The TIDAL PAGE
News of Rhode Island's Salt Ponds
Fall/Winter 2026

Connecting Our Community to the Ponds

By Angela Brunetti and Alicia Schaffner, SPC Staff Members

With the spring and summer seasons winding down, we're taking a look back at a busy year of education and outreach. Connecting people with their local environment and encouraging stewardship of our beautiful salt ponds is a central tenet of SPC's mission. This year, we brought that mission to life through school field trips, Salt Pond Safaris, paddles, birding and art programs, a new seaweed pressing workshop, and our Annual Meeting. Together, these programs gave hundreds of children and adults the opportunity to learn more about the places we all work to protect.



PARTICIPANTS GAZE AT BIRDS ON QUONNIE POND DURING THIS YEAR'S BIRD WALK.

Bringing Students to the Ponds

Education Committee members and volunteers welcomed 92 students from two local schools this year. Third graders from North Stonington and fourth graders from Kingston Hill Academy spent time exploring the salt ponds and learning about the creatures that call them home. Using SPC's science curriculum and hands-on activities, students learned about the adaptations that allow plants and animals to thrive in the salt pond environment and how everyday human activities and environmental factors can affect pond health.

We had hoped to host a third field trip this year, but unfortunately, inclement weather forced its cancellation. Even so, we're grateful to the teachers and parents who helped make this year's field trips a success. We continue to look for opportunities to introduce more local students to the ponds and expand these programs in the years ahead.

Exploring the Ponds with Salt Pond Safaris

Our Salt Pond Safaris once again gave children (and plenty of enthusiastic adults!) the chance to get right into

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Message from the President

Dear Members,

With fall upon us, it is time to reflect on the past year. I would like to personally thank all our volunteers including the Pond Watchers, program educators, Board Members, and more who keep SPC rolling.

We recently celebrated all of our volunteers with an appreciation gathering at George's of Galilee. This was our first time hosting the event there, and it was an evening of good food, good company, as well as a well-deserved thank you to the people who give so much of their time to SPC.

I would also like to extend a special thank you to Marshall Mugge. Marshall has served on SPC's board since 2010 and has been its Treasurer almost as long. He has put countless hours into this role, and we appreciate his service. Marshall has decided to stay on the Board but will hand off the reins to newly elected Treasurer, Tim Kenefick. Tim has years of financial experience and SPC will continue to be in good hands.

It truly is the people that have the biggest impact on SPC as an organization. What I have learned over the years came from those who lived and worked on the ponds before us. Recently, I lost the last of my great mentors who taught me so much about the ponds, Capt. Bob Smith. Bob, along with John Crandall, Sr. (Board Member, John Crandall's father) and Tom Saunders, all made their living fishing on the ponds. (See our spotlight on John Crandall on page 8.) They taught me about so many different aspects of the ponds and during my working days at RIDEM, I would look to them for guidance as we discussed what measures we could take to sustain our resources. Our hope is that through our various education programs we continue to share this knowledge with you and the local community so we can all be good stewards of the ponds for the future generations. ✦

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OUR MISSION

Salt Ponds Coalition's mission is to protect and enhance the health of the salt ponds for the benefit of wildlife and people. We are the official State-designated watershed council for RI Coastal Ponds. SPC was founded in 1985 with the creation of our water quality monitoring program, and multiple local groups coming together to protect the ponds more concertedly. We monitor six salt ponds in southwestern Rhode Island: Pt. Judith, Potter, Green Hill, Ninigret, Quonochontaug, and Winnapaug Ponds. Our organization is nearly 100% member-funded and is supported by amazing volunteers who serve as Board Directors, Committee Members, Pond Watchers, and Educators for our programs.

"Caught on the Pond"

by Angela Brunetti

This year marks my fifth year with the Salt Ponds Coalition, and it was finally time for me to get out there and experience water quality monitoring firsthand. Pond Watchers Rick Anderson and Joanne Niland welcomed me with open arms, and I had a great time on the boat with them to their deep site on Ninigret Pond.

When I had to miss a week, Rick sent me a photo from his boat showing his sampling equipment as he headed out to monitor the pond. I loved how the photo captured such a simple but important part of life on our ponds. It got me thinking: wouldn't it be fun to see more of the ponds through the eyes of the people who spend time on and around them?



PHOTO BY RICK ANDERSON

So, we're asking our members, friends, Pond Watchers, volunteers, and anyone who loves the salt ponds to share your photos with us. Maybe you've captured a beautiful sunset over the water, a bird from your dock, an osprey diving for dinner, a day out kayaking, or a moment while out monitoring. Maybe a storm was rolling in, snow was falling, or one of the ponds had the rare experience of icing over. We want to see it all!

