

# The Wrack Line

Newsletter of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge • Newburyport, MA



United States Fish & Wildlife Service

Summer 2014

*Summer on the Refuge:*

## “Prime Time” for Making Connections with Nature

By Matt Poole, Visitor Services Manager

Since 2006 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has supported a variety of initiatives and projects on national wildlife refuges that share the specific objective of providing opportunities for people — children, adults, and families — to forge meaningful, lasting connections with nature. Many public and non-profit organizations spawned similar programmatic efforts in the wake of the wildly popular *Last Child in the Woods*, in which author Richard Louv sounded the alarm about the growing disconnection in our society between children and nature. The book compellingly points to the negative impacts of such disconnections on human health—physical, mental, and emotional.



Photo by Maureen Farren

Bike tours provide visitors with fresh air, exercise and a more multisensory interpretive experience!



FWS/Matt Poole photo

Tide pooling programs are popular at the refuge in summer.

Summer at Parker River NWR is a great time of year for the refuge visitor to “work” at building nature connections. And the building process need not be high tech, structured, or complicated! What could be simpler, or perhaps even more “connective” than a child, holding a small bucket, wandering among the rocks in a tide pool looking for “critters?” It was exactly this seasonal, coastal pastime that Rachel Carson wrote so eloquently about in *The Sense of Wonder*.

Two new visitor services program offerings focus on getting the refuge visitor *out into nature*. Guided kayak tours of the salt marsh, supported by the recently completed water trail, immerse the visitor in the refuge’s most predominant wildlife habitat. What better way is there to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of a marsh than from the cockpit of a kayak as it slips along the meandering tidal creeks?

Our new guided bike tours, conducted along the refuge’s Wildlife Drive, present much of the same interpretive material that is covered during the popular van-based *Behind the Scenes Tour* — but does so in a manner that promotes fresh air, fitness, and a more multisensory experience.

# Pictures — Worth Far More Than a Thousand Words!

By *Alix McArdle, Kate Murray, & Karen Stahle, Refuge Volunteers / Archive Team*

The summer 2013 edition of *The Wrack Line* included a request for volunteers to take on the task of sorting, purging, and organizing boxfuls of photographs and slides accumulated over the years since establishment of Parker River NWR's in 1941. The intention is to create not only a historical archive for the Refuge, but also to initiate a library of images digitally preserved and available to the public for research, wildlife identification, and historical fact finding.



**Beach Life.** This photo from the early 1960's shows the old road (closer to the marsh) and the haphazard nature of parking on the refuge.



**Education:** Throughout refuge history, environmental education has been a priority. This 1987 picture shows the popular Project Wild workshop activity being conducted on the beach.

The refuge and its purpose has grown and evolved over the past seventy-three years – a history that is well documented in the old pictures. The original refuge purpose was to provide migratory waterfowl, such as the black duck, with valuable nesting, resting and feeding habitat. In the early days millet, buckwheat, and rye were planted at the southern end of the refuge to supplement the natural food available to these ducks and geese. Beginning in the early 1950's, freshwater impoundments were created, along with islands for safe nesting. The human pastimes of salt marsh haying, clamming, hunting, surf fishing, and beach going continued uninterrupted for many years. Eventually, roads and parking lots were constructed in early efforts to limit the impact of increased

vehicular traffic and other human activities on refuge lands and waters. Over time, the camps and cottages that existed prior to the creation of the refuge were absorbed and the land was allowed to revert to its natural state. Within the constraints of their “wildlife first” mission, national wildlife refuges began to promote what Congress identified as the six “wildlife dependent public uses,” or what refuge staff simply refer to as “The Big Six”: environmental education, wildlife observation and photography, interpretation, hunting and fishing.

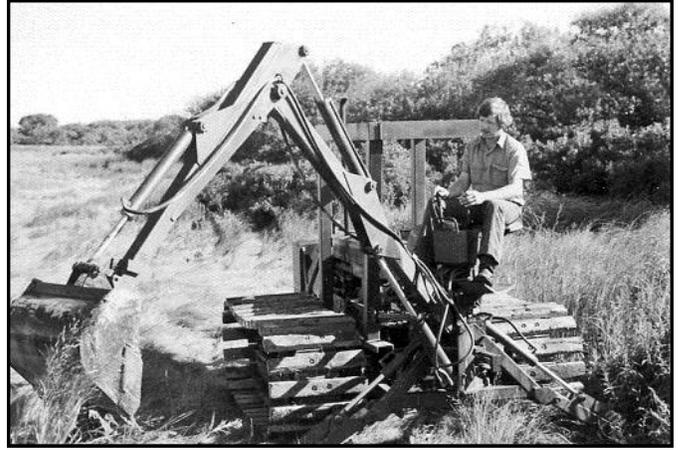
Upcoming editions of *The Wrack Line* will include articles on refuge history brought to life by the old photographs. These images illustrate some of the topical areas we are working on:



**Bird Monitoring.** Net cannons were used to capture ducks sitting on the beach in order to band them and monitor their health.



