

### CARETAKERS, EDUCATORS



Peter August, a professor of natural resources at the University of Rhode Island and chair of the Napatree science advisory committee, and Janice Sassi, manager of the Napatree Point Conservation Area, stand next to a trail closed for restoration efforts. Several summer research projects underway now at Napatree Point include horseshoe crab surveys, native plant restoration and a study of small fish in the lagoon that oyster catchers feed on.

| Photos by Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

## Protecting the living lab of Napatree

Pristine conditions provide optimum research opportunity



By Cynthia Drummond  
Sun staff writer

WESTERLY — Standing on the tall bluff that overlooks Napatree Point and the Block Island Sound, Janice Sassi, manager of the Napatree Point Conservation Area, described the topography of the long, sandy spit.

“This is little Narragansett Bay on this side, and the Atlantic on the other,” she said, gesturing

toward each side of the point. “Before the ’38 hurricane, you know, there were 30 houses along here, so as you can see, it is pristine habitat, fortunately, because of people that came up and preserved the land.”

On a recent June afternoon, beach-goers were enjoying the sea and the sun, unaware that a host of research projects was taking place, sometimes right under their noses. In addition to being one of southern New England’s most cherished recreation areas, Napatree also serves as a living laboratory for



Napatree Point is home to a wide variety of bird life, including the federally protected Piping Plover.

See Research, A5

## >> Research

From A1

scientists studying everything from sea level rise to American oystercatchers. A team of science advisors oversees every aspect of the management of the Napatree area.

"We don't make a management-wise without running it past our science advisors," Sassi said. "We have all these scientists that are donating their time to us and helping us figure out who's living out here, what their issues are. It's an incredible resource for us."

Peter August, a professor of natural resources at the University of Rhode Island who chairs the Napatree science advisory committee, described the area as one of global significance.

"Napatree has been designated a globally important bird area by the Audubon Society. It's been named a Coastal Institute climate response demonstration site," he said.

August and Sassi gave a guided tour of some of the research and restoration projects taking place this summer. One ongoing project involves replacing invasive plant species with natives. On one side of the path up to the bluff, a collection of native plants has replaced the invasive species that were taking over the dunes. The project is funded by the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Institute.

"Right down below us is where our native plant restoration is happening with our Rhody Native program through the Rhode Island Natural History Survey," August said.

Napatree's ecosystem is undeveloped and dynamic, attributes that attract researchers like Bryan Oakley of Eastern Connecticut State University, who has been studying short and long-term shoreline change of the barrier beach and headland since 2013.

"The lack of infrastructure and development on the Napatree barrier make it an ideal location to examine shoreline change in the absence of 'the line in the sand' mentality inherent on more developed portions of the coastline," he wrote in a 2016 report on his research.

Sassi patrols the beaches in a small, all terrain vehicle paid for with grants



Peter August, a professor of natural resources at the University of Rhode Island and chair of the Napatree science advisory committee, stands next to a trail closed for restoration work.  
| Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

from the Superstorm Sandy recovery fund and the Watch Hill Fire District. In addition to greeting visitors and explaining appropriate beach behavior, she keeps a constant watch on the research and restoration projects.

One ongoing initiative is making sure that visitors don't walk across the newly-replanted dunes to get from the cove side, where boaters anchor, to the ocean beach. Special markers tell people which paths to use, and the others have been roped off. Rustic split rail fencing has also been installed near the beach entrance to keep people out of sensitive areas.

"Janice and I got some good consulting with the National Park Service and asked them how they deal with keeping people out without screwing up sand flow," August said. "That's this: the split rail fencing. This new section is 300 feet that Janice added on this year, and I have to say this does a darn good job of keeping the people out, and if you ask me, it's such a warm, welcoming entrance to Napatree."

On the cove side, several pairs of horseshoe crabs are coming into calm, shallow water to mate. Named for the crab's latin name, *Limulus polyphemus*, the Project *Limulus* monitoring program began at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut in 1998 and involves the compilation of data collected by volunteers and tagging adult crabs, including those at Napatree. At the peak of the mating season, about two weeks ago, 800 crabs were counted.

Driving slowly along the beach, Sassi points out eelgrass beds just offshore, which she describes as the largest in

Rhode Island. Lifting a pair of binoculars that she keeps by her side, she spots a pair of willets, medium sized wading birds, and then, a solitary piping plover. At the end of the beach, she raises her binoculars again to observe common terns and a few American oystercatchers on a sand bar.

Napatree also offers education programs. There are free nature walks for visitors of all ages and a summer children's education program, called "Investigators" to reflect its exploratory focus. As she is talking, Sassi abruptly stops the ATV to scoop up a discarded mylar balloon. Balloons pose serious entanglement risks to wildlife and can kill birds and animals that mistakenly eat them.

"This is the bane of my existence," she says, stuffing the balloon into the ATV.

In 2016, 18,300 people visited Napatree between the end of May and September, and an average of 778 visitors were recorded on weekends. During the same period, 5,899 boats were observed. Welcoming thousands of visitors while protecting Napatree's sensitive ecosystem is a constant balancing act.

"I think the challenge is educating people to do the right thing at Napatree, so that they can come out here, enjoy, discover, explore without ruining the ecosystem," August said. "See that little thing?" he said, pointing to a piping plover, "Where else can you go in Rhode Island and see American oystercatchers, a listed rare species, piping plovers, feeding terns, the snowy owl and mating horseshoe crabs? It's one-stop shopping at Napatree."