



WINTER 2026

SOFO

Naturalist

South Fork Natural History Museum (SOFO) Quarterly Newsletter • January February March 2026


In This Issue

Protecting North Atlantic Right Whales..1	
SOFO News.....3	
Seals on Long Island.....5	
What is a Hibernaculum?.....5	
Membership Drive.....7	


SOFO's Calendar of Events with program descriptions and registration information can be found on the SOFO website:

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This photograph of right whale No. 3720 and calf was cropped and taken in East Hampton, NY from a distance greater than 500 yards to assure the animals' safety. Boaters should maintain safe distances if they spot a right whale. Photo credit: @FishGuyPhotos

—Ecolinks—

Protecting North Atlantic Right Whales: East Hampton Town Marine Museum Partners with StationKeeper Technology to Support Conservation Efforts

By: Grace Grimes,
South Fork Sea Farmers Aquaculture Coordinator

The North Atlantic Right Whale (NARW), *Eubalaena glacialis*, was once abundant across the Atlantic, with estimates of 9,000–21,000 individuals before commercial whaling.¹ Hunted for their oil and baleen, they were known as the “right” whale to kill—swimming close to shore, buoyant after death, and rich in resources. Centuries of exploitation pushed the species to near extinction, and today only about 370 individuals remain, including roughly 70 reproductive females.² Their survival depends on a combination of scientific research, conservation policy, and public engagement. The East Hampton Town Marine Museum (EHTMM) is helping bridge these efforts through educational programs and partnerships with emerging technology, such as StationKeeper, which provides real-time vessel alerts to reduce ship strikes in critical NARW habitat.

NARWs are baleen whales, meaning they filter tiny prey, such as copepods, krill, and other plankton, using long, comb-like fringes of baleen instead of teeth. They are the third-largest whale species, growing to 45–60 feet long. Beyond their impressive size and cultural importance, NARWs play a key ecological role, contributing to a process called the whale pump. Whales feed throughout the water column, but defecate at the surface, releasing nutrient-rich plumes that fertilize phytoplankton, the microscopic algae at the base of the marine food web. When NARW population levels were higher, they probably contributed substantially to this nutrient cycling.³ And as their population hopefully stabilizes, we may gain a deeper understanding of their ecological importance and historical patterns, just as we have seen with other recovering whale species.

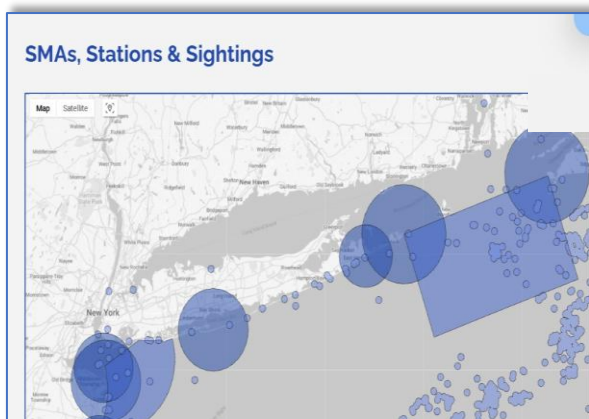
International regulations to protect whales emerged in the early 20th century, culminating in the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 1361–1423h), the 1986 global moratorium on commercial whaling, and the 1997 Atlantic

Continued on next page

Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (50 CFR 229.32). However, the NARW remains in peril, listed as endangered since 1970, declared part of an Unusual Mortality Event in 2017, and elevated to critically endangered status in 2020. The life expectancy of the NARW is currently estimated at 70 to 75 years. However, studies suggest that in the absence of anthropogenic stressors, it could reach upwards of 150 years.⁴ Although commercial whaling has subsided, its legacy persists in new forms as the species faces threats from fishing gear entanglements and vessel strikes, resulting in a median lifespan of only 22 years and few individuals surviving beyond 45.⁴

Vessel strikes are a major source of injury as these whales migrate through heavily trafficked coastal corridors—moving north in the spring, summer, and fall to feed off New England and Canada, then traveling south in winter to South Carolina, Georgia, and northeastern Florida to calve in shallow waters. Unlike many other whale species, the NARW lack a dorsal fin, making them difficult for mariners to spot at the surface. They are also relatively slow swimmers and spend significant time resting, feeding, and socializing near the surface. Mothers with calves are especially vulnerable, as calves nurse and travel alongside their mothers in the upper layers of the water column. These behaviors make right whales susceptible to being struck by vessels traveling at high speeds.

