Transcript – Mary Gannon, Class of 2017

Narrator: Mary Gannon
Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist
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Amanda Knox: Good afternoon. I am Amanda Knox. I am the Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist at Brown University. It is Wednesday, May 6, 2020, and it is one o'clock in the afternoon, and I am here recording again today another COVID-19 oral history with Mary Gannon. Mary, would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners, please?

Mary Gannon: Sure. So I'm Mary Gannon. I am a native Rhode Islander, born and bred, will probably never leave this little state. I love it here. I work as the wildlife outreach coordinator for the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife under the Department of Environmental Management. So I'm very happy to have found work right here in our little state. And I graduated Brown in 2017 with my Masters of Arts in Teaching.

AK: Perfect, thank you. So I just want to share my own anecdote to explain how we got here. Of course I would be interested in your story no matter what, [1:00] but last week I found a big brown bat was grounded on my front porch, I live on the East Side of Providence, and we thought that she was dead. In some ways, thankfully she was not but it started a 36 hour experience of me trying to save the wild that who he named Bruce Wayne. I worked with, I worked with Kristin, Rhode Island's that rehabilitator in Portsmouth, as well as Charlie Brown, who is one of the biologists who works at DEM, in a series of steps that included me safely relocating, Miss Bruce, who we found out later was a female bat, to some of the trees in our backyard. But unfortunately, she, it didn't work out for her. And what I learned in this process was that there is some question as to whether or not bats started or transferred COVID-19 in Asia, and so they're worried about bat populations [2:00] – they being you, I guess, Mary, I'm kind of talking to our broader listeners here. There's some concern that the bats here in North America could catch it or spread it. And so, therefore none of them are able to be taken in for rehabilitation, or released if they were in, for example, Kristen's home being rehabilitated –

which I just thought was absolutely fascinating how this pandemic is impacting people and our wildlife. So, I did some of my library, librarian sleuthing through the staff list of DEM to see if I could find anybody who was connected to Brown, and I'm so thankful that I was able to find you, Mary, to do this oral history today. So I would first like to start from the kind of beginning of the pandemic. If you remember the first time you heard about COVID-19 or Coronavirus when you were hearing this come up. What, what were you thinking in those moments?

MG: I was thinking honestly that, [3:00] what have we started like, it was like in January in the news, you know, it popped up in Asia and then it started moving to Europe and we're thinking, oh, okay, well, you know, initially it didn't really, really affect me that much. Because, you know, we're here in Rhode Island, you know, maybe it'll eventually get here. I figured it would probably get here if, you know, people are traveling, etc. But, you know, when they said, you can go home to telework, I figured about two weeks, you know, we'll be back in two weeks. I even set my away message on my desk voicemail, "I'll be back on March 30." And somebody called me out on it, I guess, like someone called, he had gotten the wrong number. He was looking for somebody who used to sit at my desk, our fiscal officer, she has since moved to another building. And so I got this call about a purchase order that had nothing to do with me. And so he called my cell phone because I left my cell phone number there. And he's like, "Oh, you know, it says you're going to be back on March 30." I said, "Well," and it was like two weeks after March 30. I said, [4:00] "Well the current situation, like nobody's back at work."

AK: How do you want me to change the message?

MG: I mean, I thought I'd be back you know, I'm sorry. He's like, "Well you might want to fix that." I'm like, "We're not going in." So I don't know –

AK: The least of our worries at this point is the voicemail message.

MG: I know! Email me, something. So you know, our staff, we, it's kind of bare bones staff right now, so they gave us the okay to telework. You know, if you, if you want to, if you feel comfortable, if you're able to. So most of us have been teleworking. For myself, you know, I can

do a lot of my work on the computer, I sit at my desk, you know, half and half. About half of my work is in person, though, you know, with, with students, with members of the public. We run public outreach programs, you know, we're doing bird walks. We had to cancel all of our, or it's looking like we're probably going to have to cancel all of our bird walks for the summer. You know, because we usually take out groups of 25 or more. We did, [5:00] we had to cancel our amphibian night, our vernal pool exploration. We had that all planned out. It was like so much work goes into planning these things. We had people signed up, we had emails going, so that had to get canceled. We do an annual sky dance night, which is observing American Woodcock, if you've never heard of the American Woodcock, please do a Google search whoever is listening to this. If you would like to be entertained by this very charismatic upland game bird that does a sky dance in the spring at dusk, and you can sit down and be quiet and watch them twirl up into the air and do their little thing. And it's really a great experience for a lot of people. We had to cancel that.

