



# Connecticut NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE

## eNewsletter

Winter Updates 2026



### Happy 4th Birthday to... the Reserve!

Four years ago, on January 14th, the *Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve* was designated by NOAA as the 30th Reserve in the system.

A special thanks to all of our partners for their support over the past years and here's to many more Reserve "birthdays".

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### A note from Ashley Hamilton, our Monitoring Lead

Happy New Year from the Reserve! I'm Ashley Hamilton, the Monitoring Lead and a part of our Research Program team. After welcoming a new baby, I'm excited to be back in the office, lab, and field with a renewed sense of motivation and appreciation for the work our team is doing.

In any job, it's easy to get caught up in day-to-day tasks and lose sight of how individual efforts contribute to a larger mission. At the Reserve, that mission of supporting a resilient Long Island Sound where human and natural communities thrive is achieved through collaboration across our four sector areas: education, coastal training, stewardship, and research and monitoring.



Stepping away for a few months and returning with fresh eyes has allowed me to appreciate the progress our team has made toward several long-term goals across our programs, outlined in this newsletter.

And as for monitoring, we're entering the year with exciting momentum as we have finalized our System-Wide Monitoring Program (SWMP) stations and will be installing equipment this spring. This will mark the start of our Reserve's commitment of measuring short term

variability and long term changes on water quality, biological systems and land use/cover within our boundaries, as well as contribute to the larger, *nation-wide dataset*.

Winter is often a season for rest and reflection, and while rest can be hard to come by with our programs' ambitious plans, we're proud to start 2026 reflecting on last year's accomplishments. Thank you for following along and for being a part of our progress!

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## Welcome our new staff!

### Lauren Barrett

Associate Research Scientist

As an Associate Research Scientist, Lauren will be helping with our new Eelgrass Seed Restoration Project as well as other research initiatives. She is a marine biogeochemist with interest in the relationship between humans and marine environments. An alumna of the graduate program in the UConn Department of Marine Sciences, Lauren received her Ph.D. in 2024, studying the direct and indirect impacts of human pollution on carbon dioxide chemistry in Long Island Sound and the Arctic Ocean. Lauren was a 2024 NOAA Knauss Fellow with the Democrats of the House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, where she helped members of Congress oversee NOAA's implementation of Congressional directives and drafted legislation related to weather, climate, and oceans.



### Falyn McQuarrie

Assistant Coordinator

As Assistant Coordinator, Falyn will be working with our Coordinators to plan stewardship and educational events. She's also helping with our MyCoast Program and our Culvert Assessment Project. Falyn completed her Master's in Marine Policy and Management with a concentration in Marine Resource Sustainability from the University of New Haven after studying Marine Affairs at The University of Rhode Island. During graduate school, she conducted research on the use of recycled oyster shells in living shorelines to mitigate coastal erosion in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Before joining the Reserve, Falyn worked in Greenwich for the Conservation team, gaining experience with permitting and community conservation and Old Lyme in Land Use permitting for the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission and Planning Commission.



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## 2025 Program Highlights

### Education

- Hosted another successful Teacher on the Estuary (TOTE) workshop: *A Tale of Two Rivers*, exploring the Thames and CT Rivers in partnership with the CT River Museum and Thames River Heritage Park.

- Continued development of lessons and classroom **resources** for teachers – including new loan kits where students can become a water quality “detective”, role play as eelgrass managers, and learn about oyster and reef balls restoration.

## Training

- Completed a new **Needs Assessment** to help direct Reserve priorities moving forward.
- Continued to grow the **Long Island Sound Eelgrass Collaborative**, through quarterly meetings, advancing LIS seed-based restoration and eelgrass mapping efforts.
- Partnered with CT Sea Grant and CIRCA to pilot the **MyCoast** app in New London, Groton and Stonington - with the goal of reporting coastal flooding and storm damage through community photo-taking.

