The United Nations proclaimed May 22 as the International Day for Biological Diversity to help shed light on the critical importance of biodiversity around the world. Communities near and far recognize that the threat to ecosystems and biodiversity has never been greater, and that this threat is largely caused by human activities. Climate change, habitat fragmentation, increasing human population and development are putting tremendous burdens on our planet.

Conservation and environmental stewardship happen best at the local and community level. Right here, in our small corner of the world, we face enormous conservation challenges. So we continue our collaborative efforts, working with other conservation groups, federal and state agencies, private landowners, volunteers, interns and citizen scientists to promote biodiversity conservation.

Our research on the tiny, threatened northern long-eared bats; black racer snakes; and eastern spadefoot toads on Martha’s Vineyard are authentic examples of local biodiversity conservation in action, and reasons why BiodiversityWorks has become recognized as an important environmental cog, in not only our conservation community, but the broader scientific world.

Much of what we are able to do is the direct result of donations and grants from foundations. We are grateful to all who have helped us in our mission, and we hope that we can count on your generosity this year. While there is no price on the faces of the excited children admiring Katama (the black racer) on the cover of this annual report, we hope they inspire you to give generously so that we can fully fund our programs and staff.

Please enjoy this annual report, and then pass it on to a friend who might also like to support our mission. Again, we thank you most sincerely.

David A. Faber

ON THE COVER: Volunteers say hello to Katama the snake before she is released into her sandplain habitat. Liz Baldwin (right) and others have been tracking her since July.

PHOTO BY JEANNA SHEPARD, COURTESY OF THE VINEYARD GAZETTE
As we find ourselves almost halfway through BiodiversityWorks’ eighth year, we are grateful for the enthusiastic support we receive from our Martha’s Vineyard family and friends, from shores near and far.

Because of your steady encouragement, 2017 was another good year. We continued to connect Island landowners, students and residents with the wildlife and habitats around them, and build upon our mission of community-engaged wildlife conservation and stewardship. We are especially proud to be the only local organization working to save northern long-eared bats from extinction by studying the unique behaviors that allow them to persist amidst white-nose syndrome.

Continued development, habitat loss and fragmentation are also key areas of concern. With our black racer snake study, we’re learning about a beautiful Island native and sharing our passion for maintaining large tracts of the early successional habitat they and other species need to survive within our community.

We’ve also taken important steps to build staff and improve our outreach and communications. We hope to see you July 5 at our Bat and Moth program at the state forest, or our annual thank-you event July 24 at Tashmoo Springs, where you can meet this year’s interns and staff in person and learn more.

Accelerated development on the Island makes it more important than ever that people and organizations remain proactive. At BiodiversityWorks, we are working every day to build a habitat stewardship ethic in our community. Your continued support is fundamental to our mission.

With hope and gratitude,

Luanne Johnson
Director

Liz Baldwin
Assistant Director
Our critical research into northern long-eared bats continued this year, with results both promising and worrisome. For the third year in a row, we confirmed the presence of summer maternity colonies near Lambert’s Cove in West Tisbury; and at Job’s Neck and Major’s Cove in Edgartown. But we also documented the Island’s first known case of white-nose syndrome, which has decimated hibernating bat populations throughout the region.

The Vineyard had been considered something of a safe haven from the disease, which was first observed near Albany, N.Y., about 12 years ago. The story took a turn last February, when Antone (Tony) Lima alerted us to a bat he observed flying on a warm day in Oak Bluffs. We captured the bat using mist nets and identified a possible fungal infection on her wings. In a manner typical of white-nose syndrome, she died a day later when temperatures dropped below freezing and she failed to seek shelter. The National Wildlife Health Lab later confirmed the bat was fully infected with the fungus *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* (Pd), which causes the disease.

Our research since 2015 has provided the first official data for the Island population, and continues to yield new insights. In both 2016 and 2017, for example, we recaptured banded females at Lambert’s Cove and Major’s Cove, verifying that female northern long-eared bats on the Island are surviving the winter. All of the maternity colonies so far have been observed on the outside of houses, where they pose no threat to people.

A northern long-eared bat that was reported flying in a home in West Tisbury in March did not show any signs of infection. However, the bat later tested positive for the Pd fungus (not the disease itself). Despite the threat of white-nose syndrome, reports like these further support our theory that northerns are hibernating in multiple locations around the Island.

