



Summer 2026

SOFO

Naturalist

South Fork Natural History Museum (SOFO) Quarterly Newsletter • July August September 2026

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

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

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Bay Scallop in Eelgrass Meadow, a New York State High Priority Species of Greatest Concern, Fish Guy Photos

—Ecolinks—

Nature's Health, Humanity's Future

By Frank Quevedo, SOFO Executive Director

I write this article from a local perspective, but it most certainly applies globally as well. Let's begin with the question: Have any of you taken a breath of air, drank a glass of water, eaten a vegetable or fruit, and thanked nature for it? Most likely not...I certainly haven't. Humans often act as if we are totally independent of nature, and that disrupting the life-giving services it provides will not have an impact on us whatsoever. Well, the truth is...we are living in a critical time for prolonging human life. Regardless of how we continue to disrupt our fragile ecosystems, the Earth will continue to endure these impacts and continue to function for millennia to come; but we, as a species, will suffer from these human-induced impacts and inevitably slowly disappear from existence.

I've been exploring the East End of Long Island as a naturalist for over thirty years. And in that short period of time, I've seen such a dramatic decline in our local biodiversity and the natural functioning of its fragile ecosystems—especially the loss of marine eelgrass, dramatic declines in bird populations, and all the bees, butterflies, and moths. Most of us don't understand the magnitude of this issue we are having today, but I hope this short article will encourage you to become aware of this crisis.

"No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced."

—David Attenborough

Biological diversity is a term used to describe the variety of life on Earth. These varieties exist at

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American Bumblebee, New York State High Priority Species of Greatest Conservation Need

many different levels, from insects, fungi, plankton, and plants, and genes found in all living organisms. These varieties of life create ecosystems, which are characterized by their collection of species, their physical environments in which they live, and how they interact with each other in their shared environment. Long Island hosts a diverse range of ecosystems, shaped by glacial activity thousands of years ago, ranging from freshwater wetlands (coastal plain ponds and vernal ponds) to coastal salt marshes, pine barrens, grasslands, maritime forests and shrubs, marine eelgrass beds, sandy beaches, and dunes. These specialized habitats support high biodiversity, including migratory birds, marine life, native insects, and native plants. When these ecosystems are healthy, they provide goods and services that sustain all life on Earth, including human life. Unfortunately, humanity frequently takes these services for granted.



Red Knot, a New York State Threatened Species

These easily overlooked ecosystem services are divided into four categories. First are **Provisioning** services, which provide food, fuel, and medicines. Second are **Regulating** services, purifying air and water, mitigating floods, and detoxifying soils. Third are **Cultural** services, non-material benefits that people can obtain from ecosystems. These include spiritual enrichment, intellectual development, recreation, and aesthetic values. Fourth are **Supporting** services, which make all other ecosystems functional, such as pollination, nutrient cycling, and photosynthesis. These ecosystem services are disappearing at such an alarming rate, mostly due to human conduct, primarily habitat destruction.



Eastern Screech Owl

"We live our comfortable lives in the shadow of a disaster of our own making. That disaster is being brought about by the very things that allow us to live our comfortable lives."

—David Attenborough, *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future*

Other threats to biodiversity and ecosystem loss include the introduction of non-native species (Southern Pine Beetle and phragmites), pollution (including excessive nitrates and phosphates from sewage and agricultural runoff into our bays and ponds), and climate change due to the release of carbon gases from fossil fuel burning. It's a simple equation: the more we destroy nature, the more we destroy ourselves.

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Believe it or not, nature has been sending warning signals to us for many years now. The disappearance of certain species like many amphibians, migratory



Eastern Tiger Salamander, a New York State Endangered Species

birds, and insect populations are bioindicators (ecosystem canaries) that are highly sensitive to changes in moisture, temperature, and pollution. We must protect all wildlife and their habitats but specifically insect populations. We must stop cutting down our trees. One tree lost has a direct impact on many caterpillars, which feed birds. Birds use trees to raise their young, and through photosynthesis, trees absorb carbon dioxide from the air and help slow down climate change. Nature's message to humanity is simple: Nature doesn't need people. People need nature.



