



SOUTH FORK NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM (SOFO)

SOFO's Bi-Weekly Newsletter



Black Racers

STAFF PHOTO

BLACK RACER, LONG ISLAND'S LARGEST SNAKE

By Paul King III

As the temperatures warm, Long Island's largest and quickest snake comes back out after their dormant winter state. The Black Racer (*Coluber constrictor constrictor*) averages a length of 3-5 feet, but the record length is over 6 feet. They are typically found in old fields, pastures, grasslands, and open woodlands. Vineyard field behind SOFO has a healthy population of this beautiful snake. We have boards marked throughout the field that these diurnal snakes will seek refuge under during the night and on colder days. Like their name implies, racers are very fast, and if threatened or chased will retreat into bushes or low branches on nearby trees. While they are not venomous, they can still give a painful bite when defending themselves. Black racers feed on a variety of animals, including mice, rats, voles, frogs, bird nestlings and eggs, as well as other snakes. While their scientific name is *Coluber constrictor constrictor* they do not kill their prey with constriction. Instead, they capture their prey with their mouths, and swallow them alive. This time of year, in early spring, the black racers mate. After reaching three years old, the females leave a pheromone trail, that males will follow to locate her. Mating continues until early June, and after the females will lay about 9-12 eggs in an old mammal burrow, or other refuge. These eggs will then hatch in late August or early September. The baby Black Racers which are about a foot long when they hatch, have bold patterns with red and brown blotches on a gray background. As they get older this pattern disappears until they are all black. Next time you visit the field behind SOFO, be sure to keep an eye out for these beautiful snakes.

BABY PAINTED TURTLE

By Paul King III

This baby Eastern Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta picta*) was found along the waters edge behind SOFO. Looking on the underside of this turtle, its clear that it was freshly hatched as there is a stain where the yolk sac was attached. Typically, Spring is the time of year when our native turtles are just starting to breed and lay eggs. So why does this little painted



Baby Painted Turtle

PAUL KING III PHOTO

turtle look like it just hatched? Well, painted turtles, and many of our other local turtles can overwinter in the nest, if they sense that it is not a good time to emerge. This is common for many turtles in northern latitudes because emerging in fall is a time of peak predator abundance as well as decreasing food sources as temperatures begin to drop. By staying in the nest, hatchlings can emerge in the following spring when food sources and temperatures are increasing. Overwintering does come with its own risks. Many of the nests are exposed to below freezing temperatures and hatchlings can pass away from the cold. They also risk running out of energy stores and dying from a lack of energy. However, painted turtles have a bit of freeze tolerance and are even able to supercool. This supercooling ability means that the hatchlings can withstand temperatures as low as -12 °C without having their body fluids freeze. They can do this because they do not have any ice nucleating agents for ice crystals to form around. This means they cannot freeze unless they come in contact with any ice nucleating agents, but even then, their skin helps to prevent this from happening. This means that the hatchlings can tolerate their body tissues freezing at very low temperatures.

GIANT LEOPARD MOTH

By Paul King III

This weird sea urchin like object is actually a caterpillar of the Giant Leopard Moth (*Hypercompe scribonia*). The caterpillar looks very similar to the larva of the Isabella Tiger Moth (*Pyrrharctia Isabella*) known as the Woolly Bear, that is found in a similar habitat during winter, under leaves and logs. Because of the similarity this caterpillar is sometimes known as the Giant Woolly Bear. Unlike some other species of caterpillars, the Giant leopard Moth lacks stinging spines and does not bite. Instead, its main defense is to curl up and create a ball of stiff prickly setae. The stiff setae make it incredibly hard to uncurl them when they are in a defensive posture. When they are curled up their bright red inter-segmental areas are highly visible, acting to warn predators that they are not tasty to eat. As adults, Giant Leopard Moths have a beautiful pattern of hollow circles and a bright blue and orange iridescent abdomen. They are the largest species of tiger moth in our area reaching lengths of 3 inches. It is not only the caterpillars that have many defensives. The spots on adults,



Giant Leopard Moth

PAUL KING III PHOTO

serve as a disruptive coloration to confuse predators. When threatened the adults may also "play dead" by curling their abdomens and displaying their bright colors. They can also secrete a droplet of yellow, acrid fluid from glands on their head that is very bitter tasting if an animal were to attempt to eat it. They also have ears that aid them to help detect echo-location sonar of hunting bats and enable them to take evasive maneuvers to avoid getting eaten. While the Giant Leopard moth has many defensives that help it evade most predators, they are frequently parasitized by tachinid flies.