## Stewardship

- Secured funding to support ecological function, coastal resilience and improve public access to Bluff Point in partnership with CTDEEP.
- Continued to partner with other organizations to achieve our Reserve’s goals, including a new partnership with The Nature Conservancy to support habitat restoration at Rocky Neck State Park and to assess culverts-tidal restrictions in Southeastern Connecticut.
- Wrapped up three years of field work to identify and map the presence and extent of invasive plants at Bluff Point State Park, Haley Farm, Great Island and Lord Cove.

## Research

- Continued ongoing research and monitoring in a number of habitats – including: eelgrass, aquaculture, marshes, coastal embayment’s, and upland forests.
- Finalized plans for a more efficient laboratory space, including new equipment to analyze water quality and nutrients.

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# Upcoming Reserve Events

## Interview Training – Social Science Basics (Jan 27)

This NOAA-led virtual training provides participants with the knowledge to create an “interview guide” tool and conduct effective interviews that can be used in multiple resource management settings. To learn more and register, [click here](#).

## Volunteers needed: Quahog Bowl (Feb 14)

The Quahog Bowl serves as the Connecticut regional competition of the National Ocean Sciences Bowl. This prestigious competition brings together high school students to showcase their knowledge in marine sciences, covering topics ranging from oceanography and maritime history to policy and biology. We’re recruiting volunteers to help with the event (deadline to sign up is Jan 26). Email [quahogbowl@gmail.com](mailto:quahogbowl@gmail.com) for more info.

## Connecticut Blue Economy Education Resources Workshop (Feb 28)

Educators! Empower your students; the “Blue Economy” is more than a buzzword - it is the future of our coastal and maritime workforce. Join the CT Blue Economy Coalition at the intersection of education and industry to help your students navigate the careers of tomorrow. To learn more or register, [click here](#).

## Birdwatching at Haley Farm State Park (Mar 21)

Join us for a spring walk to observe birds at Haley Farm State Park. The 2-hr walk will be led by fun and friendly birder, Joe Attwater (The Connecticut Audubon Society’s Conservation & Education Coordinator). No experience is needed. Binoculars and bird guides will be provided. To learn more and register, visit the Reserve’s event page by [clicking here](#).

## Groton Clean-up (Apr 10)

Join us as we partner with the Baker Cove Watershed Committee (BaCWaC), Eastern Connecticut Conservation District (ECCD), Mystic Aquarium, Town of Groton, and City of

Groton to clean up various sites in Groton, CT. Neon vests, gloves, pickers, and bags will be provided. To learn more and register, visit the Reserve's event page by [clicking here](#).

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## Upcoming Partner Events

### Waterfowl Walk at Rocky Neck State Park (Jan 31)

Join CT Audubon as they search for ducks and geese breed that breed further north and spend the winter along our coast when their inland bodies of water start to freeze. To learn more and register, [click here](#).

### Great Backyard Bird Count (Feb 12 & 14)

Join CT Audubon for the 2026 Great Backyard Bird Count! Learn how to participate in the count and what birds you can see in Connecticut in winter in our webinar, then search for birds with us at the Roger Tory Peterson Estuary Center that weekend. The program is free, but registration is required, and space is limited. To learn more and register, [click here](#).

### Ecological Landscaping and Green Infrastructure Training Series (starting Feb 12)

The Natchaug Watershed Advisory Board is launching this three-part series, beginning with an introductory workshop on February 12 from 5:00–6:30 PM at Woodstock Town Hall. This first session explores how everyday landscaping choices affect stormwater runoff and water quality, and introduces practical solutions for protecting local watersheds. Two additional workshops will follow. Register [here](#).

### Eastern Connecticut Watershed Network Water Quality Monitoring workshop (Feb 26)

This evening event will be held at the East Lyme Town Hall and feature speakers from the Niantic River Watershed Committee and Clean Up Stonington Harbors, who will discuss current monitoring efforts, recent findings, opportunities to get involved, and what's next for regional water quality work. Register [here](#).

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