So, you know, I did not think going into this that I my entire calendar would be wiped clean. I say to my coworker all the time, "Oh my gosh, we've got so much on the calendar so much." It's like we're in schools almost every single day, especially in the spring, because you know, things are starting to move and you know, the kids are going outside. So a lot of elementary teachers, you know, ask us to come in and do a lot of [6:00] different programs throughout the year, but the spring is especially busy, because we can go out in the schoolyard and do a lot of stuff with them. But I did not think that my calendar would ever be empty like this. And I said to, to Gabby, my, my coworker who helps to co-run the outreach program with me, I said, "Oh, we should, you know, keep the summer open." This was like months ago. I said, "Let's keep the summer open so we can have time to do all the behind the scenes stuff." So we have a lot of, you know, written outreach materials that we've been trying to develop, we have a lot of curriculum materials we're trying to develop for teachers to use in the classroom. Because we actually had to turn people away, we don't have, there's only two of us to go places. So I don't want to, I don't want to stop kids from learning and I don't want to stop teachers from participating in our program. So we decided to create these little curriculum kits that people could take out for free and have all the information and we'd have trainings for the kids and stuff. So this, this is taking a lot of work to put together. So let's clear the summer schedule. We'll just have our field programs, you know a few of them and we won't go crazy. [7:00] Never

ever should I think that I would get this much time.

AK: You jinxed it all!

MG: Here's a couple of months, you know, where you're just at your house, sitting at your kitchen table and, and it's like, wow, okay, so I was not expecting this at all. In some ways, it's been kind of a blessing in disguise because we've had that time to work on stuff. But also it's just so disappointing to not be able to talk to our constituents and do our regular thing. And I'm so disappointed, especially for the kids. You know, we do feel field trip programs as well, when we pay for the buses. So we've got kids from Providence, who don't leave the city, and we take them out on a field trip to Goddard Park and do a [same net?] survey with our fisheries team and we'll take them for like a little hike and look for birds and habitat and stuff. And this is like huge for them. This is like a really big deal for them. I've worked with these teachers for like four years now running this particular trip and it's just so disappointing to have to say that we have to cancel it. So. [8:00]

AK: Can you tell me a little bit about what your, under normal circumstances, what your day to day or classroom trips would look like? And then how those have changed now? Like, are you able to do classroom programs via Zoom? Or are you just completely out of the, like classroom loop at this point?

MG: Yeah, so I did – with that fourth grade team actually, from Providence, just because I know them so well, and I've worked with them so long. They were like, some of the first when I first started on the job, they were like some of the first people to sign up for programs and they didn't know me from a hole in the wall. "Oh, she's got a program. Let's sign up." And I'm like, they trust me! You know what I mean? I'm like brand new on the job. I'm like, so nervous, and they were absolutely wonderful. So we built this beautiful partnership with Spaziano Elementary in Providence. It's on like the, like the Johnston line of Providence, by New New Quonquont Hill and we've built this awesome partnership, so I know them well. They said, [9:02] "Could we just" – and I visited the classroom previously this year, so the kids know me. And they said, "Could we just try a Zoom? You know, just see what happens?" And obviously, it's not ideal. We

