

SOFO naturalist



Each quarter SoFo features eco-links, written by a member or friend of the Museum. If you wish to submit an article please contact us.

eco links

In anticipation of SoFo's second annual Climate Change Symposium & Benefit, to be held at the museum in June, we are pleased to share this article with you about an unusual early seasonal salamander-sighting by Andy Sabin, President of the Board of the South Fork Natural History Museum (SoFo). The article was written by Kitty Merrill and first appeared in the January 6, 2016 edition of *The Independent* newspaper. Sabin, who has been studying and recording the behavior of the Eastern Tiger Salamander for many years, reports that this is the earliest he's seen the endangered amphibian in almost 30 years of tracking it.

Changes taking place in the lives of animals and plants on our planet is just one of the many topics that will be addressed in the upcoming SoFo Climate Change Symposium & Benefit. All the speakers at this year's Symposium are important national and international leaders involved in studying the environment. We urge you to attend in June. You will receive further information about the Symposium shortly.

A Rare Find

by Kitty Merrill



Andy Sabin, AKA the Salamander Commander, had a feeling the conditions would be right . . . and the cofounder and president of the South Fork Natural History Museum was right. He found an Eastern Tiger Salamander on Christmas Eve, the earliest he's seen the

endangered creature in almost 30 years of tracking them. Returning from Colorado on December 23, he recalled this week, "I landed in a driving rain." Knowing the salamanders are driven by moisture and temperature, Sabin set out the next evening with two friends to see if he could locate one of the rare salamanders. In waders, sporting a one million-candle power searchlight and a dip net, Sabin arrived at a pond in Bridgehampton.

Within three minutes of entering the pond, the naturalist spied the prize. (Sabin doesn't disclose exact locations of finds in order to protect the salamanders from overly enthusiastic visitors who could disrupt their habitat or even injure or kill them.) The discovery was a rare one; Sabin emphasized this week. Generally tiger salamanders are around later in the winter and early spring. "I look in January, February, March and April when I lead the nature walks," he explained. "This is the earliest I've ever found



one." And, in environmental circles, Sabin's known for his finds. The State Department of Environmental Conservation hadn't been able to locate a tiger salamander on the South Fork for close to 20 years when Sabin discovered one on the Bridgehampton Turnpike in 1986. Since then, he's documented over two-dozen places where the endangered species makes its home on the South Fork. He's found the biggest populations in Riverhead and Calverton. A volunteer for the DEC, Sabin has the special license required for handling tiger salamanders. They're endangered in New York State, and only found on Long Island. Tiger salamanders are defined by irregularly shaped light yellow/olive colored spots. They're one of the largest terrestrial salamanders found in the country, growing to between 18 and 21 centimeters. Some have grown as big as 33 cm. They live anywhere from 12 to 15 years, maturing at age four to five. Eastern Tiger Salamanders spend most of their time buried under ground, emerging at night to mate, usually during rain events. They'll eat insects, worms, and even small vertebrates. Some species of birds, snakes, and even raccoons and opossums like to eat them. Lead funder for the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia Law School, Sabin said that while he was excited by his discovery, it also gave him cause for concern. Speaking to *The Independent* on Monday, he reported a group of friends upstate found rattlesnakes active in mid-December, while he's seen frogs still busy and heard the sound of spring peepers during winter walks. "It's a crazy year," he said. Sabin's worried about the unusual weather patterns and sea level rise. "Our kids and our grandkids are going to have to bear the brunt of climate change, which is kind of sad," he said.

Photos/Nancy Wendell



*Relative size compared to an adult male hand.
Photo: Carl Safina*

The Water's Edge

by Melanie Meade, SoFo Nature Educator

Braak! Braak! Braak! The raspy call of the Great Blue Heron suddenly sounds overhead. Sorry, Great Blue Heron, I didn't mean to disturb your fishing.