**Volunteers.** The refuge has always relied on the help of volunteers and annually hosts its own summer Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) program for trail blazing, beach cleaning, and boardwalk building. This 1993 photo is of a group from Turning Point, Inc.



**Construction** equipment was seldom designed for marsh use and required retrofitting by the ingenious maintenance staff. These wooden treads kept the heavy machines from sinking into the marsh.



**Education.** These are participants in the 1965 Youth Hunting Program. The curriculum included learning how to handle a rifle, marksmanship, and bird identification.



**Cottages** and camps dotted the landscape of the refuge when it became a federal property in 1941. As families passed on, the cottages came down and the dunes reclaimed the land.



**Management Strategies.** Controlled burns, like this one at Stage Island, were once used to help manage exotic, invasive plant species.



In 1987 the deer hunt was reintroduced. Biologists determined that the finite environment could not sustain the growing herds, with starvation and disease on the rise. One day each year is set aside for the hunt.

## The Refuge Beach is for the Birds

By Kaytee Hojnacki, Biological Technician

The age-old debate rages on: is the beach for people or is it for the piping plover? Recent articles in the Wall Street Journal (*Plover Protections Ruffle Feathers in Northeast*, May 30, 2014) and Boston Globe (*Move Over, Plover; the Beach is for People*, June 7, 2014) continue to express the frustration that the beach-going public feel when they are excluded from public beaches due to nesting piping plovers. Yet you have a large portion of the public who support the efforts to protect this 2-ounce shorebird. Nature-lovers and concerned citizens alike don't mind losing a portion of their beach for a few months; many even enjoy watching the full nesting cycle. Truly, who couldn't help but smile when they see the tiny chicks (two cotton balls on toothpicks) running around the beach?

As for Parker River NWR, it is well known that we are on the side of the plover. Since the listing of the Atlantic population as threatened in 1986 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the refuge has closed the beach to all recreational use starting in 1990. The restrictions were eased in 2001, when the Lot 1 portion was left open for the public's use. This balance between public use and nesting plovers is one that occurs

throughout the breeding range of these shorebirds. Both humans and plovers prefer the same beach "habitat," making it essential that if the birds are to have undisturbed areas to nest, then sections of the beach need to be closed to human use. Due to the narrow nature of the refuge beach, this means closing our full length. But at other beaches (such as at Sandy Point State Reservation), sections of

the beach can be roped off for plovers while people are free to use the remaining beach area.

To many, this simply is not acceptable. They feel that people have the right to the full beach, endangered

species or not. Town officials are stuck trying to keep their taxpaying citizens happy while at the same time obeying federal ESA laws. At times it can be a tough position to be in. Luckily for the piping plover, while many people gripe, the symbolic fencing and beach closures remain in place, protecting their hallowed grounds. And while it will never be possible to sway everyone onto the plover's side, we here at Parker River NWR hope to spread a little more plover love.