In response, NOAA implemented seasonal speed restrictions in 2008 (73 FR 60173), requiring most vessels over 65 feet to travel at 10 knots or less in designated high-risk areas during specific times of year. These Seasonal Management Areas (SMAs) are supplemented by Dynamic Management Zones and Right Whale Slow Zones, where vessel operators are encouraged (but not required) to slow down for 15 days after whales are visually or acoustically detected. Previously, mariners relied on an application called WhaleAlert, which displays SMAs and right whale detections, but is limited by cellular or internet connection. Improved shore-to-vessel communication channels are vital to enforce these regulations.



*Image courtesy of StationKeeper,
<https://www.motioninfo.com/map>*

To address this need, Moses Calouro, CEO of Maritime Information Systems and MotionInfo, partnered with Portia Calouro, who manages coordination with historic district

preservation boards, site selection, and artwork design, to develop StationKeeper. This device receives Automated Information System (AIS) data transmitted by vessels regarding their identity, position, and speed, and then transmits information back to vessels. Currently, StationKeeper sends automated alerts to operators when they enter and leave SMAs, and if they exceed the speed limit. The system's long-term goal is to expand these alerts, warning vessels when entering voluntary slow zones or when whales are nearby. Consumer electronic devices like Garmin, Raymarine, and Simrad are also working to integrate AIS features to expand broadcasts to recreational boaters. To implement this mission, StationKeeper has partnered with the American Lighthouse Foundation and the United States Lighthouse Society, revitalizing lighthouses as active guardians of the ocean.



Image credit: East Hampton Town Marine Museum

The EHTMM was part of pioneering this project. In 2023, the EHTMM began discussions with StationKeeper, and by the summer of 2024, officially launched its program, the first on Long Island and the sixth site nationwide (followed by the Montauk Point Lighthouse). Led by Stacy Myers, Director of Education, and Caly Stewart, recent Cornell University graduate and Assistant Director of the Marine Summer Program, the initiative integrates marine conservation technology with public education. The museum leads a variety of programs with students from East End Schools. Program activities focus on interdisciplinary programs that blend science, art, history, and critical thinking. The EHTMM's extensive gallery and maritime collection allow for deep interactive learning. The museum also offers public tours that explore the history of whaling, showcase local art inspired by marine life, and teach about other marine mammals found around Long Island, including how to observe seals safely. Through these programs, the EHTMM is helping transform awareness into action, linking Long Island's maritime past with the protection of its future. Their initiatives continue to grow, with plans to pilot public field programs and offer training on identifying and logging whale sightings through the citizen science app, WhaleAlert. These local stewardship and education initiatives bring hope for the long-term survival of the NARW.

Continued on next page

Join SOFO and EHTMM for a Whale of a Time on a Tour of the East Hampton Town Marine Museum, Free for All Ages, January 16th and 19th, 3:00-4:30pm. Register with SOFO.

Sources:

1. S., Pennino, M. G., Smith, T. D., Reeves, R. R., Meynard, C. N., Kaplan, D. M., & Rodrigues, A. S. L. (2016). A spatially explicit estimate of the prewhaling abundance of the endangered North Atlantic right whale. *Conservation Biology: The Journal of the Society for Conservation Biology*, 30(4), 783–791. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.12664>
2. Linden, D. (2024). *Population size estimation of North Atlantic right whales from 1990-2023* (NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS NE ; 324). <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/66179>
3. Roman, J., Nevins, J., Altabet, M., Koopman, H., & McCarthy, J. (2016). Endangered Right Whales Enhance Primary Productivity in the Bay of Fundy. *PLOS ONE*, 11(6), e0156553. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0156553>
4. Greg, B., Els, V., & Corkeron, P. (2024). Extreme longevity may be the rule not the exception in Balaenid whales. *Science Advances*, 10(51). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adq3086>