We'll be featuring photos in future issues of *The Tidal Page* and in SPC communications, with credit to the photographer. You don't need to be a professional photographer — we're much more interested in the moments you notice and the different ways you experience our ponds.

Email your photos to angela@joinsaltponds.com along with your name, the pond where the photo was taken, and a brief description of what we're seeing.

Show us the salt ponds through your eyes—we can't wait to see what you've captured. ✦

2026 BACTERIA RECAP

SPC's 2026 monitoring season wrapped up in early October, and we're sharing this year's bacteria results! All 28 Pond Watching sites are sampled monthly for bacteria, with twice-monthly sampling at ten sites. We test for both fecal coliform and enterococci bacteria which are indicative of shellfish sanitation and swimming standards respectively. Rhode Island experienced below-average rainfall and drought conditions this summer, particularly in June. However, intense, isolated storms brought heavy rain and runoff, potentially carrying pollutants into local waterbodies. After droughts, dry soil absorbs less water, increasing surface runoff and the likelihood of short-term bacteria spikes in our samples.

At the end of the season, almost every site came in well below the acceptable standard for bacteria. There are a few of areas of concern, including:

- Upper areas of Point Judith Pond (Ram Point and Long Cove) as well as the Saugatucket River. We are integrating more Saugatucket data into our existing dataset in order to find potential sources of pollution that flow down river into Point Judith Pond. We recently submitted data to RI Department of Environmental Management to support their preparation of a Saugatucket River Watershed Management Plan.

- Allen's Cove in western Green Hill Pond which had some issues towards the beginning of the sampling

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Connecting Community, continued from page 1
the water and discover what lives beneath the surface. Using a 30-foot seine net, SPC staff and volunteers swept through the shallows of Ninigret and Quonochontaug Ponds, bringing the catch back to shore for everyone to examine.

This year, more than 125 children participated through our public safaris and summer camp programs with the Weekapaug Yacht Club and Clark Street School in Westerly. Participants encountered all kinds of salt pond residents, including silversides, pufferfish, scallops, spider and blue crabs, sea squirts, jellies, and other invertebrates. We even caught a lookdown fish, a tropical visitor that occasionally makes its way into our ponds in late summer, as well as a large horseshoe crab.

But perhaps the most memorable discovery happened right in one of our buckets. During one safari, a male pipefish gave birth to hundreds of tiny pipefish, giving participants an extraordinary up-close look at the salt ponds' role as a nursery for so many species. It was the kind of unexpected moment that makes these programs so special, and a reminder that there is always something new to discover in our ponds!



A JUVENILE LOOKDOWN FISH, A TROPICAL VISITOR TO THE PONDS.

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Learning for All Ages

Our education programs aren't just for children. This year, we continued offering opportunities for adults to learn about and experience the salt ponds from different perspectives.

At our Annual Meeting, we welcomed Jon Dodd of the Atlantic Shark Institute, who shared his work studying and tagging sharks in local waters. His presentation gave attendees a fascinating look at the sharks that inhabit our coastal waters and the research being done to better understand them. We had about 55 people at this program.

Local artist Frances Topping also returned for two Art on the Salt Ponds programs, inviting participants to slow down, observe the natural world around them, and translate what they saw onto paper. Five people participated in our first session, followed by another ten attendees for the second which was held on a beautiful, sunny day at the Ninigret Wildlife Refuge.

We also welcomed birders Barbara Seith and Maria Bloom who led a bird walk near the Quonochontaug Breachway. Fourteen participants explored the area together, spotting a variety of coastal and salt pond birds.

This year also brought a brand-new program to SPC: our first-ever seaweed pressing workshop led by Rebecca Venezia, a PhD graduate from URI who studied seaweeds. Seventeen participants learned more about the seaweeds found along our shores while creating their own pressed specimens. It was a fun, hands-on way to look more closely at another often-overlooked part of the salt pond ecosystem. We hope to offer it again!



ONE OF MANY PIPEFISH BORN AT OUR SAFARI THIS YEAR.



FRANCES TOPPING WORKING WITH A SKETCH CLASS PARTICIPANT.

Getting Out on the Water

Earlier this summer, 20 people joined us for a paddle on Green Hill Pond, followed later in the season by our Quonochontaug Pond paddle with 11 participants. Getting out on the water is always a great way to experience the ponds from a different perspective and learn more about the places we work to protect.