We detected feeding calls in Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, Tisbury, West Tisbury and Chilmark, but were unable to capture any northerns during our usual mist-netting in the fall. Still, we believe the Vineyard and other coastal areas provide conditions that allow these bats to survive. In the absence of caves and mines, the bats may be hibernating in multiple groups and locations where they are less likely to encounter the fungus. And a milder climate on the coast may shorten the hibernation period itself, further limiting the bats’ exposure and giving them a fighting chance to shed the fungus in the spring.

Looking ahead, we will continue to monitor maternity colonies on the Vineyard, and hopefully find new ones and recapture more banded females.

“The longer they persist, the higher the chances are that we’re going to be able to understand the mechanism for persistence,” BiodiversityWorks director Luanne Johnson said of the population. “And then we may be able to find ways to help them.”
Anita Michalak on Learning (and Teaching) the Ropes of Vineyard Ecology

For an undergraduate college student, browsing for summer internships or work experiences can be a remarkably stressful thing. At least in the sphere of biology and ecology, I feel as though there’s a certain pressure to find the perfect opportunity to gain field-based knowledge and tangible, transferable skills, but also find a place that’ll be enjoyable and almost like a second home.

In applying for a wildlife assistant position with BiodiversityWorks, I wasn’t quite sure what I was getting myself into. All I knew about the conservation nonprofit before applying was that it was fairly new, remote (at the time, I was convinced that “island” = “remote”), and small-scale, but with an ambitious team and set of research projects. The feature that won me over the most was BWorks’ branched research focus; I hadn’t previously come across an opportunity where I could work on several projects at once.

So when I found out I had been accepted for the position, I felt a jumble of excitement, curiosity and slight terror. I felt that I had a lot to live up to upon arriving, partially because of another one of BWorks’ features: its hierarchical mentoring system. I was thrilled to participate in projects regarding shorebird monitoring, bat detection and snake telemetry under the guidance of the awesome Luanne Johnson, Liz Baldwin and Nicole Lynch (who was also new to BWorks but, unlike me, recently graduated from university). In addition, however, I was serving as a mentor to BWorks’ high school summer interns, something I wasn’t sure I could even do.

It turns out the things I thought would be my biggest challenges are the very things I value the most from my time on Martha’s Vineyard. Mentoring younger blossoming biologists, for instance, allowed me to pay more attention to the things I was both teaching and learning. In helping instruct someone on how to put up a mist-net for capturing bats, I was reinforcing my own skills. And it made me aware of how much more I have to learn, and how well-connected and collaborative a seemingly small organization actually is.

Epic Breeding Season for Spadefoot Toads

After getting a tip from Susan Sellers of Edgartown, Erik Faber found an endangered eastern spadefoot toad on the edge of a dirt road near Susan’s property in June. Ken Magnuson discovered another one around the same time and captured it on audio. (To listen to the recording, click here.)

Massachusetts lists the eastern spadefoot toad (Scaphiopus holbrookii) as threatened due largely to its vulnerability to development, pesticides and roads. Edgartown has the only documented spadefoot toad breeding pools on the Vineyard, and this year’s breeding season was one for the books.

These nighttime creatures bury themselves in the ground, slowly digging themselves in with their hind legs, then enter a kind of torpor before emerging and breeding in ephemeral pools that form during heavy rains. The tadpoles develop quickly enough to metamorphose before the pool dries up. After two droughty years on the Vineyard, the conditions were just right in the spring and summer of 2017 for the toads to emerge from their slumber.

It’s possible that other breeding pools exist on the Vineyard, and we hope to engage the Island community in 2018 to help discover them. In addition to our ongoing annual search for ephemeral pools, a public talk at the West Tisbury library this summer will teach people how to identify the species’ duck-like croaking, and other signs of its presence.
STATE OF THE BEACH-NESTING BIRDS

Despite their dramatic recovery in the region since the 1980s, piping plovers on the Vineyard and Nantucket still have a long road to recovery. The islands reported the lowest number of chicks fledged per pair in the state over the last two years, and in 2017 only 49 pairs nested on Martha’s Vineyard, fledging just 37 chicks. High rates of predation by abundant crows and gulls remains the primary obstacle to chick survival. BiodiversityWorks protects more than half of the Vineyard’s nesting piping plovers each year, and our 25 pairs, on 12 different beaches, fledged 68 percent of the Vineyard chicks. 