—SOFO News—

“A Breath of Fresh Air”—

A New Look to Inspire the Next Generation of Environmental Stewards

On behalf of the SOFO Board of Directors and staff, it is with great pleasure and excitement that I introduce you to our newly designed quarterly newsletter, the *SOFO Naturalist*. Driven by our mission since 1989, our team is eager, more than ever, to continue leading the next generation of environmental stewards through education, scientific initiatives, and environmental advocacy. This publication, originally called *SOFO Biota*, started as a journal 37 years ago and has developed into an important document in understanding the ongoing changes and extreme sensitivity of our unique natural environment. Over the years, changes in wildlife behaviors and their habitats, due to environmental impacts from human activity, have been an ongoing challenge in creating nature discovery programs aimed to enlighten the public’s appreciation and preservation of the natural world. These articles, written by staff members, friends, and young environmentalists, continue to be an inspiration for our Education Director, Melanie Meade, and will make this newsletter even more informative than before.

As a seasonal publication, the *SOFO Naturalist* provides us with many opportunities to experience the magical wonders of the east end year-round. From searching for snowy owls, nocturnal salamander walks, tropical fish seining, turtle surveys, or even a hike through the woods, our Calendar of Events has something for every nature enthusiast, young and old. We hope you take a deep breath and find enjoyment in our newly created newsletter and continue this journey with us for many years to come.

— Frank Quevedo, SOFO Executive Director

Hayground School Apprentices at SOFO



Birding at SOFO



Touch Tank Interactions

In September, SOFO welcomed students from Hayground School’s apprentice program for a third year. Seventh graders Miles and Indie joined us for three days a week over eight weeks. During their time here, they learned all about the daily responsibilities of running our museum, such as opening/closing the museum to the public and caring for our resident animals. They both took a particular interest in learning about husbandry or animal care tasks. With our environmental educators’ guidance, Miles and Indie learned how to clean exhibit tanks, prepare food, make saltwater, and even how to handle some of our animals.



Indie (left) and Miles with Students and Eastern Box Turtles

The apprenticeship program concluded with a school group visit from Hayground School, Grades 3, 4, and 5, which both Miles and Indie assisted with. They helped organize educational materials and gathered animals for the reptile and amphibian show. During their apprenticeship, Miles and Indie each chose one particular reptile or amphibian to learn about, and they helped present their chosen animal to the school group on their last day. It was great to host these young apprentices who are passionate about the local environment.

–SOFO News–

SOFO Welcomes New Staff

My name is Tommy Steinbrecher. I had previously been an intern at SOFO for several summers starting in 2018, and I am thrilled to return as a full-time educator. I have a Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology from The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).



Having grown up in Southampton, New York, I fostered a passion for our local ecology and a love for science at a young age. Most of all, I have always been fascinated by marine science, which was propelled academically as a student of Greg Metzger (SOFO Sharks) at Southampton High School's Marine Wet Lab, and then later at UCLA in classes involving tide pools in the rocky intertidal zone and scuba diving in kelp forests. Other fields of interest include animal behavior, restoration ecology, and evolutionary biology. Notable influences on my journey to science education include Steve Irwin and Bill Nye the Science Guy.

Working at SOFO has given me the opportunity to deepen my connection to, and understanding of, the unique environment of the South Fork, and in sharing this with the public I hope to do the same for them.

SOFO Sharks Research

By Erin Hwang, SOFO Executive Assistant

In early November 2025, Frank Quevedo (SOFO Executive Director), Dr. Tobey Curtis (SOFO Sharks Lead Collaborating Scientist), and Greg Metzger (SOFO Sharks Chief Field Coordinator) travelled to Massachusetts as representatives of the SOFO Shark Research and Education Team.

During their visit, the SOFO Sharks Team visited various institutions, including the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy, the New England Aquarium, and the Harvard Museum of Natural History. While at these institutions, the SOFO Sharks Team had the opportunity to meet with fellow shark scientists to discuss ongoing shark research objectives, as well as ways to continue collaborating in the future.

We would like to thank the following people for such an educational, inspiring, and productive weekend, and we look forward to continuing to work together:

- Dr. John Mandelman, Chief Scientist at the New England Aquarium Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life
- Dr. Megan Winton, Senior Scientist at the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy
- Dr. Laurant Brewster, Assistant Professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth School for Marine Science & Technology (SMAST)
- Lindsay Graff, PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth SMAST

Stay tuned for exciting updates!