I let the kayak drift as the large gray bird lifts itself from the shallows at the river's edge, beating its wide wings slowly, and flies a short way upriver to settle down again at another fishing spot. The quiet waters of the Peconic River Estuary provide extensive habitat for birds like the Great Blue Heron and Belted Kingfisher. These birds depend on water habitats for their survival, and Long Island's estuarine and riparian—or riverside—environments provide ample opportunities to view these birds in the wild. Kayak access sites are plentiful, and an hour of paddling on a spring or summer afternoon is something I always can find time for.

With their long legs and large toes, herons are adapted to hunting for food at the water's edge. Look for them in marshes, ponds, estuaries, even a backyard goldfish pond. Great blue herons can also be seen hunting in saltwater meadows. Standing still, statue-like, they watch for prey to come close. With a lightning-fast strike, their strong, pointed bills snaps up a small fish, frog, or snake—even a rat may be on the menu. To identify a Great Blue Heron in flight, look for the characteristic bent back neck, slow wingbeats, and long legs trailing behind.

Adult birds can be distinguished by their blue-



Great Blue Heron in flight

gray colors and black eye-stripe. Most adult great blue herons migrate further north than Long Island to breed. Gathering in colonies called heronries, mating pairs construct large stick nests high in trees. First-year birds are non-breeders, identifiable by their overall gray plumage, and are the majority of the birds seen in summer on Long Island. In the fall, adults returning south use our waterways as a stopover to rest and feed. Young birds can be found in our area all year if open water is available.

Paddling around a bend in the river I hear the loud, rattling call of another bird common at the water's edge, the Belted Kingfisher.

The loud, rattling call gets my attention as a blue blur swoops low over the water. I watch the bird dive and then rise in a shower of shimmering droplets, a silver fish in its bill. The kingfisher is easy to identify in the field by its blue-gray color above, white under the wings and tail, and a characteristic blue-gray



Belted Kingfisher pair

crest. Male belted kingfishers have one blue-gray band on a white breast; females have a blue band and a rusty-red band.

Kingfishers perch in overhanging branches along a river, salt pond or tidal estuary, anywhere there are small, schooling fishes. They dive by swooping down from a branch or by hovering over the water then diving after a fish. Kingfishers nest in burrows they dig along a sand or gravel riverbank. Suitable nesting banks are not always available close to the water's edge, so the birds will use what they can find, such as sand and gravel pits or embankments along the railroad. Kingfishers can be found on the East End all year, unless their fishing area freezes over. Next time you are out paddling on the river or walking along the water's edge, listen and look for these entertaining water birds.

the Nature clubhouse

Building a SoFo Box Turtle Pen for Non-Releaseable Turtles

by Ryan Sharpelletti; Eagle Scout, Southampton High School Senior, and SoFo Member.



Ryan Sharpelletti

In deciding what to do for my Eagle Scout community service project, I reached out to the South Fork Natural History Museum (SoFo), as I wanted to give back to this wonderful place I had visited often as a Cub Scout. Frank Quevedo, the Museum's Executive Director, and I discussed a number of project possibilities, but what resonated the most with me was building an outdoor Eastern Box Turtle pen. We decided on the pen because SoFo has a number of Eastern Box Turtles at the museum which cannot be released into the wild because they cannot care for themselves. This is often as a result of an injury or shell deformation. To make sure that these turtles have a good quality of life, we wanted to give them an opportunity to have a place outdoors as well as indoors.

After several meetings with Karen Testa from the Turtle Rescue of the Hamptons and local carpenters, I was set to start my project. The first

continued on last page



Andy Sabin addresses environmental issues on the East End at SoFo's 1st Annual Climate Change Symposium in June, 2015
Photo: Kimberly Goff

SoFo's 2nd Annual Climate Change Symposium & Benefit

Moving Toward Sustainability

June 2016 (date TBA)

Cocktail Reception 5–6 pm

Panel Discussion 6–7 pm

All proceeds will benefit SoFo's Climate Change Programming.