We monitored five small colonies of least terns in 2017, but the loss of eggs due to skunk predation reduced productivity. Tern colonies hosted by The Trustees at Norton Point and Cape Pogue were among the largest in the state and had greater success. The Island also supported 42 pairs of nesting American oystercatchers, which fledged 25 chicks — somewhat fewer than we would like to see. The 14 oystercatcher pairs we monitored fledged seven chicks and lost 19 to crow and gull predation.

Reducing food sources that support abundant crow, gull and skunk populations around the Island (open compost piles and trash bins, for example) will help reduce their numbers, and this would benefit many other species. Please help with this effort and make sure to leave no food scraps behind from your beach visits.
On a late July morning, we met up with The Trustees of Reservations and MassWildlife to capture and band black skimmers at the Cape Pogue elbow. By early afternoon we had captured, banded and released 11 chicks as part of a larger effort to learn more about this species along the Atlantic coast.

Massachusetts is now the northern extent of the nesting range for black skimmers, with Martha’s Vineyard having the largest nesting colony in the state: seven pairs as of 2017. We began wondering what makes the species tick and the colonies change over time. So we teamed up with field biologists from The Trustees and MassWildlife to begin a banding project similar to those already underway in New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Florida and Texas.

“The big question is, are those chicks going to come back and nest here,” said BiodiversityWorks director Luanne Johnson. Little is known about whether black skimmers return to their natal colonies, and at what age. “Next year will tell us more about that,” she said, although it may be a couple of years before the chicks mature and return to breed. “It’s possible they will come back to the colony but not breed,” or they might settle in somewhere else, Luanne said.

Already last fall, two black skimmers with orange bands from the Vineyard were sighted on Coney Island, along with adults and juveniles from New York and New Jersey. We look forward to tracking our 11 banded birds through re-sightings along the coast, and hope to see them return home in the near future.
A small army of volunteers helped us capture, tag and track our second black racer snake since we began studying this rare Island species in 2014. Annie Adams, a young volunteer who discovered the snake in a trap in July, named her Katama after the grassland habitat in Edgartown where the snake was captured and continues to live.

Our study of black racers (*Coluber constrictor*) began with funding from the Edey Foundation in 2014 and a goal of gathering historical data and reports of recent sightings. The species has declined greatly on the Island since the 1990s, due largely to habitat fragmentation and deadly encounters with vehicles.

Unlike her predecessor, Audrey (named for volunteer Audrey van der Krogt, who discovered her in a trap in 2016), Katama has been observed several times in the company of other black racers, and prefers the shrubby habitat along roads. And she went into hibernation earlier in the fall. BiodiversityWorks assistant director Liz Baldwin said she was surprised by multiple black racer sightings in Katama in 2017, although she noted the greater abundance of houses and people
in that area. “It’s all anecdotal, but it seems like there’s a good population there,” she said.

A total of 36 volunteers contributed to this project in 2017, installing and checking traps, implanting a radio transmitter, and even identifying plants in the habitat area. Volunteers will continue to track Katama’s movements in 2018, and will soon begin setting up and checking new traps — one in Katama and another up-Island. Our goal is to capture and track two more black racers this year, helping us understand and protect this rare Island species.

BiodiversityWorks staff and volunteers head out to our trap array in Katama to release our second black racer snake, a juvenile female named after her sandplain habitat in Edgartown.

MAIN PHOTO BY JEANNA SHEPARD, COURTESY OF THE VINEYARD GAZETTE

THANK YOU TO THE MANY VOLUNTEERS WHO MADE THIS AND OTHER PROJECTS POSSIBLE IN 2017

Annie Adams
Warren Adams
Luciano Baldwin
Holly Borday
Sharon Britton
Kendra Buresch
Wendy Culbert
Margaret Curtin
Dave Dandridge
Angela Debettencourt
Kevin Donovan
Alysa Emden
David Faber
Erik Faber
Eva Faber
Jim Feiner
Brian and Justen Foster
Karyn Franzen
Flip Harrington
Sara Hoffman
Norma Holmes
Roy Hope
Emily Houser
Lev Hund
Michelle Jasny
Carmine Morra
John Pearson
Sharon Pearson
Scott Stephens
Penny Uhlendorf
Victor Valentim
Audrey van der Krogt
Ulrike Wartner
Jamie Wasserloos
Nancy Weaver
Soo Whiting
Francesca Zee
Overfishing by large fleets offshore, along with declining freshwater habitat, have driven river herring to their lowest numbers in history on the Vineyard and mainland. BiodiversityWorks partnered with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries and The Nature Conservancy to assess river herring habitat at Look’s and James ponds in West Tisbury, in order to identify ways we can help recover this vital species that supports many larger fish in the food chain.