were supposed to do a spring bird program with them. So normally what I would do is we'd sit in the classroom for a little bit, talk about birds in general, talk about, you know, what we do at the Division to conserve, manage, and monitor birds in the state. And so we'll talk about a few of our projects. And then we go out, and we birdwatch, so for that particular school, we go to New New Quonquont Hill and we walk around and do a nice little hike and I have binoculars for the kids and we have a grand old time. It's awesome. So obviously, my Zoom session did not involve that. We did a little bit of what we could. So I guess the quote unquote, the lecture part of the, of the program. And the kids are pretty good. You know, it's, it's tough though because like, you know, half of the kids are there. You know, some kids are paying attention, some kids aren't. [10:00] Then in the chat you see, like kids are like, "Shh I'm trying to learn. Quit putting things in the chat unless it's a good question for Miss Mary." And I'm like, this is great. The kids are just like self-policing themselves, you know, and they're – so there's, there's definitely though there was an eagerness to learn, which is great. So they were, they did get something out of it, which I think something is better than nothing. But most of our programs are very interactive. You know, we'll do like a, you know, the talking portion, but it's a conversation. Talking to a class over Zoom is really hard. You know, it's hard because it's like, you know, the kids are on mute. And then the kids trying to ask a question, and the internet's bad, and you're like, "I can't hear you. Who's talking?" Like you can't see them. So, you know, in the classroom it's much easier to have those visual cues if the kids got a question. It's very interactive. You know, when we, when we present a program, usually it's like so what do you guys think of this? And then the answer, then we answer back and it's this back and forth conversation, which I think lends itself well to younger students. [11:00]

So that being said, I offered it to, I offered Zooms to our middle school classes who had signed up for programs this spring. And they were like, we're just like swamped like, there's just so much going on with the way the block schedules working and this, that, and the other thing, so it would be so difficult to fit it in. So that's okay, call me next year. But I wanted to offer it to them anyways. But anything younger, you know, than fourth grade, I don't know if they could handle it because so much of elementary learning is like that social, that social aspect of learning and interacting with each other. And half of the program most the time is like some sort of game, we play a game with them or we do an activity, we'll bring a little craft or something like that and it ties in with the lesson. You know, we play a game Oh Deer, and that, that's for project wild

and it shows you how deer populations rise and fall with resource availability. So that shows you what happens when you have an overpopulation and when, when the population hits carrying capacity and it crashes. You can't do that on Zoom. [12:00] You need to have kids running around tackling each other. It's supposed to be tag, but it's tackle. Tackling each other, taking each other the other side. And then you can see oh, wow, the habitat is depleted, our deer population is up. What do you think is going to happen in the next round? So it's drastically changed how we've approached outreach.

Right now what we're doing is we're focusing on videos. I never thought I'd be a video editor or director in this job, you know. So other states have, are very lucky. They have, you know, larger staff and they have, you know, video crews with professional cameras and beautiful editing software and their stuff looks gorgeous. If you look at Maine, Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, they have just like gorgeous stuff. You know, some of the states out west have really, really beautiful video work. I just watched one from Utah on toad, that was like, whoa, this is so cool! They had like slow motion of the toad hopping and it's like, here we are, you know, with our iPhones out in the middle of the great swamp and in March to do a vernal [13:00] pool virtual field trip to take people with us on a field trip, in quotes, to try to at least continue that outreach. So if you visit the Department of Environmental Management's YouTube page, you will see that the Division of Fish and Wildlife has completely taken it over. We've commandeered it for our own purposes. We've added a lot of videos just to engage with the public at this time.

You know, a Gabby, my coworker has done a great series of creature crafts. So it's aimed towards, towards students and kids at home. But we're hoping that those little craft videos that she does, and she intersperses video. She did one on turtles and she took her kayak out and took a little video of a turtle basking and inserted all pictures and all sorts of stuff. So it's like facts and a craft at the same time. So we're hoping that we can include those in those kits later on or make them available to teachers later on. So it's not for, it's not a waste of time to do these because [14:00] we'll have this nice archive of, like, corny home videos. That's what I'm calling them because it reminds me of like, you know, your, your home videos that you watch as a kid, you go, oh my gosh, like who is operating the camera? You know, we do our best. But we are not, you know, professional videographers here. My cousin is, is and he lives in LA. He's like, "Oh, I wish I could come home, I would just do it for free." But he's trapped out there. So you

know, we're hoping that, that having that little archive will help us moving forward. And then we'll laugh at it later on when hopefully we have some good equipment. We'll say, "Oh, remember those days of COVID when we had the renaissance of Fish and Wildlife shorts?"