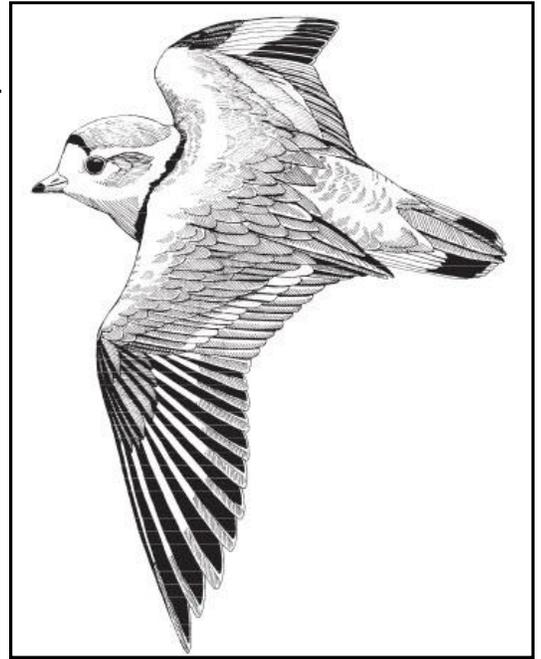


Image of piping plover chick by photographer Chip Gray

## Counting Berries... In the Name of Science

By Kaytee Hojnacki, Biological Technician

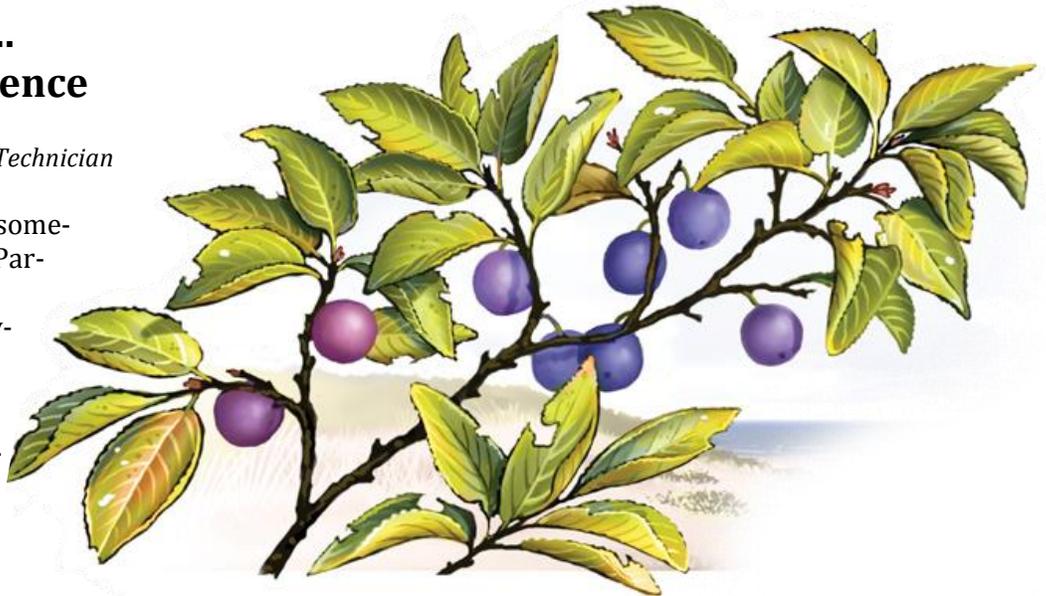
While many people may be somewhat familiar with some of Parker River NWR's biological projects, such as piping plover monitoring, saltmarsh sparrow research, and invasive plant management, most people aren't aware of the many smaller projects that are done by the refuge's biological staff.

These include: acoustic bat surveys, salt marsh integrity monitoring, and adaptive shrub management. It is this latter project that many visitors have witnessed over the years, and will continue to witness in future years, as refuge grasslands are shifted to shrublands. Beginning in 2008, Parker River NWR, in conjunction with three other coastal refuges, began working toward providing prime maritime shrub habitat. Here our focus is on providing important habitat for fall migrating songbirds, which frequently stop within the refuge to feast on the plentiful berries.

### phe-nol-o-gy:

periodic biological phenomena that are correlated with climatic conditions (such as bird migration, and the ripening of berries)

Monitoring the quantity, phenology, and species composition of these berries is essential as we collect and analyze data that will help inform management decisions in future years. As part of the adaptive shrub project, we conduct berry counts in the fall, following a standardized protocol. But from our personal observations, we felt that many of the berries were no longer on the plants at the time allotted for surveying. This is what spurred us to create



the berry phenology project, started in 2010. During this project, we follow specific shrubs from flowering, through fruit development, until the berries are dropped or consumed. Each week, berries are counted (in a quick/rough estimate) and the percentage of unripe and ripe fruit is recorded.

With this data, we are able to determine the amount of berries that develop in a given year and whether these berries are available for fall migrants (by tying in with bird survey data collected separately). This will then be used to inform our decision-making process, especially as we look to restore several more grassland areas to maritime shrubs.

### *Call for Volunteers!*

*The biological staff is looking for an individual to adopt the berry phenology project. The data collection is very easy to do and requires about 2 hours, once a week, from mid-June through the end of October. If interested, please contact Nancy Pau at [nancy\\_pau@fws.gov](mailto:nancy_pau@fws.gov) or 978-465-5753.*

# Big Challenges, Big Opportunities!

By Nancy Pau, Wildlife Biologist

I have a job that most people dream about. I was reminded of this recently when a very prominent and accomplished researcher said to me, “Oh you’re the biologist at Parker River. When I was little, I came to Plum Island all the time and dreamt of one day growing up to be you.” Being a biologist at Parker River does come with many rewards, but it can also be daunting at times. This has been especially true in the past few years with a shrinking federal budget that resulted in cuts in refuge staff and the overwhelming challenge of managing the refuge in the context of climate change impacts.

While the climate forecasts can be foreboding and can easily lead any conservationist to depression, I am amazed by the human ingenuity and spirit that can dream up new ways of facing insurmountable challenges. Climate change hit too close to home for many (literally) when several homes on Plum Island were lost during winter storms 2 years ago. The refuge and our conservation partners are also seeing signs of climate impacts in our salt marshes, beaches and other habitats while local communities are seeing shoreline erode and roads flood during high tides.