Alewife (Alosa pseudoharengus) and blueback herring (Alosa aestivalis), collectively known as river herring in Massachusetts, are hatched in freshwater, then spend the majority of their lives in the ocean, returning to freshwater to spawn — alewife in late March to mid-May and blueback herring from late April through June.

We visited Look’s and James ponds during the spawning and nursery seasons in 2016 and 2017, to assess water quality and fish passage, both into and out of the ponds. Passage to Look’s Pond was recently restored when boards were removed from a dam on the Tiasquam River and a fish ladder was installed downstream of the pond. We assessed the pond habitat in relation to spawning and juvenile growth, as well as passage for juveniles back to the ocean in late spring or early summer.

The new fish ladder was working well, but the annual breaching of the barrier beach at Tisbury Great Pond didn’t last in 2017, so not many river herring came in to spawn. As with James Pond, Look’s Pond showed signs of nutrient pollution in the summer, but mostly in the form of phosphorus, whereas James Pond also suffers from nitrogen, most likely originating from lawns, septic systems and agriculture in the watershed. We found among other things that the channel between James Pond and Vineyard Sound was too shallow, and water temperatures were too warm to support juveniles in the summer. DMF fisheries biologist Brad Chase worked with West Tisbury herring warden Johnny Hoy to improve a culvert between James Pond and a nursery pond to the west.

BiodiversityWorks will continue monitoring Look’s and James ponds for spawning activity in 2018, and spend more time assessing potential nursery habitat around James Pond following the habitat improvements.
Students in Oak Bluffs, Tisbury and Edgartown continued learning about Vineyard ecology through Habitat Kids, a program that began in 2015 with a two-year grant from the Martha’s Vineyard Vision Fellowship.

Once a month, biologist Kendra Buresch, who recently joined the BiodiversityWorks board of directors, visited second- and third-grade classrooms to teach kids about habitat fragmentation and other ecological issues facing the Vineyard, and engage them in environmental stewardship. Students gathered seeds from habitat patches at their schools and distributed them at local libraries, learning and also teaching the importance of saving seeds. In addition, third graders also created animated films about habitat fragmentation and connectivity, with support from the Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival. To see videos created by students at the Chilmark School, click here.

Looking ahead, Habitat Kids has formed a new partnership with Polly Hill Arboretum in West Tisbury, where a greenhouse and native plant expertise will keep the program growing in 2018, with a continued emphasis on habitat stewardship. In its new phase, the program will reach students in Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, Chilmark and possibly West Tisbury, with new activities planned at schools and the arboretum.

Kendra’s greatest reward in 2017 was seeing kids fully grasp ecological concepts such as habitat fragmentation. “It’s cool to see them get that concept, and then actually want to do something,” she said. “It was great to see them come up with new ideas about how people can help.”
Public support for BiodiversityWorks continues to grow as the organization matures, and awareness of our work increases. Grants and contracts remain integral sources of income, thanks to the diligent work of our staff. While expenses were higher than income in 2017, this was largely due to grant and contract income received in 2016 that funded two years of programs, including Vineyard Vision Fellowship projects focusing on bat research and Habitat Kids, and our contract for monitoring herring habitat at James Pond. An outside financial review in 2017 found our accounting processes accurate, and expenses were consistent with approved budgets.

Terry (Sally) A. Appenzellar
Treasurer

For a copy of our 2017 financial statements or Form 990, please contact Luanne at luannej@biodiversity-worksmv.org or 800-690-0993 ext. 0.
THANK YOU to our supporters in 2017
Jan. 1 – Dec. 31

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Caldwell Fisher Charitable Foundation
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Massachusetts Cultural Council
Martha's Vineyard Vision Fellowship
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Vineyard Tax Matters
A snow goose in Chilmark, a king eider in Tisbury, a ruby-crowned kinglet in Edgartown, and nine snowy owls around the Island were among the highlights of the 58th annual Christmas Bird Count on the Vineyard.

Hosted by BiodiversityWorks with support from the Gus and Doris B. Daniels Wildlife Trust, the annual event tallies bird species across the Island and across the region. Dozens turned out for this year’s count, combing the Island from Chappaquiddick to Aquinnah and counting a total of 119 species and 24,082 individual birds.