AK: Yeah, yeah. I was, I had interviewed somebody who was in LA and he was like out on his patio and you could hear all of these beautiful birds. And in the back of my mind, I'm thinking like, someday someone might listen to this interview and like there's this one particular bird that might have gotten wiped out by the pandemic and they'll hear like the last time it was in [15:00] LA, which I'm hoping is like very extreme and not going to be the case for certain species. But the way like wildlife is getting captured on video, I think could be an interesting resource in many years when maybe that particular animal or plant is not around anymore. Hopefully extremist.

MG: I know, I know, I know. We've been talking a lot about you know, just in preparation for this and I had a student from RIC reach out earlier this week, talking about the same topics, and she was in a journalism class and she needed to talk to somebody about local wildlife. So I reached out to my coworkers and said, "Hey, do you have anything that, any other thoughts?" Because I have my, my thoughts in my brain but you know, it's best to hear from everybody and I brought up you know, the videos that you're saying like, oh, there's lions in South Africa laying on a putting green. And then there's jellyfish in the Venice canals. And there's [16:00] Elephants walking down the street in Thailand. And like all these different things that we're seeing, and one of my co workers, you know, we have this like healthy skepticism. So these are small incidents and it's while it's cool, you know, it may not be, it may not be like this huge upheaval of nature. You know, maybe, maybe the jellyfish were in the canal the whole time, but the water is so cloudy, we just couldn't see them. It's not like they're magically returning. You know, at night, maybe that golf course has lions on it. But during the day that now that no one's there, maybe they feel more comfortable to be there. We, our, Sarah Riley, who's our implementation aid at the front desk of Fish and Wildlife, she takes every single phone call that comes into the office and they vary, believe me, they vary between like, when does fishing season start? To like, I have a bat on my porch, or there's a raccoon in my chimney, what do I do? So she said, you know, we've had actually fewer calls about nuisance wildlife because normally [17:00] nuisance

wildlife is the hottest thing that's coming into the phones. It's like, like just nonstop. But she said we've had fewer calls about nuisance wildlife, which is good for her because she's just bombarded all day. You know, maybe, maybe people have like bigger things to worry about. You know, right now a lot of them like the fox is trotting through their yard, that's really not causing a problem. It's just there. But she said, I've had a lot of people a few emails and calls people were calling in and saying, well, oh, there's a turkey in my yard. I didn't even know we had turkeys in Rhode Island. And she's like, "Really?" You know? "Oh, my gosh, there's a fox in my backyard. I've lived here forty years. I've never seen a fox in my backyard. Probably just because I haven't been home." You know. So people are normally at work all day, or at school and we're not home and not looking out our windows and we have much more to do to keep us busy. So I think people are noticing wildlife more, which is a good thing. Those were all positive interactions. And Sarah was very pleased that people you know, called just with positive [18:00] anecdotes to share. But, you know, I'm hoping that that there'll be some positive implications for wildlife from this, you know, maybe, maybe it's the positive public perception because you're in like, in the suburban state of Rhode Island, you know, everybody's like, "Oh, well, can't it just go somewhere else? Why does it have to be in my yard? Doesn't it have someplace else to go?" Well, in many cases, no. Wildlife doesn't have a place to go. So they, they end up in your yard. And simply because they are there, you know, it's not, it's not that big of a deal. It's not that, that scary. But a lot of people view it that way. You know, a lot of people have this like fear of wildlife and it could just be like, you know, something very benign, like, like an opossum extremely benign. I just, I was just listening to Spotify. There's a funny commercial about like, "Oh, you're being cornered in your, in your garage with opossum, an angry opossum," and I'm thinking like, who, like what opossum are you talking about here? "Angry and like ripping through the [19:00] drywall." Oh my gosh. So hopefully, you know, people will have a better perception of wildlife, you know, and view it as like, "Oh, well, that's what kept me occupied during this time is watching the birds outside or getting interested in, in the things that are around me."