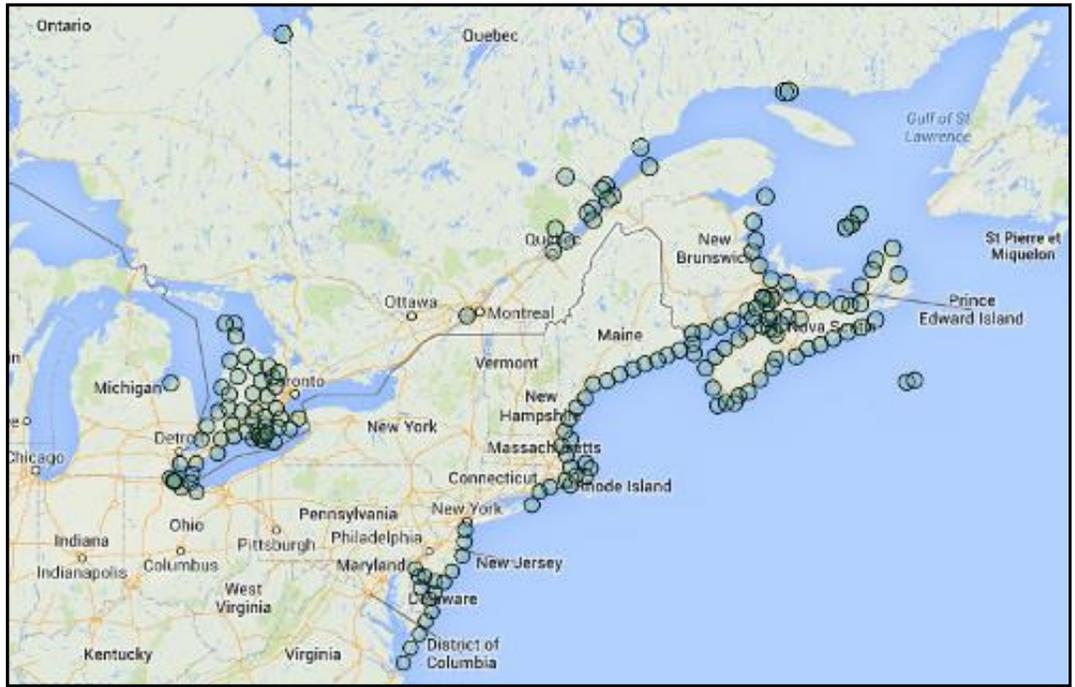
In many ways, Hurricane Sandy and the nor’easters that caused loss of coastal property were a catalyst for change. In the past 2 years, I’ve seen many efforts and partnerships emerge to address these very complicated challenges. These include (1) Storm Surge group that has been educating themselves and the greater Newburyport community on issues on climate change and how to help communities prepared for sea level rise and storm surge, (2) the Merrimack River Beach Alliance

which has been meeting to discuss both short and long term solutions to beach erosion on Plum Island and Salisbury, and (3) several new conservation partnerships (Parker, Ipswich, Essex Rivers Restoration Partnership or PIER2, Great Marsh Coalition, and Great Marsh Resiliency Partnership) formed specifically to address various aspects of climate change. All these groups recognize the need for expanded partnerships in order to address the challenges they face and have been sharing information across disciplines.

Hurricane Sandy provided significant federal funding through two Department of Interior grants to address climate impacts through increased

Project	Lead Organizations	Description
<b>Joint Projects (Funded by both Sandy Grants)</b>		
Salt marsh restoration through treatment of invasives	Refuge Merrimack Valley Planning Commission Mass Audubon	Restore salt marsh from Salisbury to Essex through removal of two invasive plants, <i>Phragmites</i> and perennial pepperweed. This project will increase health and resiliency of salt marsh and preserve its wildlife, cultural, and economic value.
Hydrodynamic Model of the Great Marsh	Refuge MVPC	Develop a hydrological model of the Great Marsh (from Merrimack River to Essex Bay) that will incorporate hydrological flow, salinity patterns, and sediment transport between ocean, barrier beach, and salt marsh systems. The model will help us understand future vulnerabilities and make inform decisions on habitat restoration and mitigation planning for the coastal communities.
<b>Refuge-funded projects</b>		
Innovative <i>Phragmites</i> Control	Refuge, Land Management Research and Demonstration program	In addition to tradition control of <i>Phragmites</i> , we are piloting some new methods that do not involve pesticide. Two common items that have some promise is sugar and salt. We will be testing these applications in <i>Phrag</i> stands to look at viability for large-scale treatment.
Salt marsh hydrology restoration	Refuge, LMRD program	Hydrological functions in salt marsh are rapidly changing in response to climate impacts. The Refuge is piloting some technics that should assist with this adaptation. Ditch remediation involves assisting old mosquito ditches to heal by placing loose vegetation in the ditches. Runnel creation builds shallow channels where water can drain off marsh platforms that are becoming increasingly wet.
Coastal Shrub restoration	Refuge	Restore 50 acres of coastal shrub habitat at Great Bay and Parker River Refuges to increase resiliency and to facilitate salt marsh migration.
<b>Partner-funded Projects</b>		
Restore hydrological barriers	Ipswich River Watershed Association	Inventory and assess over 1,000 man-made structures for vulnerability to flooding and impact to hydrological flow and fish movement. The top 100 highest risk crossings will be selected for engineering redesign to reduce flooding risk and restore hydrology.
Dune Restoration	University of New Hampshire, Dept of Conservation and Recreation	Restore 6 miles of dunes from Newbury to Salisbury using sand nourishment, native planting, and innovative fencing methods to dissipate wave and wind energy and protect coastal communities
Eelgrass Restoration	UNH, MVPC	Restore 3 acres of eelgrass bed to dissipate wave energy and stabilize channels and shorelines
Community Resiliency Planning	IRWA, National Wildlife Federation	Assist the six communities (Salisbury, Newburyport, Newbury, Rowley, Ipswich, Essex) in understanding infrastructure vulnerabilities from sea level rise and storm surge and human mitigation efforts in order to make informed decisions and prioritize mitigation projects