Left to Right: Frank Quevedo, Dr. Tobey Curtis, and Greg Metzger

SOFO's Purple Martin Colony Update

Our purple martin colony in Vineyard Field had a successful nesting season in 2025, as reported by John Shemilt, SOFO's Purple Martin Colony Steward. There were 40 nests established. The first eggs were seen in early June, and overall a total of 165 eggs were observed. Of these, 154 eggs hatched and 148 of the hatchlings fledged. John reports all of his data to the Purple Martin Conservation Association. We look forward to the colony returning yet again next year.

East End Bluebirds Update

This year was a good year for bluebirds on the East End, with 138 bluebirds fledged, making a grand total of 1,902 to date. Some of the highlights were: 18 pairs of bluebirds at the East Hampton airport, good nesting of bluebirds at Barcelona Neck, successful nesting of bluebirds at North Haven, and double nesting of bluebirds at Sculpture Garden. Failures included nesting attempts with eggs laid at Springs Park, SOFO, and Camp Hero. It was the first time in a number of years that bluebirds attempted to nest at Springs Park and Camp Hero. In 2026, Joe Giunta, SOFO's Bluebird Steward, hopes for continued successes and the replacement of older boxes. More bluebird nest boxes are planned to be added to the Barcelona Neck site. Joe is also open to the construction of a new bluebird trail in suitable habitat.

—Footnotes on Nature—

Seal Season: Long Island's Coastal Visitors

by Sophia Cecere, SOFO Environmental Educator



Harbor Seals, Photo credit: Xylia Serafy

With winter in full swing, it can be tough to make the decision to brave the cold and get outside to enjoy nature, especially as much as we do in warmer months. Even in the cold, there is great beauty worth seeing in the natural world. One of the many species we are lucky to have the chance at observing in the winter time is the harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*), which is the most commonly seen seal species on Long Island, closely followed by the largest species of seal found in our waters: the grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*), as well as hooded, harp, and ringed seals, all of which are rare sightings.

Seals are considered pinnipeds, which refers to a group of “fin-footed” mammals. They travel to Long Island in the colder months and can typically be seen from November to May. The seals seen on Long Island come here to rest, sleep, and eat, gaining the energy they need to travel back up north in the spring. For the remainder of the year, seals reside in Canada and New England’s waters, with those areas serving as their breeding grounds.

To identify earless seals on our beaches, look out for their dark spotted coats, rounded snouts, and short flippers. If you look closely, you will see that they lack external ear flaps and have a smooth surface on the sides of their heads. These animals are most easily identifiable by the way that they get around on land. They can often be seen using their hind flippers to propel themselves forward in a sort of worm-like motion. When seals sleep in the water, they are only able to shut down half of their brain in order to maintain the functions necessary for survival, however, when they are resting on land, they are able to fully shut down their brains and go into a deep sleep, making it that much more important for these animals to have optimal undisturbed time on land in the winter months.

The best places on Long Island to spot a seal during the winter are Montauk Point State Park, Cupsogue Beach County Park, and Jones Beach State Park, but there is always the opportunity to see seals on the Island’s beaches, especially right here on the South Fork. Another great way to spot our winter visitors is by

boat, whether that be on a personal vessel or a guided tour. Seals are most commonly spotted during low tide and are often seen resting on sand bars or rocks. Although it can be very exciting to come across these creatures in the wild, it is important to always remember that they are federally protected species, and it is recommended to maintain at least a 200-foot distance at all times, and to try and not disturb them.

This winter, the museum will be hosting guided seal walks on **January 18th, February 15th, and March 14th**. So bundle up, grab your binoculars, and join us to see our favorite pinniped friends! Please contact the museum at info@sofo.org or 631-537-9735 for more information and to reserve your spot.

—SOFO YES! Corner—

What is a Hibernaculum?

By Mare Dianora, YES! Director

Since the Young Environmentalists Society (YES!) at SOFO has celebrated its five-year mark, we can be proud of the work we have completed in this community. Our program participants have all been important partners for the work we do, but there exists a group of program stewards that have shown exceptional involvement, commitment and responsibility for upholding the values and continuity of this program - many from the start back in 2020!