But yeah, and also, you know, we had brought up some of us had had talked about road mortality with fewer cars on the road, maybe we'll see less road mortality as a result of this. There's a, an interesting study going on right now at URI. There's a master student in the Natural Resources Science Department who is collaborating with our state herpetologist, and they're

looking at road mortality hotspots of reptiles and amphibians, because these are creatures that move very slowly and they cross a lot of roads because, you know, our roads cut through everything and so sometimes they, you know, a frog needs to breed in a wetland, but it lives in the upland for the rest, like the wood frog, they go to a vernal pool to breed and then they hop around in the upland in the forest for the rest of the year. So they travel, a little bit, not as much [20:00] as you know, a bird migrating, but they do travel and a lot of them get hit by cars. So this project is to look and see like where the hotspots are for things getting hit, and then what we can do to apply best management practices moving forward. Maybe it's little tunnels under the road. Maybe it's like a sign that says beware of frogs crossing, something. So they're, they're going to take a look at that.

AK: I love that so much.

MG: That would be awesome! I love that. "Frog Crossing" sign. But, you know, as they gather that data they can come up with the best solutions there, but I'm wondering how his data is going to look this year.

AK: Yeah.

MG: If it's going to be skewed because there's just fewer people on the road. And they're not going anywhere. So that, that'll be interesting to see, you know, in in a couple years when he's done with his masters and we'll check it out.

AK: For sure. We'll have to follow up with that. Absolutely. Did you, when you were hearing about COVID-19, or maybe even as it was getting closer, did you immediately think that there would be an impact to wildlife in Rhode Island or even in the country, [21:00] or was that I'm just kind of assuming because you're in that world that maybe that thought would have crossed your mind.

MG: Yes, it didn't initially, it didn't initially crossed my mind, to be honest. I was more concerned with like, oh my gosh, how are we going to continue like our outreach programs? You

know, a lot of my coworkers, their, their work has been affected, don't get me wrong, but, you know, field work can be solitary, you know, so if they're going out and doing their field work, and it's lucky that you know, it's at this time where, you know, a lot of things are moving. And like our field season is starting, you know, the biologist can get out and get some of their work done. Some projects have to be suspended, or may be suspended, so I, I know that bats right now, like, as you said, you know, you can't, they can't take in any new bats at the clinic. They can't release any bats. But our biologist Charlie, he can't even do, and this is nationwide, they're not capturing and releasing [22:00] bats at all as part of research and monitoring. So normally what we do in the summers, we'll set up these huge, looks like a like a giant badminton net. It's very, very thin, stands like 20 feet tall and we'll set it up at night and the bats fly into, they get caught. It's like a little pocket so they, they just kind of fly in and land in the pocket. And Charlie will pick them up, he's wearing gloves, you know, he handles them, he weighs them, just examines them, kind of gets, gets an idea of how old they are, if they're pregnant, lactating. And then once he's all done with that, then they get a little tiny aluminum band. If you've seen birds banded you know the little leg bands that has a number. They make them for bats as well and they sit like, the best analogy I have is a cuff bracelet. You know it's open at the, at the, at one end so it just slides over their arm and he pinches it just a little bit so it's, it's comfortable but it's not going to fall off and super lightweight so the bats can still fly. So this is a way that you know, it's very low tech tracking because we can catch bats in the same spot. Whether it's in the [23:00] same night, that's happened. Same bat will fly in. It's like, caught again. Next year in the same exact spot, they're very site faithful. So we've been able to tell where they go in Vermont, we have, a lot of our bats go up to Vermont for the winter. So this is, you know, low tech tracking, it's really, really a useful tool. And that has halted across the country for this year because they're concerned that our bats here in North America have not been exposed to the virus. And if it is truly zoonotic and people can carry it, then we're exposing them to the virus and that could decimate our bat populations even further because they've been hugely decimated by White Nose Syndrome, which is a fungal disease that that grows in the caves, in the hibernacula, where they spend the winter. So we've lost millions of bats in this country due to White Nose Syndrome and they can't take another hit. So it will be a huge gap in the data. You know, for bats and they're talking about for waterfowl as well. [24:00] So we band, we capture, band, and release waterfowl, particularly Canada Geese and American Black Duck, which