resiliency of natural and coastal communities. The refuge received \$420,000 to increase resiliency of refuge habitats and improve scientific understanding to inform management decisions. In June, our conservation partners in the Great Marsh, with National Wildlife Federation as the lead applicant, received \$2.9 million for the Great Marsh. The table on the previous page provides a brief summary of how the refuge and partners will use these Sandy funds to address climate threats and make the Great Marsh more resilient.



In 2014 more than 300 automated receiver stations will be deployed by dozens of researchers in order to track animal migration throughout the eastern flyway. (Copyright Bird Studies Canada)

Another challenge that prompted human ingenuity is large scale development of wind power. While wind power is one of the cleanest and most viable alternative energy options in the Northeast, it also highlighted some information gaps in the scientific community. In trying to assess potential impacts to birds and bats from wind turbines, many of which will be sited in the same routes used by these species for migration, we realized that we don't know exact routes, heights and distance from shore that many of our birds and bats take during migration. To address this gap in knowledge, a professor at Arcadia University, Phil Taylor, turned to technology. Using very light radio transmitters and low-cost, home-made automated receiving stations, Dr. Taylor and his team developed a system that allows researchers to track animals over large distances and round-the-clock, without need for personnel to manually track the animals. In partnership with Professor Rebecca Holberton at UMaine, they coordinated researchers and a network of towers across the Gulf of Maine and beyond to study migratory patterns and behavior of animals in ways never possible before. Parker River Refuge participated in the pilot research in 2013. This year, we will be part of the network of more than 300 towers from Arctic Canada to Virginia tracking animals tagged by dozens of researchers. At Parker River and Great Bay refuges, in addition to contributing to increased

understanding of flyway movements, we are also interested in some local and regional questions regarding a few species of interest.

**Shorebirds.** Parker River NWR and the Great Marsh is very important as a migratory stopover for shorebirds migrating between their breeding grounds in the Arctic and South America. We have many different habitats that support shorebirds, including beach, salt marshes, tidal flats, and impoundments. Regionally, it's important to understand how these shorebirds use the refuge during their migration. Do shorebirds leave from the Bay of Fundy and hopscotch down the coast at several stopovers? Or do they fuel up at Parker River and make the long over-water migration to the Caribbean or South America. Locally, we also want to understand how the shorebirds use various habitats at different times of day and tides so that we can better provide for their migratory needs (e.g. timing of impoundment management and disturbance from public activities).

**Salt Marsh Sparrows.** The salt marsh sparrow is a very unusual bird that spends its entire life in salt marshes and nests in only from Maine to Delaware. The salt marshes in and around Parker River provide nesting habitat for a significant portion of the world's population. The Refuge has been working with partners to study this very secretive bird for the past 10 years. With this nanotag technology, we will be able to

address some long-unanswered questions, such as (1) how long do young sparrows stay once they fledge and how much local movement do they make?; and (2) do the high mercury content in sparrows affect juvenile survival?

**Northern long-eared bats.** The northern long-eared bat has been proposed for federal listing as endangered, and Great Bay NWR supports a large breeding and migrating population of this species. While this species has drastically collapsed throughout much of its range due to white-nose syndrome, it appears to be hanging on in some coastal areas. One theory is that the coastal bats may be using coastal hibernacula where they are not being exposed to white-nose syndrome. Through the nanotag study, we're hoping to learn where these bats may be migrating to. We will also be studying how the

bats use the refuge during the breeding season and when they leave their summer home to inform forest management practices.

I have been doing a lot of refuge and regional planning in the last few years for the refuge's comprehensive planning effort and to address climate challenges. While the threats and the tasks before us are overwhelming and could potentially lead to paralysis, I am very encouraged by the innovative spirit and solutions that our partners have developed to address these very complicated challenges. Through these partnership efforts, both new and existing, I am optimistic that we can rise to the challenge of protecting and conserving our coastal resources and coastal communities in this ever-changing landscape.

## Building capacity in our Conservation Ambassadors...



*On a warm Friday afternoon in late June, refuge biologist Nancy Pau led a group of 15 refuge volunteers on a guided tour of the refuge that focused on many of the research and management activities that she and her staff are involved in across the year.*

*Refuge volunteers who have a greater grasp of such things as the salt marsh sparrow research project, piping plover management, efforts to understand the impacts of climate change and sea level rise on the salt marsh, and invasive species management strategies are more effective as refuge conservation ambassadors.*

## Meet Refuge Volunteer:

### Linda Stewart

By Jean Adams, Outdoor Recreation Planner

If you come into the Visitor Center on Thursday mornings or Saturday afternoons, you are likely to be greeted by a very friendly volunteer who will go above and beyond to help you out and make you feel welcome. Her name is Linda Stewart and she has been a volunteer here at Parker River for over 5 years.