[JOIN / RENEW](#)

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SOFO is happy to announce that, in line with the issuance of the latest State Executive Order, we are now able to offer our outdoor nature walks for up to one hundred (100) people, which includes our staff. Please note that we will at all times follow stringent six-foot distancing separation protocols required by the Department of Health for the safety of our participants and environmental educators. We will provide masks and gloves for all attendees. Please dress appropriately for tick protection. [Please check our website calendar for more details about upcoming nature walks.](#)

JOIN OUR BACKYARD WATCH CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECT

We are calling on all of our young environmentalists to observe and document nature awakening in your own backyards. We ask you to send us pictures of your findings with the date you discovered them, and your name and any notes you would like to include. We are happy to feature observations sent in by our fellow environmentalists with details about the nature sightings they shared with us. Please send your photographs and notes to info@sofo.org. Stay safe and be on the look out for Nature news in your backyard!



OAKES FAMILY PHOTO

MARSH MARIGOLD OR COWSLIP

(*Caltha palustris*)

By Crystal Oakes

Marsh Marigold, also known as Cowslip, (*Caltha palustris*) is a perennial native of the Buttercup Family that prefers to live in wet areas such as near streams, in swamps, or in this case, a very damp area of lawn. The large, rounded, shiny, heart or kidney-shaped leaves help distinguish this native buttercup from other yellow buttercups whose leaves are very deeply cut almost to the mid-rib (field guides describe as 'dissected'). This flower has no true petals but 5 to 9 showy, shiny yellow sepals (which are usually green and at the base of other flowers) to protect a cluster of stamens and pistils at the flower's center. Hoverflies are the Marsh Marigold's primary pollinator but many other species, including early butterflies and bees, have been observed visiting the flowers.



OAKES FAMILY PHOTO

MINER BEE

(*Andrena sp.*)

By Crystal Oakes

This small bee is about 1/2 inch long and is a solitary bee known as a Miner Bee (genus *Andrena*). There are about 500 species of Miner Bees in the Northeast US and are named for the tunnels they dig to raise their young or overwinter. Brood tunnel excavation mounds are found in the spring, resembling ant hills but are about an inch high and have a single round hole at the center. Females will dig a tunnel down to a foot or more, with many side chambers that will be filled with a pollen ball and a single egg. When all of the chambers are filled and sealed the female will leave, and the young will hatch and metamorphose without any additional care. Some species will stay underground until the following spring and others will emerge during the summer and dig a tunnel to overwinter in. Many females may have tunnels close together in favorable, sunny digging locations, sometimes at the sides of road or trails.



OAKES FAMILY PHOTO

THREE-LINED MUDSNAIL

(*Tritia trivittata*)

By Crystal Oakes

If you are searching the wrack line of any of our beaches, you may find this small snail shell that is 3/4 inch or smaller. It is known by two common names, Three-lined Mudsail or New England dog whelk, and four scientific names *Ilyanassa trivittata*, *Tritia trivittata*, *Nassa trivittata*, and *Nassarius trivittatus*. The Three-lined Mudsail/New England dog whelk lives intertidally in areas with sandy bottoms but the empty shells wash up on bay, Sound, and ocean shores. Many shells will have a circular hole worn through one side, evidence it was preyed upon by a moon snail.

APRIL 28 - MAY 12, 2021 PROGRAMS

[Please visit sofo.org/calendar/ for more details.](#)

KEY: A-Adults, T-Teens, C-Children, F-Family, AA-All Ages, *Live Animals

SATURDAY, MAY 1, 10:30AM - Zoom Presentation—Sharks, Awareness Inspires Conservation – A Shark Education Program by the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy: AA

SUNDAY, MAY 2, 10:30AM - Online Video—Feminist Bird Club Presents Birds After Flight: The Art & importance of Bird Taxidermy: A/T

SATURDAY, MAY 8, 10:30AM - Zoom Presentation—Moonglow, on a moonlit night in the forest, magical things can happen when forest animals are transformed by moonbeams. Meet the author and the illustrator of this enchanting children's book. Cosponsored by the Peconic Land Trust: AA

SATURDAY, MAY 8, 3PM - SOFO Cleans the Beach—Help Needed: AA

OUR YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALISTS SOCIETY (YES!) NEWS

Our YES! Group meets bi-weekly via Zoom. Click here to see the latest projects and activities!

sofo.org/yes/

SOFO's SHARK RESEARCH and EDUCATION PROGRAM NEWS

The sharks are back! Click here to follow the latest developments and upcoming shark tagging expeditions.

sofo.org/sofos-shark-research-education-program/

YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB

Our Young Birders Club meets the third Saturday of every month and is open to anyone ages 8-18 who is interested in learning about birds. We concentrate on birding in local areas since Long Island has so many great habitats that are home to a wide variety of species.

We remain very appreciative of your support, and we welcome you to visit us at the Museum. Reservations only by calling the Museum at 631-537-9735. Daily sessions from 10-11:30 and 1-2:30. Please watch for announcements on our social media pages facebook.com/sofomuseum and instagram.com/sofomuseum, and feel free to email us at info@sofo.org so we can keep connecting as we all continue to explore our natural world and strive to raise environmental awareness by providing the inspiration and torch for all of us to become caring and responsible stewards of our planet.