Trees Cut in a Forest for Development Purpose

"If we were to wipe out insects alone on this planet, the rest of life and humanity with it would mostly disappear from the land within a few months."

—E.O. Wilson

—SOFO News—

SOFO Receives Grant from the Peconic Estuary Partnership (PEP)



**Peconic Estuary
Partnership**

PROTECTING AND RESTORING LONG ISLAND'S PECONIC BAYS

We are happy to announce that the Peconic Estuary Partnership (PEP) has awarded SOFO a grant in support of the museum's educational programming. PEP, as guardians of the Peconic River Estuary watershed, was influential in the designation of the Peconic Estuary as an "Estuary of National Significance" in 1982, allowing the organization to receive consistent federal support.

The awarded funds will be used to enhance and expand the museum's environmental education programs and support additional outreach activities with local schools. We look forward to increased museum visits and field-based explorations with more school children and other organized groups

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–SOFO News–

from the community. We are grateful to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), Suffolk County Department of Health Services (SCDHS) and our local PEP team.

SOFO and Sag Harbor Cinema Present *The Power of Creativity* with Photographer and Explorer Kike Calvo



Snorkeling with Sea Lions, Kike Calvo

Join SOFO on Friday, September 4th, 11:00am to 1:00pm, for a multi-media presentation, **The Power of Creativity** and dive into the world of award-winning photographer and author Kike Calvo. Through photographs and images, Kike traces his personal journey of discovery as he focuses on cultures and environments across the world. As an author and educator, Kike has produced bilingual children's books about environmental issues and provided them to indigenous communities to promote cultural and science literacy and local conservation efforts. The presentation is free to the community, sign up with SOFO, <https://sofo.org/calendar>. Cosponsored with the Sag Harbor Cinema.

Balloons for Sharks Program

By Rebecca Rogers, SOFO Environmental Educator and Outreach Coordinator

You might be asking, how does collecting balloons help sharks? SOFO's "Balloons for Sharks Tournament" was developed to help conservation

efforts through stewardship and fundraising for the SOFO Shark Research and Education Program. Every entry helps SOFO Sharks purchase satellite tags to study sharks off Long Island. Additionally, we hope to raise awareness of the problems balloons cause in the environment, get more people outside, and help clean up our beaches.

Balloons are incredibly harmful to our marine life. Many animals become entangled in the (usually) plastic string that we tie to balloons. This can lead to severe circulation problems and/or limit their movement, such that they cannot defend themselves from predators or find food. Animals also ingest balloons. Sometimes the balloons look like food (i.e. a jellyfish, bunker or other shiny fish) or they are just mixed in with their food and eaten by mistake. The balloons can then block their intestines, leading to health problems, and eventually starvation.

The first Balloons for Sharks Tournament took place in 2019. The goal was to find the most balloons by land or sea in one day to win a trip on the shark research boat the following summer.

Over the years, participants have removed over 6,000 balloons from our beaches, bays, and the ocean!



Balloon Collection of One Participant

Inspired by SOFO's program, participants with Chickadees, a volunteer organization based in Maine, are collecting balloon litter and other plastics from the coastline and sharing their results. Part science, part community pride, and part storytelling, activities like these help visualize how marine litter connects coastal communities.

SOFO's 8th annual Balloons for Sharks 2026 will run from July 15th to August 15th. There will be two

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prizes awarded: One for the person who finds the most balloons, and anyone who participates will be entered in a drawing to win a prize as well. What's the prize you ask? It's a trip in Summer 2027 on the shark research boat! So even if you don't find any balloons, you still have a chance to win!

If you'd like to know more about the tournament, email balloonsforsharks@sofo.org.

—Footnotes on Nature—

Spark Bird

By Mike Cooper, Naturalist

A spring morning, sixty something years ago, and a flurry of sparrows flashed through my backyard. I was perched atop my playground, six years old and about to conquer my new slide, when one sparrow, probably also a youngster, paused on my knee for an instant. We looked at each other and I'm sure I flinched at the unexpected visitor. The sparrow flew off to join its family, and even now I can remember thinking that this might be a once-in-a-lifetime encounter.