We are very pleased to announce that SoFo will host its 2nd Annual Climate Change Symposium & Benefit in June, 2016 (date TBA), which will discuss the challenges of local sustainability and share expert recommendations for positive change on the East End. Our group of speakers will feature environmental activists:

Peter Boyd, Founder of The Time4Good Group, Senior Advisor and Climate Lead for the B Team;

Steven Englebright, New York State Assembly member for the 4th District, SoFo Board Trustee;

Michael Gerrard, Director of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, leading environmental attorney and author;

Carl Safina, Conservation pioneer and Founding President of the Safina Center, author, SoFo Board Trustee; as well as other noted speakers to be announced. Check our website, www.sofo.org, for upcoming news regarding special guests and our complete roster of panelists.

Please contact Diana Aceti, Director of Development, for more information, sponsorship opportunities and reservations at dmaceti@aol.com, 631.903.7217 or 631.537.9735.

Additional information is available at www.sofo.org.



Willi Salm, April Gornik, Andy Sabin, Adrian Grenier & Susan Rockefeller at last summer's sold-out 26th Annual Gala Benefit
Photo: Rob Rich/SocietyAllure.com

Save the Date for SoFo's 27th Annual Summer Gala Benefit

July 16, 2016

6–10 pm

Please save the date for SoFo's 27th Annual Summer Gala Benefit on Saturday, July 16 honoring the Jeff Tarr Family. The event will feature farm to table cuisine by the Food Network's favorite Chef Alex Guarnaschelli, and other surprise chefs. This year's gala, which will again take place at the South Fork Natural History Museum, will begin with a pre-gala VIP cocktail reception that features a special tasting menu by acclaimed local chefs. The main event, from 6-10 pm, will include an Honoree presentation, a Platinum and Silent Auction, dancing, and many surprise guests. Please check our website, www.sofo.org, for more exciting details as the date draws near.

SoFo's 27th Annual Summer Gala Benefit is our most important fundraiser of the year, ensuring the long-term sustainability of SoFo. The museum is a very important environmental resource that educates and inspires children and adults to become engaged and responsible caretakers of our planet now and for decades to come. The museum's exhibits, programs, nature talks and trails, and outdoor experiences are essential to SoFo's mission of conserving and preserving the natural resources of eastern Long Island.

order of business was digging a 7-foot by 8-foot hole that was 3-feet deep and lining it with hardware cloth. Hamptons Tennis Company generously donated a CAT machine for us to use (and two workers), which turned what would have been many hours of hard labor into a 45-minute task.

After this, we built the base of the pen, placed it around the hole, and stapled the hardware cloth to the base. When installing the hardware cloth, we had to make sure every overlap was secured by a zip-tie, since rats and other predators can take advantage of any opening. We then cut beams for support under all four corners of the base, making sure it was leveled, and filled in the hole.



Pen base with hardware cloth

Next, we started to build the actual frame of the pen, as well as the door and doorjamb. Using a shed kit, which provided all of the brackets for connecting the wood, we measured and cut

all of the wood (we used mahogany for durability and aesthetics) and proceeded to screw it together.



Frame for the pen

This wasn't the hardest part, though. I think the hardest part was covering the frame with hardware cloth to, once again, ensure that no predators could get in. It was a challenge to

reach the top of the structure and put it on as straight as possible.

From here, we painted and attached two pieces of plywood to put on two sides of the pen, so that the turtles could have some shade and

protection from the elements, but at the same time have exposure to the outdoors. (This is the same reason why plastic roofing is only on one side of the pen.) We also painted and attached wood about 15 inches high around the bottom of the pen's perimeter.



The final product

After ten work sessions and over 250 hours of help from scouts, friends, and family, the pen was completed in early September. Turtles are not yet "residing" in the pen, due to the soil being too "new." The soil has been loosened one foot down and leaves piled high in the

pen to decompose over the winter and condition the soil for spring, when plantings and worms will be added for the turtles' arrival!

There will be a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Saturday, June 4, 2016 at 2 pm to celebrate the new SoFo Box Turtle Pen. We look forward to seeing you then and introducing you to some of the residents who will be able to call the pen their new outdoor home.



Eastern Box Turtle



South Fork
Natural History
Museum (SoFo)

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