This group of young museum ambassadors had the privilege to be invited to meet with Tim Wheeler, the Living Lands Regional Program Manager, at Edwina von Gal’s Perfect Earth Project in East Hampton, New York, back in October of 2024. Together, we shared a beautiful afternoon touring the grounds and learning about all of the innovative landscaping projects on the site and beyond. Tim took the time to listen to these kids and learn who they were and what they saw as possible goals. After we left, the YES! members were asked to continue the conversation and collaboration - which continued both in person and on Zoom with Tim through the winter and into spring. We eventually decided to build a snake hibernaculum onsite at the museum as we were all inspired by the beautiful and eye-catching hibernaculum that Tim showed us at The Perfect Earth Project site.

This shelter will be a refuge for snakes (and anyone else who decides to move into it!) from predators and the cold. This project happened in many stages through the summer and into the fall. It was because of the hard work and dedication of these fine young environmentalists that this structure was completed.

Continued on next page



YES! members proudly display their giant hole, the base for the project. This hole was then skillfully filled with specific structural items (bluestone slabs, tree cookies, branches and stones) under the guidance of Tim Wheeler.



Hibernaculum building in progress!

Thank you to Felix Carmona for excavating the hole.



YES! members: LauraRose, Saoirse, Ollie and Liam with Tim Wheeler (center), Living Lands Regional Program Manager at The Perfect Earth Project, with the completed shelter.

We now look forward to watching this human-built retreat settle into the natural environment and seeing if we do in fact get residents to establish this as their winter home. Please come visit this project behind the educational pond on the museum property and let us know what you see going on around our hibernaculum!



Black Racer Snake



Garter Snake

—Membership—



SOUTH FORK NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM & NATURE CENTER

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SOFO Calendar at a Glance Winter 2026

SOFO's Calendar of Events with program descriptions and registration information can be found on the SOFO website:

<http://www.sofo.org/calendar>

Programs are FREE to members. Programs at the museum: Non-members: \$10 child, \$15 adult, includes museum admission that day. Children under age 3 are free.

Off-site programs, non-members: \$5 per person, age 3 and up. Children under age 3 are free.

Visit us at:

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**Thursdays in January, February and March—
11:00AM: Who's Hungry?, FREE with museum
admission**

—January—

Friday, January 2

**11:00AM-12:00PM: FREE, Backyard Birds: All
Ages**

Saturday, January 3

**11:00AM-1:00PM: FREE, New Year's Walk at Big
Reed Pond Trail, Co-sponsored with Third House
Nature Center, Montauk: Adults and Children ages
10+**

**11:00AM: Feeding Time—Help Feed the Museum
Animals: Children ages 6-8**

**5:00-6:00PM: FREE, Full Wolf Moon Hike: All
Ages**

Sunday, January 4

10:30AM: FREE, Birding for Beginners: All Ages

Saturday, January 10

**11:00AM: FREE, NEW! SOFO's Bug Club: Bug
Watching Buddies with Moe Kennedy. This Week:
Sleeping Spiders and Curled Up Caterpillars: Adults
and Children ages 5-16**

Sunday, January 11

**5:00-7:00PM: Stargazing—Quadrantids Meteor
Shower: All Ages**

Friday, January 16

**3:00PM: Tour of the East Hampton Town Marine
Museum with Education Director Stacy Myers: All
Ages**

Saturday, January 17

**DAWN to DUSK, NYSOA Annual Winter
Waterfowl Count: Experienced and intermediate
adult and teen birders**

**3:00PM: FREE, Winter on a Salt Marsh: Video and
Images with Tim Regan: Adults and Children ages
8+**

Sunday, January 18

**1:00PM: Seal Walk with SOFO: Adults and Children
ages 8+**

Monday, January 19

**1:00PM: Tour of the East Hampton Town Marine
Museum with Education Director Stacy Myers: All
Ages**

Wednesday, January 21

**1:00-3:00PM: East End Outdoor Nature Education at
Vineyard Field, Bridgehampton: All Ages**

Saturday, January 24

**12:00-2:00PM: Make Your Own Recycled Paper:
Adults and Children ages 5+**

6:00PM: Owl Walk with Aidan Perkins: Adults

Sunday, January 25

**10:30AM & 1:30PM: Owl Storytime & Craft, FREE
with Museum Admission: Families**

Saturday, January 31

**9:00AM: FREE, Trail Walk at Big Fresh Pond, Co-
sponsored with North Sea Maritime Center: Adults and
Children ages 10+**