Along with filling bird feeders, refuge volunteer Linda Stewart has been greeting the public at the visitor center for five years!

A native of California, Linda came to this area 11 years ago, working as a nanny. Although she is the true definition of a “people person,” she also has a special affinity for animals. In fact, she worked for many years at a wildlife rehab center in California. Now, she does side work as a pet sitter and adores her canine clients.

When asked what she likes most about working at the information desk, she says that meeting folks from all over the country and the world is a real thrill. She especially likes engaging the kids in activities and getting them excited about all that the refuge has to offer. She says that if you can get the kids involved, the parents get interested too –which helps gain support for the Service’s mission.

There is so much positive, caring energy within Linda that it is hard not to be in a good mood when talking to her. She cares so much about others that she even volunteers at the Jean Geiger Crisis Center, where she works with the children of troubled families. There is no limit to her big heart and enthusiasm. Linda is willing to help out at a moment’s notice and seems to think we are doing her a favor by having her here instead the other way around.

Linda is the kind of person we love having as the “public face of the refuge.” She projects a very positive and helpful public image, a very good thing indeed. Although she always thanks me at the end of the day, I am the one who should thank her. She is a great asset to our volunteer workforce. Linda Stewart is the “real deal” and we are lucky to have her!

## Call for Volunteers:

### Help Us Rid An Invader!

The Great Marsh Weed Warriors volunteers, Ipswich High School volunteers, Sparhawk Students and Essex Correctional Facility residents have been busy in the salt marsh! They have volunteered their time to pull pepperweed. The ongoing Perennial Pepperweed Control project is coordinated by Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, Massachusetts Audubon and other partners that work together to control the invasive species in the Great Marsh. As of Friday June 20<sup>th</sup> we had managed to pull 95 bags of pepperweed with the help of 106 volunteers that donated 355 hours!

If you would like to help in the fight against our *Public Enemy Number 1*, please contact Frances Toledo Rodriguez, Biological Technician, at (978) 465-5753, ext. 203 or email here at [Frances.Rodriguez@fws.gov](mailto:Frances.Rodriguez@fws.gov).



Bags filled with pepperweed being transported to a special location for proper disposal.

## Willetts: You Hear Them, But Have You Seen Them?

By Linda Schwartz, Refuge Volunteer

Many of you have probably seen a rather large shorebird around some of the fields at Parker River and wondered what it was. That bird may well have been a willet. Willets are a rather large, stocky shorebird in the sandpiper family. Chances are you have seen and heard willets, though you may not have realized it. They tend to hunt for crustaceans and other invertebrates by probing in the mud with their sensitive bills. Unlike some shorebirds, they tend to forage for food by themselves instead of in groups. They can frequently be seen sitting on fence posts.



They look like a fairly non-descript shorebird as they busily probe for food in the mud. They have a grey or brown or black mottling of their feathers with bluish grey legs. From a distance they can resemble the greater yellowlegs, only they are larger and stockier with dark colored legs as opposed to yellow legs. They have a heavy, straight bill longer than the length of their head. The definitive identifying mark is the striking white and black stripe that runs the length of their wings.



They frequently will raise their wings upwards as part of a display when frightened. The stripe is also very visible when they fly.

The willet's is one of the more dominant calls in the symphony of bird sounds heard at Parker River. Roughly described as "pill-will-willet," this call is repeated constantly, particularly in the salt marsh, where they often nest. You may also hear "kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk."

Their nests can be very well hidden, as the female will pull grass over the nest, making it very difficult to see. Both the male and female take care of the eggs, with the male spending the night on the nest. They lay 4-5 eggs that are grey to olive in color, marked with brown speckles.

Willetts declined sharply in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to hunting and egg collecting. Their numbers have since increased considerably, though they are still at risk due to salt marsh habitat loss.



**Piping plover chicks are a magnet for photographers. Here are some images from members of the Photographic Society of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge**