After a lifetime of birding and nature study, I still wonder if that sparrow was my "spark bird." In the world of birding, a "spark bird" is generally considered to be the one that got you hooked into the birding world. For many people, their first hummingbird or Scarlet Tanager may fill that role.



House sparrow, Mike Cooper

Most birders I know came to birding later in life and therefore have a clearer memory of the spark bird that got the ball rolling for them. In my case, my family moved from "the city" to the wilds of Suffolk County just after my fourth birthday and my nature-watching started shortly afterwards. I traded Astoria Park for the woodland just beyond my backyard.

Like most kids, I first gravitated towards things I could catch- mostly spiders, insects and snakes. But once I was old enough to hop that back fence, the world of birds opened up for me. Birds were colorful. Birds were singing. Birds were easy to see. Before long I was using the family encyclopedia and trips to the library to work out Great-crested Flycatchers and Baltimore Orioles. My parents were always encouraging. They wanted me outside, climbing that fence. Before long, the Peterson Field Guide appeared on my shelf. Then the Peterson double record album. The rest, as they say, is history.

I've held many birds in my hand since that day- even had a few more land on me. But I've always wondered if that one little spark that paused for an instant on my bent knee became the flame that has lasted a lifetime.



Chipping sparrow, Mike Cooper

Editor's Note:

Each quarter, SOFO features seasonal articles written by staff, members or friends of the Museum. If you would like to submit a nature observation for Footnotes on Nature or longer article for Ecolinks, please contact mmeade@sofo.org

—SOFO YES! Corner—

Beyond Recycling, Students Investigate Sustainability and Consumption

By Mare Dianora, Young Environmentalists Society (YES!) Director

The *Young Environmentalists Society* has long admired the organization founded by Annie Leonard in 2007 called *The Story of Stuff* that provides solutions-focused information for our consumer-driven society. We met with their staff on Zoom several times to discuss plastic reduction and how we can face challenges that go beyond just throwing out or recycling. I approached them to ask if we could do another Zoom for our older students as they were asking for more information on living sustainably, and they suggested that I offer them the course they offer on their website specifically titled “Buy, Use, Toss: A Closer Look at the Things We Buy.” This is a ten-unit interdisciplinary curriculum that explores the full cycle of the materials economy.

I decided to run this course as a one-day workshop. I planned to have the kids come to the museum in the morning and we would spend a full day working through their projects and end the day sharing dinner to discuss everything we explored together. This pilot program included several long-standing members of YES! and one new high school student from Syosset - the idea was to have a smaller group for the first round of this course so we could run through it together and see what adjustments would need to be made for a larger group. This worked out great and we are now ready for additional dates for this course with larger groups.

We spent the day watching videos, reading articles and discussing topics such as extraction, production, distribution, consumption and disposal. I had photographed my entire lot of garbage for the month of February, and we discussed my trash and theirs. The students asked really good questions, and we researched the answers together. We all left the class feeling a bit empowered on how to move forward more sustainability. We all decided that much of the pressure needs to be on the industry and not the individual. We all felt there is too much greenwashing

and this needs to come to an end and companies need to be held accountable.



Analyzing one family's month of garbage

I asked the students for their feedback on the information. We spent quite a bit of time talking about how the information relates to them personally and to their community. One student shared that he wished that governments would work together to create solid sustainability laws and then enforce them so we can have a healthier planet. He stated, “Personal accountability can only go so far.” Another student stated that he was upset to learn how much companies exploited impoverished people in China - specifically related to recycling e-waste from the West.

This is just the beginning of our conversation. This group has continued to meet on Zoom to further our discussions. One student asked for a beach clean up to bring friends together in a fun way to do a tedious task. A second student asked if we could do a high school level book club and discussion so our group can keep meeting and keep the conversation going. I am so proud of these high school students, and I know they are going to grow up to be fine leaders in our community and beyond. They already are!

Please stay tuned to our museum calendar for upcoming sustainability courses!



HOST YOUR NEXT EVENT AT SOFO

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SOFO Mission

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

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