**11:00AM-12:00PM: Love-Bug Valentine Craft: All
Ages**

—February—

Sunday, February 1

**9:00AM: Winter Specialties of Shinnecock—A Search
for Avian Visitors of the North with Aidan Perkins:
Adults**

**5:30-6:30PM: FREE, Full Snow Moon Hike: All
Ages**

February 7

9:00AM: Winter Sea Ducks with Aidan Perkins: Adults

3:00-4:00PM: FREE, East End Environment

Lecture: Long Island's Whaling History with Dr. Tara Rider, SBU SoMAS: Adults and Children ages 10+

Sunday, February 8

11:00AM: Nature Hike at Promised Land, Amagansett: Adults and Children ages 7+

Saturday, February 14

11:00AM: FREE, NEW! SOFO's Bug Club: Bug Watching Buddies with Moe Kennedy. This Week: Bug Themed Valentines with Candy Treats: Adults and Children ages 5-16

7:30PM: Eastern Tiger Salamander Search with Andy Sabin: Adults and Children ages 6+

Sunday, February 15

11:00AM: Feeding Winter Birds: Make a Natural Bird Feeder: All Ages

February 16-20

11:00AM: FREE, Outdoor Walks: All Ages

Monday: Animal Tracks—Who Was Here?

Tuesday: How Plants Survive Winter

Wednesday: Searching for Winter Wildlife

Thursday: Scavenger Hunt

Friday: Where Do Bugs Go in Winter?

Wednesday, February 18

1:00-3:00PM: East End Outdoor Nature Education at Wildwood State Park, Wading River: All Ages

Saturday, February 21

10:00AM: FREE, Young Birders Club Walk with Aidan Perkins: Ages 8-18

10:30AM: FREE, Birding for Beginners: All Ages

Sunday, February 22

10:30AM & 1:30PM: Food Chain Stories and Feed the Animals, **FREE** with Museum Admission: Families

Sunday, February 28

1:00PM: Seal Walk with SOFO: Adults and Children ages 8+

—March—

Tuesday, March 3

7:00-8:00PM: FREE, Full Worm Moon Hike: All Ages

Saturday, March 7

7:30PM: Annual Blue-spotted Salamander Search with Andy Sabin: Adults and Children ages 6+

Saturday, March 14

10:30AM: FREE, Birding for Beginners: Adults

11:00AM: Seal Walk with SOFO: Adults and Children ages 8+

11:00AM-1:00PM: FREE, East End Environment Lecture and Exhibit Tour: Roy Latham's Journals with John Holzapfel, Co-sponsored with Oysterponds Historical Society: Adults

8:00PM: Another Blue-spotted Salamander Search: Adults and Children ages 6+

Sunday, March 15

11:00AM-12:30PM: DIY Science for Kids—Water Experiments: Adults and Children ages 8+

Wednesday, March 18

1:00-3:00PM: East End Outdoor Nature Education at Cupsogue County Park, Westhampton: All Ages

Saturday, March 21

10:00AM: FREE, Young Birders Club Walk with Aidan Perkins: Ages 8-18

11:00AM: FREE, NEW! SOFO's Bug Club: Bug Watching Buddies with Moe Kennedy. This Week: National Learn About Butterflies Day: Adults and Children ages 5-16

8:00PM: Spotted Salamander Search with Andy Sabin: Adults and Children ages 6+

Saturday, March 28

9:00AM: FREE, Alewife Walk with Peconic Baykeeper Pete Topping, Co-sponsored with North Sea Maritime Center: Adults and Children 8 and up

11:00AM: Spring Has Sprung! Pollinator Garden Planting: Adults and Children ages 5+

6:30PM: FREE, Andy Sabin's Wood Frogs & Spotted Salamander Walk: All Ages

Sunday, March 29

10:30AM & 1:30PM: Water Cycle Stories and Experiments, **FREE** with Museum Admission: Families

11:00AM-1:00PM: FREE, Beach Clean-Up with SOFO: All Ages

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Visit us at:
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PO Box 455
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Open Daily, 10am - 4pm
www.sofo.org • 631-537-9735

SOFO Mission

The mission of the South Fork Natural History Museum (SOFO) is to stimulate interest in, advance knowledge of, and foster appreciation for the natural world with special emphasis on the unique natural environment of Long Island's South Fork.

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