happens in the winter so that that season is all done. I'm not sure what they're going to do for, for those goose surveys or for, for any other waterfowl surveys moving forward. But that's, that's hugely important too, because those banding efforts for waterfowl guide hunting decisions so – hunting regulation decisions – so what's the bag limit for a particular species? How long is the season? And this, you know, for many of us who think about wildlife, we don't think about oh, hunting, like, how does that even relate? It does. So if you don't already know this, whoever is listening to this, this may change, you know, in 50 years we'll see. You know, if you're listening to this 50 years from now, maybe this isn't the case anymore, but most of the revenue for wildlife conservation in this country comes from hunting license receipts [25:00] and excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. That's the Pittman Robertson Act that was signed in 1937 and it is responsible for the recovery of a good chunk of our wildlife across North America. So that was written with game species in mind, so birds and mammals. We're allowed to use that money for birds, mammals, and habitat acquisition and management. So even though it may not be used for, directly for a frog project, if you're protecting land that has wetlands in it, you effectively help the frogs by protecting habitat because it's like a huge – the biggest threat to all wildlife is habitat loss. So when we look to buy new land, a lot of the land in our management area system, some of it's shared with Forestry so it was paid for a little differently, but a bunch of it was paid for with that Pittman Robertson money. So when we, you know, we manage game species, when we care for game species like waterfowl, like deer, like turkey, [26:00] you know, we do this to make sure our populations are at a sustainable level, so that people can continue to hunt them for the future without decimating their populations, so that they can replenish naturally and stay balanced. But that's going to, that pays the bills, you know, for, for wildlife conservation across the country. So thinking about, you know, that gap in the data for, for a game species can be a little worrisome, and hopefully, that's just for this year. And that doesn't continue, because they have enough data, you know, backup data throughout the years and we have last year's data, so things hopefully should not change that drastically from year to year. But that, that's something to think about, you know, moving forward. If you know, if COVID, there's even talk of like, you know, if COVID returns, you know, if you, if every year all of a sudden this becomes like a cycle like the flu season, is that going to affect our work long term, being able to get out there and do these surveys?

AK: Are you seeing any kinds of measures [27:00] being taken, like was, so like looking forward, are, are, is DEM trying to come up with different ways of doing this kind of research? Which sounds like it would be extremely complicated to do, but is there already preparation for like the second wave that we're kind of talking about and essentially bracing ourselves for?

MG: Yeah, so that I'm not sure. That might be like, a little bit above, above my, my level. I think we're just going to have to ride it out and see how long this lasts. And it's, it's so, everything's so up in the air. It's like, so difficult to I'm even thinking like my own perspective – are schools going back in September?

AK: Right, right.

MG: Am I going to see kids you know, in the fall, you know, are we going to be able to, you know, resume some sense of normalcy? So I'm not sure. I'm not sure about that. I'm sure that we will think about it eventually, if this is looking like, [28:00] you know, it's going to go into later in the year and we're still seeing the surges of not being able to go out and, and do things. But for right now, it's just kind of like hang tight, and we'll see.

AK: So right now a lot of people are like, essentially, the only thing we can do relatively safely at this point is like go for a walk. And in Providence, in particular, I think maybe generally Rhode Island, like parks are starting to reopen again, with certain kinds of restrictions. Do you have any recommendations for people who are interested in learning about wildlife or kind of like safely viewing wildlife while they're out on their walks?

MG: Yeah, sure. So that was another concern of ours. You know, because the parks, you know what people, it's not that people don't go outside, but like, I feel like now that people are stuck at home they're like, "Well, what can I do? Restaurants are closed. There's no concerts. There's no like, stores aren't open, like, oh, it's nice out. I'll go for a hike!" [29:00] Like, you know, I think a lot of people have discovered hiking as a result of this which just –

AK: What an invention.

MG: It makes me so happy that people are like, oh, I'll go out and like get some nature dosage, you know that, that's awesome. But you know, thinking about, you know, with our parks being closed, beaches being closed, a lot, those are accessible places for a lot of people. A lot of people know Lincoln woods, a lot of people know Goddard Park, and that they're beautiful places, a wonderful place to recreate. And the parks are designed – state parks are designed to handle more people. You know, there's parking lots, there's bathrooms, there's, you know, paved walkways, and all this stuff so it's more accessible to people and it's designed with people in mind. You know, of course, you know, there's wildlife there, that's wonderful. But if you go to a management area, it's very different. It's in a totally different system. You go to a management area, you've got a gravel road, if you're lucky. And there's no, there's no trail markers, and most of them it's preserved as wildlife habitat [30:00] and to give people opportunity to go hunting and fishing away from you know, you can fish obviously in the state parks, but you can't hunt in the state parks. So it gives people that opportunity to get away to recreate in those ways. So, and they're generally much quieter. You know, there are some places like Big River is heavily used, Arcadia can be heavily used at times, but a lot of them are very quiet.