Giving Back to the Beach

Our annual East Beach cleanup with the Ocean Recovery Community Alliance (ORCA) brought together a record 29 volunteers this year. Together, we collected 61 pounds of litter from the beach- a pretty impressive haul, and the most volunteers we've ever had for the cleanup. We're grateful to everyone who came out to spend part of their day helping care for this beautiful stretch of shoreline. It's a simple way to make a tangible difference for the ponds, the ocean, and the wildlife that depend on them.

This was the second clean-up of the year; the first was held in the early spring on the Saugatucket River where we partnered with the Wakefield Village Association. We are so grateful to all the volunteers who came out for our first cleanup on the river.

A Big Thank You to Our Volunteers

None of these programs would be possible without the many volunteers who give their time, energy, and enthusiasm to SPC. From helping students explore the ponds and hauling seine nets through the water to leading bird walks, lending artistic talents, and helping out behind the scenes, our volunteers play an essential role in bringing these programs to life.

We're especially grateful to the members of our Education Committee, including Ann Whaley-Tobin who has been a guiding force for the committee as well as new members Rebecca Venezia and Lori Keough, and to all of the returning and new volunteers who joined us for field trips, Salt Pond Safaris, paddles, and other programs this year. We're fortunate to have such a wonderful group of people willing to jump in and help.

We're always looking for new volunteers to join us for field trips, Salt Pond Safaris, and other educational programs, as well as people interested in becoming members of the Education Committee. You don't have to be a marine biologist or lifelong birder, just bring your curiosity and a willingness to get involved! If you're interested, email angela@joinsaltponds.com.

As another season of programming comes to a close, we're reminded how much there is to learn, explore, and appreciate right here in our own backyard. We look forward to continuing to bring people together around the salt ponds and finding new ways to help our community understand and care for these remarkable coastal resources. ✦

JOIN SALT PONDS COALITION!

SEE OUR MEMBERSHIP OPTIONS ON PAGE 7 OR VISIT SALTPONDSCOALITION.ORG

OUR END-OF-YEAR FUND: LOOKING AHEAD

If you've made it this far into *The Tidal Page*, you've probably gotten a pretty good sense of how busy a year it has been at the Salt Ponds Coalition. From water quality monitoring and advocacy to education programs, paddles, cleanups, new initiatives, and everything in between, there has been a lot happening around our ponds.

Fall and winter give us a chance to catch our breath a little and turn our attention to what comes next. There are programs to plan, projects to develop, partnerships to build, grants to pursue, and plenty of ideas we'd like to turn into reality in the coming year. It's also when we take a closer look at what worked, what we learned, and where we see opportunities to do more for the ponds and the communities around them.

That's where your support comes in!

Your support provides the flexible funding we need to turn our ideas into real projects and programs, while allowing us to respond to emerging needs and keep important work moving forward. If you're able, please consider making an **end-of-year contribution to the Salt Ponds Coalition.**

End-of-year gifts are separate from annual membership contributions and are fully tax deductible. You can donate using the QR code or by mailing a check in the enclosed envelope.

Thank you for helping us care for our salt ponds today and plan for all that's ahead. ✦

CELEBRATING OUR VOLUNTEERS! 💙

Each fall, we take a moment to recognize the volunteers who help keep SPC running throughout the year. From our Board and Committee members and Pond Watchers to those who help with field trips, safaris, paddles, cleanups, fundraising, and countless behind-the-scenes tasks, volunteers are at the heart of what we do.



This year, we're celebrating eight Pond Watchers who have reached service milestones, including one very special 15-year milestone:
15 Years: John Crandall
5 Years: Rick Anderson, Joseph Catalano, Marianne Chronley, Kent Kreutler, Joanne Niland, Joan Pavlinsky, and Don Vivenzio.

Pond Watcher Spotlight: John Crandall

A lifelong lover of the salt ponds, John grew up in Charlestown and has spent his life on and around the water. A retired fisherman, he worked for years in his family's fishing business, lobstering, clamming, and periwinkling on the ponds and in the ocean. He also helped run the family seafood market and now operates a raw bar business. After decades of working and living on the water, John has a deep understanding of the importance of healthy salt ponds.

John is also one of SPC's longest-serving volunteers. He has served on the SPC Board since 2012 and is a member of the "Quonnie Warriors," the dedicated group of Pond Watchers that samples four sites on Quonochontaug Pond. John believes strongly in water sampling and testing as an important way to protect water quality and keep shellfish healthy. He even enjoys boating across the pond to collect samples!

