs. The legs of a dabbling duck are closer to the center of the duck's body, helping it maintain balance when dabbling and also making it easier to walk on land. The legs of a diving duck are located closer to the rear of the body, which makes it awkward for the duck to walk on land but helps propel the bird when diving and swimming

underwater. Wing shape affects how the birds launch themselves from water. The longer, tapered wings of dabbling ducks enable them to fly more or less directly upwards from the water's surface, while diving ducks, with their shorter, stubbier wings, flap frantically while "running" across the water's surface to achieve "liftoff."

People sometimes wonder why the feet and legs of waterfowl don't freeze on ice and in severe cold. The secret to this adaptation in birds is the *rete mirabile*, a complex network of fine arteries that channels blood flow in a countercurrent system, reducing the heat of arterial blood as it travels to the legs and feet, then re-heating blood returning in the veins. By minimizing the disparity in temperature in the arteries and veins, enough blood is supplied to the birds' feet to keep the tissues supplied with nutrients and oxygen while ensuring that little heat is lost outward.

Locally, Echo Lake has been a good place to find gadwall, bufflehead and hooded mergansers. Bufflehead, a tiny diving duck, also can be found on Brickyard

Pond. Conspicuous with their extravagant fan-shaped crest, the black and white bufflehead frequents bays, estuaries, lakes, and ponds near the coastline. The hooded merganser, another diving duck, has equally striking plumage, with a chestnut-colored body, white breast with bold black stripes, and a bold white crest atop a black-and-white striped head.

Allin's Cove is home to American black duck, American wigeon, mallards, and brant, a small Arctic goose with a black neck and head and distinctive white "necklace." As the health of Allin's Cove has improved since its restoration years ago, a flock of American wigeon has taken up residence there. These dabbling ducks, formerly known as "baldpate," have a white stripe running from their pale bluish bill along the length of their heads; their faces are marked by iridescent green patches. Wigeon prefer wetlands and marshy areas surrounded by grassy vegetation, which their short, stubby bills are designed to dislodge. The return of these grasses to the Cove has made it a more hospitable place for these ducks. But in recent years, the upland grasses have been increasingly displaced by invasive phragmites; whether this will have an effect on the wigeon's presence there remains to be seen.

Finally, although most of us don't look twice at the Canada geese, winter flocks that can number in the hundreds offer the chance to find an outlier traveling with them. In the fall of 2017, a greater-white fronted goose was spotted at the Warren Reservoir, and since then, other rarities found in agricultural fields amidst large flocks of Canada geese have included snow geese, Ross's geese (Western birds rarely seen on the East Coast), and a pink-footed goose (a rare visitor from Greenland).

There are lots of feathered friends visiting the BLCT properties this winter, so grab your binoculars and head on out to take a look. You can check out a list of BLCT properties at <http://blct.org/blct/protected-lands>.

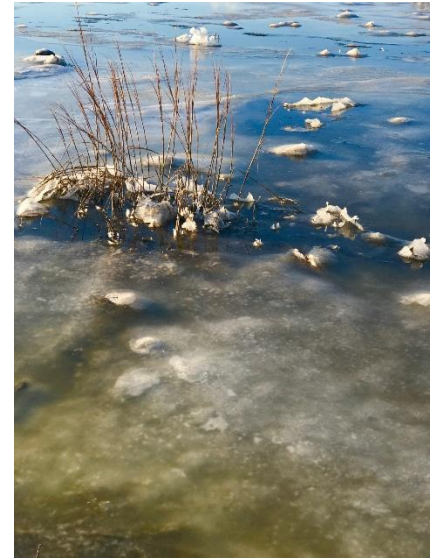
Article by Catherine Boisseau; Photos by Robert Puckett

Upcoming Events

Winter Scavenger Hunt!

February 23 at 10:00am

Winter is a great time to get outside and see some of the art and beauty of nature. A winter scavenger hunt at Osamequin Nature Preserve will help you and your family enjoy the outdoors and help sharpen your observation skills. Participants will be provided with a list of items and observations to search for during the approximately 1.5 mile walk along the west shore of Barrington's Hundred Acre Cove. This walk is ideal for elementary school-aged children and their adult companions but all are welcome, regardless of age. Everyone should dress warmly and with the expectation that you might get muddy. **There's more info on the Barrington Library website or by going here: <http://bit.ly/2rtWWmE>**



Photos by Robert Puckett

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www.BLCT.org or on
our Facebook page!

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