Now with the parks being closed, and they're set to, you know, reopen in phases, but with, you know, more people outside, more people going to all these places, I'm a little concerned about, you know, the management areas, people flocking into the management areas, filling the parking lots, all of a sudden you get all this foot traffic going through and all of this disturbance. And yes, they're open to the public. I'm not trying to discourage people from going. Like, absolutely, please visit them. But when you go, and this is not to sound accusatory to anybody who is thinking of going, but please pick up your trash because unfortunately, people just dump things [31:00] in the parking lot on a, on a normal day. It doesn't have to be COVID, they just view a parking area with a metal gate in the middle of the woods as a personal dumping ground. I'm a little concerned about this new trash of masks and gloves that people are dropping everywhere. So picking up, picking up after yourself. Leave no trace is like one of my mantras I say until I'm blue in the face. Please! Carry in what you carry out, carry out what you carry in.

You know, being mindful of like just staying on trails. The trails exist for a reason. An issue that we have in a few places is that people go off trail or, and you could take your bike to a lot of our management areas. You know, the roads are wide, they're beautiful gravel roads you can ride around as long as they're just like a regular pedal bike not a, not a dirt bike, no

motorized vehicles. And you know that that's different for like if you go to an Audubon Refuge, you do not bring a bike, that's not allowed. So make sure that you're checking, like where you're going, who owns the property and like what are the rules [32:00] because I know that Audubon has had some issues with people showing up with like bikes and dogs. You're not supposed to have a dog on an, on an Audubon Refuge, you can take them to a management area though. So checking those rules out. You know staying on trail because if you go off trail you can add to erosion, you can start disturbing habitat. The trails are there for a reason.

You know, if you see any wildlife, just you know, keeping your distance from it, observing from a distance is, is kind of my rule of thumb. A lot of our spots and you can see frogs and turtles and snakes basking in the, in the middle of the roads, you know. You know, definitely take a look at them. Don't take them home. A lot of people see like a baby turtle and think it's a pet and take it home. That's probably the worst thing you can do for a turtle is to pick it up out of the wild for a number of reasons. They don't keep all those pets, you're decimating the population. They're very slow to mature, so it's not good to, to just take something home as a pet. [33:00] I had one more thing. I can't remember what I was going to say. I just like going off on tangents now all the issues I have with people violating park rules.

AK: I don't blame you at all. I don't blame you.

MG: And just, oh and also now, at least for the month of May, if you go to a management area you should be wearing fluorescent orange – at least 200 square inches. That's a vest or a hat. It is spring turkey season. So that goes from April through May. And if you, you know later on if you're listening to this and you want to go hiking in the management area, September through February is the other window of time when you have to wear fluorescent orange, 200 square inches. If you go in December, it's 500 square inches so hat and vest combined, because of shotgun deer season. So we, the reason why we have at least just in December, the reason why we have that in places because hunters wait all year to get out there. We want to keep everybody safe and no one is more irritated [34:00] than the hunters when they see people walking around with no orange because it's such a safety vio – safety hazard for everybody involved. So don't take it lightly, you know wear your orange. Red and blue and burnt orange do not count. It has to be fluorescent. There's lots of resources on why you should wear fluorescent orange and how

you can be seen in the woods if you wear that as opposed to other colors that may seem bright. That's my little PSA. Sorry. I'll get off my soapbox.

AK: No, I love that. That's awesome.

MG: You know, you want to keep people safe. You want to enjoy the outdoors and just, you know, do your best to, to care for our wild spaces.

AK: And again, 50 years from now somebody might go, "I can't believe people were able to hunt in December," like who knows what December is going to bring? You know?

MG: Yeah.

AK: So I just have a few more questions for you because I don't want to take up too much of your time. I've been asking my interviewees, like on a personal level, what has been the most challenging aspect of [35:00] the pandemic and self-isolation for you?