We're grateful to John for 15 years of service and to all of our milestone Pond Watchers for the time they dedicate to monitoring the health of our ponds. Their commitment is an important part of SPC's work and a wonderful example of what it means to be a Pond Watcher. To all of our volunteers, whether you've been with us for decades or joined us for the first time this year: thank you. We couldn't do this work without you. ✦

GIFTS FOR ANYTIME!

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Because it takes a coalition to protect RI Salt Ponds

YES! I want to show my support for Salt Ponds Coalition and my commitment to protecting the irreplaceable salt ponds that make Rhode Island so special. To ensure our salt ponds are always protected, cared for, and shared, I am joining SPC with a generous membership contribution at the following level (*please check box):*

- ☐ Contributor: $55–$149
- ☐ Supporter: $150–$274
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Nutrient Reduction Grant in Charlestown's

Salt Ponds Coalition (SPC) along with the Town of Charlestown, University of Rhode Island Onsite Wastewater Resource Center (URI), Save the Bay (STB), and The Tomaquag Museum have been working to reduce nutrient pollution in the Eastern Ninigret and Western Green Hill Pilot Watershed. The grant funding this work started in late 2021 and recently ended in September 2026.

While nutrients are essential to spur growth of marine plants and algae, an excessive amount is a nuisance. Too much nitrogen impairs pond health by reducing water clarity and reducing the amount of dissolved oxygen available in the water. Everything from marine plants like eelgrass to fish, crabs, and other marine organisms can be impacted. This project sought to reduce nutrients in two ways: manage pollution from septic systems and stormwater as well as community engagement. The partnership took a holistic approach to work with local homeowners as well as industry professionals to make positive changes for this area. Nutrient pollution may not be unique to the Pilot Watershed, but it is especially felt here as a result of intensive land use and development, outdated or aging septic systems, and storm water infrastructure. An added incentive to reduce nutrient pollution beyond improving pond surface water quality is this area also relies on groundwater for drinking.

Septic systems are the primary source of nitrogen pollution to groundwater and the salt ponds, so one of the central goals of this grant was to replace outdated or substandard systems with highly efficient modern nitrogen-reducing technology. Since 2022, 15 systems in these highest-risk areas of the pilot watershed have been upgraded through this project, reducing an estimated 531 pounds of nitrogen per year to our drinking water supply and ultimately to the salt ponds. The Town used wastewater, groundwater, environmental, and property data through a comprehensive GIS-based risk assessment to help target upgrades where they would provide the greatest benefit. Combined with prior grants and Town initiatives, Charlestown has now upgraded 41 systems in the Green Hill and Ninigret watersheds, with an estimated total reduction of over 1,000 pounds of nitrogen per year entering groundwater and ultimately the coastal ponds.



NEW COASTAL PLANTING ALONG GREEN HILL POND.

In addition, Save The Bay (STB) is working with coastal property owners to plant native grasses, perennials, and shrubs along Ninigret Pond and Allen's Cove and with watershed residents to install rain gardens. Filtering runoff from the land through coastal plantings and rain gardens is part of the Town's multi-pronged approach to reduce nutrient inputs to groundwater. To date, STB has installed two coastal plantings and a rain garden and have five more planned. Due to a grant extension, three additional pond-side planting projects are planned for fall 2026 and spring 2027, and STB is looking for more coastal property owners interested in a free consultation and free plants to help restore our salt ponds' water quality and enhance coastal habitats. To be eligible you must live in the eastern Ninigret or Allen's Cove area (see map).

A measure of these efforts is SPC's surface water quality data, and under this grant we have been monitoring three sites: Eastern Ninigret Pond, near the Creek Bridge at Sea Lea Colony, and Allen's Cove. Nitrogen concentration has been steadily increasing in the area since 2012 but that rate slowed around 2020. We speculate that this change is due in part to improvements made in this area by the Town of Charlestown under prior grants. At this time our data only tells the story though 2024. We should have our data from 2025 soon and the 2026 sampling season has

Eastern Salt Ponds Comes to a Close

By Alicia Schaffner with contributions and edits from project partners: Matt Dowling and David White (Town of Charlestown), Alissa Cox and Lisa Hollister (URI), and Wenley Ferguson (Save the Bay)



ABOVE, SALT POND SMART GRADUATE MAURICE VAN SWAAIJ HOLDS HIS SALT POND SMART SIGN.