Island ponds had frozen over at year’s end, driving down the overall number of birds spotted, although waterfowl crowded into the remaining areas of open water. Other highlights included a greater yellowlegs at the head of Deep Bottom Cove, an ovenbird at a West Tisbury feeder, a northern shoveler in Town Cove, and a pied-billed grebe at the head of Lagoon Pond.

Islanders also reported sightings at their bird feeders. Thank you to Mass Audubon at Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary for hosting that portion of the count, and to Sharon Pearson and Vasha Brunelle for recording the data. The final tally was held at the Wakeman Center in Vineyard Haven, with food donated by the Gus and Doris B. Daniels Wildlife Trust. Thank you also to 2017 BiodiversityWorks intern Connor Downing, who set up the food and refreshments, and entered data during the final count.

This winter also marked the second annual Christmas Bird Count for kids, held Dec. 16 at Felix Neck. Eight kids and 10 adults braved the cold and fresh snowfall, counting 28 species and 161 individual birds. We teamed up with Mass Audubon at Felix Neck, Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation, The Trustees and Vineyard Conservation Society for this annual event to cultivate young birders, with refreshments provided by the Gus and Doris B. Daniels Wildlife Trust.
Trooper, our beloved border collie, was part of our team from the beginning. He took us on long walks around Hoft Farm and Lambert’s Cove Road in the winter, and never missed a beat when we gathered our equipment and headed out into the field. He was almost always by our side, keeping us company as we tagged, measured and tracked, often long into the night. We’ll never forget his knowing gaze and his passion for Vineyard wildlife, which at times surpassed even our own. We’ll miss you, Trooper.

Watching Out for the Little Guys on Chilmark Pond

By Ulrike Wartner

Several years ago (and several years before moving to Martha’s Vineyard as a year-round resident), a remarkable woman named Luanne Johnson gave a talk to the members of the Hancock Beach association about protecting rare shorebirds on Chilmark Pond. During our yearly summer visits, I had wondered what those roped-off areas with the odd-looking cages were all about. After listening to Luanne talk and learning how much in need of protection piping plovers, American oystercatchers and least terns were, I was hooked, and promised myself that after letting go of my career as a psychologist and subsequently moving to the Vineyard I would be in touch with BiodiversityWorks and sign up as a volunteer. It meant coming full-circle in my academic interests (infant-parent observation), and gave me a good excuse to get to the beach as often as possible.

Volunteering for BWorks has turned out to be an utterly rewarding and fun experience. Instead of wondering what those odd cages are about, I have helped put them up, and have learned about the possible usefulness (or disadvantages) of enclosures as protection against egg predators. I installed the symbolic fencing (ropes) to let the beachgoers know to keep their distance from nesting pairs and bird colonies. Most importantly, I have had ample practice speaking with the same beach goers about their dogs — about the difference between a specialist (the Little Guys) and a generalist (dogs, crows and gulls), and why even cute, well-behaved dogs are a threat to shorebirds.

And I have had the excuse to go to the beach — to find the nests, to keep an eye on the clutches until hatching, to watch the utterly cute chicks grow from little puff balls on sticks to fledglings and then take off to warmer climates. Chilmark Pond has had two or three faithful pairs who over the past couple of years have done very well and successfully fledged almost all their chicks. This is in contrast to the rest of the Island piping plover population, which has recently struggled significantly and also suffered a public relations problem called “bird versus vehicle on the beach.” BiodiversityWorks has done well educating human summer guests on Chilmark Pond to co-exist and enjoy the beach, its beauty and its biodiversity. We are all benefitting.

Congratulations to our Intern Alumni!

Samantha Chaves
Wheaton College, Class of 2018, B.A. Biology

Eva Faber
University of Vermont, Class of 2018, B.S. Environmental Science

Emma Jean Holley
Accepted into the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Graduate Program in Creative Writing

Christopher Parsons
Beginning Peace Corps in Philippines in Coastal Resource Management

Trooper, 2006-2017
ENJOY THESE UPCOMING SUMMER EVENTS WITH BIODIVERSITYWORKS!

Thursday, July 5
Bats and Moths Program, with entomologist Paul Goldstein at the Manuel F. Corellus State Forest Headquarters
8–10:30 p.m.

Tuesday, July 24
Our annual Donor Thank-You Event at Tashmoo Springs
5–7 p.m.

Tuesday, August 21
‘Bats in Crisis and How You Can Help’ Lecture and bat mist-netting demonstration at Polly Hill Arboretum
6:30–10 p.m.

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