MG: On a personal level, I would say, I'm just kind of feeling stuck, like you're feeling and I, and my husband and I say this all the time, you know, I even hate to complain because like, you know, we, we both are working right now we're able to work remotely. We are very lucky in that. You know, we, we have a home to live in, we're able to pay our bills. So like, immense gratitude that we're able to be able to survive throughout this and not really, nothing really has changed for us. And I feel like complaining about anything is just so, like, such a place of privilege. It's like not it's not okay to complain like that, because there are people in far worse boats. We're in a tight spot right now.

But for me, I just feel a little like, a little stuck in limbo, you know, we can't, how do you move forward? You know, even just like working in the yard, you know, it was like I needed a couple of things done that I can't do myself. I need somebody else to do them. Then they're backed up on work [36:00] and then you can't move forward. But I'm home, I want to, you know, do the project and you can't, because you know, you're waiting, or people aren't able to get out. You know, that's just me personally. I like the garden. So I'm just like, that's on my

brain now, because it's so nice out.

You know, but at work, it's definitely like, what, where are we going with this? I don't even know. It's so uncertain. I have a meeting with Gabby tomorrow. And we're going to talk about how we're going to do this. You know, how are we going to handle the summer because we can't just let our outreach stop and just pull ourselves away in our little hermit holes, working on wildlife fact sheets and, and our school curriculum and not talk to anybody for the whole summer. So that can't be the case. So yeah, I think that's like, been the most challenging is just that uncertainty and that just that floating feeling of like unsettlement.

AK: Sure. If someone were to listen to this interview tomorrow, what is one thing you would want them to know? And if they're willing listening to it 50 years [37:00] from now, aside from their ability to hunt now, what is something else you would want them to know?

MG: Is, I would say, you listen to this tomorrow know that there is an entire division of people who care very deeply about our state's wildlife and we're working really hard to do our job. I feel like a lot of times people don't you know, you look at a state agency and you, you don't see the faces behind the agency and you just see the, you know, the, the title, and that's it and like, nobody, nobody nice works there. You know, so like, there's, you know, we all have to be very, very kind to each other in all the things that we do. And this this can go for any profession. I feel like a lot of people are kind of pushed around or you know, people make assumptions. But you know, at Fish and Wildlife we really care. Everybody I work with is so passionate and, [38:00] and so kind. And we really care about our wildlife, we're trying our best to do the best by our critters. They always make fun of me because I say critters, but, you know, like, we're trying, we're trying our best here. And, you know, so be patient with us as we move forward. And know that if you call our office, you're talking to people who, who are invested and care just as much as you do. So that's what I would say if you're listening tomorrow. So we're here. We're here for you. We're here for a wildlife. So, and we look forward to working with everybody on this.

If you're listening 50 years from now, this is so tough. If you're listening 50 years from now, I hope that the work that we're doing now is effective, and that our hard work has paid off and that you, whoever listening, can go outside [39:00] and see the fruits of our labor and you can see young forest species thriving. You can see Diamondback Terrapins all along the coast, in

estuaries and the salt ponds all around Rhode Island. That you can not worry about anything disappearing from this little state of ours because a lot of people assume that the endangered wildlife and the things that, that need our help are far away. They're right here, they're right in our own backyards, we have quite a few species of greatest conservation need in the state – over 1,000. And that's not, that's not all of the species that live in the state. Those are just the ones that are considered state threatened or at risk or endangered. So I hope that those things don't go off the map and that your, you and your children, you know, 50 years from now I'll probably have grandkids. I hope that I can take them out and we can enjoy that together. Yeah, keeping it positive. Think positive. [40:00]

AK: For sure. So finally, before we close, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you were hoping to be able to address today and get into the historical record?

MG: Oh, I'm not sure.

AK: No, is a perfectly fine answer.

MG: I told you, I can just bop bop bop bop bop. I can just keep talking. But thank you for, for allowing me to contribute to this. It's really been such, this is really fun to be able to do this and to help out with this.

AK: Well, good. Thank you so much for serving as my designated representative of DEM and taking time to talk with me and all of our listeners who come from across the world about Rhode Island's wildlife and the pandemic. I really appreciate it.

MG: All right, well, thank you so much.

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