RIGHT, MAP OF THE EASTERN NINIGRET OR ALLEN'S COVE AREA

just concluded. We will analyze that data as soon as it is available, and continue to track the long term-changes in this area to see the impact of the work done over the past few years.

Outreach has been a large focal point of this project, and over the past few years, project partners have worked together to create a program called Salt Pond Smart (SPS). It is a voluntary property certification program where homeowners living on properties within the salt ponds watershed can learn how everyday decisions about wastewater treatment, landscaping practices, and stormwater management can affect local water quality. In summer 2025, our first cohort of participants entered the program and by summer 2026 we had our first set of graduates! Of the twenty people who originally registered, seven graduated. We even had a few SPC members participate in the program including Maurice van Swaaij. After completing the program, Maurice said "I signed up for the Salt Pond Smart program because of concern for the health of the salt pond ecosystem and the realization that as a resident of the salt pond watershed I have a role to play in it. I like to feel I'm giving a little bit back for the joy the salt ponds give me." Maurice's wife and avid SPC volunteer Amy Hecht designed the Salt Pond Smart sign that participants receive upon completion of the program. We just hosted the orientation for the second cohort of participants in September 2026. Forty people have signed up to participate in this program and we look forward to working with them over the coming months! The Salt Pond Smart program has already been expanded beyond its original bounds to the entire coastal ponds' region. To learn more about the program scan the QR code.

In addition to SPS, project partners were out in the community talking about nutrient pollution and ways to enhance the health of our salt ponds. We did this through multiple paddle trips, community discussion and speaker events, Tomaquag storytelling and Traditional Ecological Knowledge walks, as well as tabling at Tomaquag-hosted seasonal festivals and the Charlestown Farmer's Market. Education builds the stewards of our salt ponds, so getting out into the community was an integral part of this grant.

A special thank you to the Town of Charlestown who brought all of us project partners together on this grant. Thanks to their staff's leadership, Charlestown has successfully secured significant funding to assist homeowners in reducing nutrient pollution to our valuable salt ponds and groundwater. They are a leader in RI and throughout the region in tackling nutrient pollution with such a comprehensive approach. Protecting our salt ponds is truly a community effort, but together we can make a difference. ✦

This grant was funded by:

EPA United States Environmental Protection Agency

SNEP NETWORK

2026 Auction Recap

by Angela Brunetti

What a night! This year's Coastal Social brought us to Point Judith Country Club in Narragansett for a beautiful summer evening filled with good food, great company, and some seriously enthusiastic bidding. With friends of the Salt Ponds Coalition gathered both in person and online, the evening was a tremendous success—and we're thrilled to share that we netted more than $19,800, making this our most successful Coastal Social ever!

A huge thank you to everyone who came out, bid in the auction, donated an item, sponsored the event, or helped spread the word. We are incredibly grateful to our food and beverage sponsors, "Salt Ponds Special" sponsors, auction donors, and everyone who showed up to support SPC. Your generosity directly helps us continue our work to protect and monitor Rhode Island's salt ponds.

Of course, a night like this takes a village. From planning and soliciting auction donations to setting up, greeting guests, running the auction, and cleaning up afterward, our staff, board members, and volunteers put in countless hours to make it all happen. A very special thank you goes to Julia and George Murphy, whose membership at Point Judith Country Club and coordination with the club made it possible for us to bring The Coastal Social to this beautiful new venue. And we couldn't do it without the local businesses, artists, and community members who generously contribute the goods, services, and experiences that make our auction so much fun.

Thank you for making this our best Coastal Social yet! We hope you'll take a look at our list of auction donors and sponsors and consider supporting the local businesses that support SPC and share our commitment to healthy salt ponds. ✦





PHOTOS: LEXI DEVINE PHOTOGRAPHY

Bacteria Recap, continued from page 3

season but returned to acceptable levels in the latter half.

✦ Teal Road in eastern Green Hill Pond which averaged above the standard for fecal coliform and just below for enterococci. In addition to our regular sampling, Alicia collected storm water samples from the culverts leading into eastern Green Hill Pond as well additional samples from the pond itself. We are hoping this will give us a better insight as to how this area is being impacted in wet versus dry weather. We are going to continue testing throughout the fall and an analysis of our results is pending.

Over all the ponds, while various sites did temporarily spike throughout the season for bacteria, it was not enough to flag a long-term problem. As always, we will continue to post our bacteria data to our website in real time every year from May to October. For more details, scan the QR code to see all of 2026's bacteria data. ✦



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