Allan Rube photo



Maria Kacavas photo



JR Valente photo



Kim Caruso photo



Jo-Ann Matthews photo



Jo-Ann Matthews photo



David Wornham photo

## Shipwrecks Along Plum Island

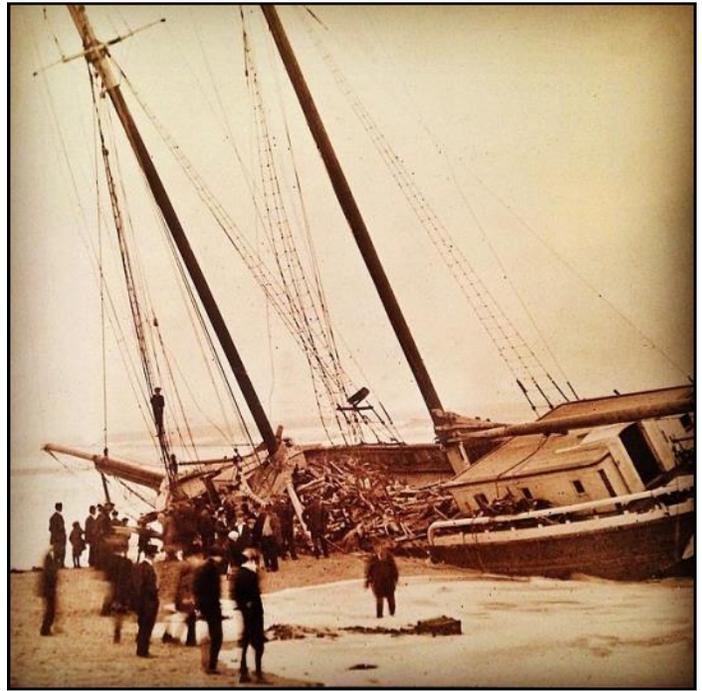
By Mark Quarantiello, Refuge Volunteer

When approaching the oceanfront of Plum Island through the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, it is difficult not to be impressed by the vast, undulating sand dunes that stretch as far north and south as the eye can see. The copper colored sand is so plentiful that it was once used to build the foundation of Boston's Back Bay area. Old schooners called "sand droghers" were used to transport the sand to Boston and many other locales. Yet, it was the constantly shifting nature of this same beautiful sand that created navigational obstacles and menaced local mariners. Since the 1600s hundreds of shipwrecks have occurred along these pristine sandy beaches and sandbars—devastation that continues in modern times as the ever changing shoreline occasionally gobbles-up errant seamen.

Many of the well documented shipwrecks along Plum Island occurred during the 1800's, when the working ports of Newburyport, Ipswich and Essex were in their heyday. Ipswich Bay forms a natural "catcher's mitt" and Plum Island a perfect "pocket" for wayward vessels — especially when a Nor'easter rages, pushing the vessels hard against the barrier island. The schooners of old could not efficiently sail up into the wind and were therefore very prone to being pressed right into the island's waiting shoreline.

Standing at the oceans edge, one looks north toward the tip of Plum Island and the treacherous waters of the mouth of the Merrimack River. The Merrimack is considered one of the most dangerous waterways in our entire country. The area has witnessed hundreds of shipwrecks and an unimaginable number of boating accidents.

The southern end of the island, in and around Sandy Point, has also claimed many ships over the years and continues to haunt even the savviest of local mariners with its constantly changing sandbars and rip currents. So abundant were shipwrecks in this area that, in 1786, the Massachusetts Humane Society was formed. By 1806 the Society had set up a system of small huts along many remote Massachusetts beaches to provide shelter and supplies for stranded shipwreck survivors.



Typical image of a Plum Island shipwreck that might be encountered in a newspaper during the early 1900s.

A U.S. Life Saving Station was established on Plum Island in 1890 (near the beach at a point just south of the refuge's parking lot 4). Initially called the Knobbs Beach Station, the name was later changed to the Plum Island Life Saving Station. Another life saving station stood at the northern end of Plum Island to service the menacing mouth of the Merrimack River. The stations were staffed with trained personnel who were all too often called upon, along with any available volunteers, to employ their advanced rescue techniques of the day. Their heroics often employed the use of the "Lyle Gun" and "Breeches Buoy." This equipment was used to fire out lines and flotation devices from shore to aid the near shore endangered vessels and the crews that manned them.

In 1915, Newburyport became the official birthplace of the U.S. Coast Guard when the U.S. Life Saving Service and the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service were merged. U.S. Coast Guard Station Merrimack River still operates in Newburyport and plays a vital role in helping to maintain safety in this area of the eastern seaboard.

Some of the most notable, documented wrecks on Plum Island were sailing vessels such as the Ingo-mar (1936), the Brave (1893), the Pocahontas (1839), the Lombard (1837) the Bluebird (1805), the Nancy (1849), the Lizzie M. Haskell (1886),

the Abbie & Eva Hooper (1895), the Pearl Nelson (1914) and the steamer City Point (1883).

The Ingomar can sometimes still be seen on the refuge beach at extreme low tides when the sands have shifted enough to expose the remnants of her skeletal wood remains. Built in 1904 in Essex, MA, the Ingomar was one of the noblest and most efficient fishing schooners of her day and was known for breaking many halibut fishing records. She went aground in a thick fog and heavy sea in February of 1936 under the command of Captain John Atwood. While the captain was able to guide his 21 men to safety, the famous vessel could not be saved. Ironically, the vessel's back was broken right near the site of the former Plum Island Life Saving Station. And so goes the story of so many other vessels that grounded on the sprawling course brown sands of Plum Island.

Of all the shipwrecks that have occurred along the southern end of the island, one that stands out is the Pearl Nelson, which wrecked in 1914. No better account of this wreck can be told than that taken directly from the wreck report logged by the Plum Island Life Saving Station Keeper Frank E. Stevens: "The schooner named above while bound from Lubec, ME to Mystic, CT, and when about 4 miles N. West of Isle of Shoals on the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup>, at about 6PM during thick and stormy weather sprang a leak, filled and rolled over on her beam ends. The schooner remained in this position, with the crew lashed to the shrouds during the night, and until she drifted ashore and stranded on the shoal off the Island. During the long night the crew were washed by the seas, the men being badly bruised and suffering while clinging to the waterlogged wreck. At about 3:30 am on Sunday the 30<sup>th</sup>, the schooner had drifted across the bay to the shoal off this Island (Plum Island) where she became stranded in the heavy breakers, when they were all washed overboard, three (3) of the men being saved by being washed ashore on the beach, while clinging to pieces of wreckage, the other two (2) seamen being drowned in the heavy breakers. The three (3) seamen saved, after partly recovering their strength, walked across the beaches to a cottage owned by Mr. Wm. Steel. Mr. Steel having no accommodations for the seamen at his cottage took them to another nearby cottage owned by Mr. Harlan Noyes, who for this time being they were kindly cared for. Mr. Steel then ran to this station a distance of about 2 miles and reported the disaster to the Keeper, with all facts in his possession, he stating that the schooner was a total wreck (this information he received from the wrecked sailors) nothing being left of



Plum Island Life Saving Station, circa 1936.

her except the broken-pieces of wreckage which was scattered along the shore."

So common were shipwrecks on Plum Island, that one could often pick up a local newspaper and see very matter-of-fact accounts of local wrecks such as that of the Nancy in 1849. According to the Boston Evening Transcript, "Schooner Nancy of Wiscasset, with a cargo of bricks from some eastern port, bound for Boston, went on shore on Monday night on Plum Island and has entirely gone to pieces. A considerable quantity of female wearing apparel, furniture, bedding, and a letter to a lady in Boston drifted ashore from the wreck. There was no one on board, and all hands are supposed to be lost."

Shipwrecks on Plum Island still occur. A large construction barge got caught on a sandbar and ran aground just below the south jetty (which borders the Merrimack River's mouth), in 2002. Salvage crews removed the disabled vessel by disassembling it in place. In 2012, a small sailboat on a journey from Maine to Florida lost its way in the fog, amidst five to seven foot waves, ending up grounded on the refuge beach. This vessel was successfully re-floated on the next high tide.

Fortunately, no one was hurt in these more recent mishaps. But as many onlookers gathered to observe these incidents, one can't help but wonder about the memories of shipwrecks long ago that were conjured-up in their hearts and minds.

## Take the Bus and Leave the Driving to Us!

The refuge’s new 18 passenger bus was recently “dressed-up” with the official logo of the National Wildlife Refuge System—the “blue goose” — and other identifying information. Our bus is currently waiting patiently as a small group of staff and volunteers pursue their commercial driver’s license.

In the months ahead, be looking for our popular *Behind the Scenes Tours* to be raised to a more comfortable and visible level!



## Speaking of Greyhounds...

One of the “cool things” about being involved in a project to organize the refuge’s entire collection of photographs and slides is running across images like this. This photo, from the 1960’s, shows (presumably) the then refuge manager giving a *Behind the Scenes*-style tour — on the dike road no less! — to a group of birders who were travelling by motor coach!

## Chasing Invasives!

Invasive plants and animals have often been referred to as “public enemy number one” on America’s national wildlife refuges. Here at Parker River one of the higher priority target species is perennial pepperweed. Recently, the refuge borrowed an agency-owned “Marsh Master” to significantly “ramp-up” our control efforts in and around the salt marsh. The lightweight tracked vehicle somewhat resembles a World War 1 era tank—providing all sorts of fodder for “War on Invasives” metaphors!





FWS/Matt Poole photo

*“This is one of the more beautiful scenes I’ve yet experienced during my nearly four years at Parker River. To have stumbled upon a scene with such a near perfect convergence of light, color, pattern, and mood was special indeed. To have had a camera with me at the time was simply icing on the cake!”* Matt Poole, Visitor Services Manager

**U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE**  
**Water Trail Guide**  
 Parker River National Wildlife Refuge

Because the majority of wildlife habitat at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge is salt marsh, one of the best ways to see and experience the refuge is by canoe or kayak. Our new water trail, which begins and ends at the boat launch (opposite Lot 1), will aid in your exploration. The water trail is comprised of two segments: Orange Trail (markers 1-6) and Yellow Trail (markers 7-13). Both segments are out and back. Please allow approximately 2-2.5 hours round trip for the Orange Trail. For the Yellow Trail, which covers a greater distance, allow 2.5-3 hours. Travel times are approximate and will vary with paddler ability and pace.

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The refuge’s new salt marsh water trail and related guide have been getting a lot of use this spring and summer.

**The Wrack Line**, official newsletter of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, is generally published on a quarterly basis—fall, winter, spring, and summer.

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