Environmentalists working to get jump on invasive rapa whelk; Fowler may take cause to court; and more...

News in Brief / By Staff and Wire Reports

Environmentalists working to get jump on invasive rapa whelk

It hasn’t made a splash like the northern snakehead fish, and this Asian invader may not emerge as an environmental threat in our lifetime.

But scientists are keeping an eye on the veined rapa whelk, first found in local waters in 1998.

“This animal is a snail. It’s not that we’re worried about it populating the East Coast in six weeks,” said Roger Mann, director of research and advisory service at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

But give it a century, and the voracious mollusk has the potential to eat its way through the shellfish population from Cape Hatteras to Cape Cod, just as it did in the Black Sea in Eastern Europe beginning in the 1940s. That’s why institute scientists want to raise awareness of the snail first found near the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge-Tunnel seven years ago.

They have T-shirts decorated with images of the animal’s spiral shell. You can get one free if you call in with 10 live whelks—or receive $5 per live animal, $2 per shell.

Mann has been to Capitol Hill, handing out rapa shells as paperweights.

Juliana Harding, a senior marine scientist at the institute, has compiled a database of the 10,600 whelks collected so far, tracking findings from the Lynnhaven River in Virginia Beach to the James River in Newport News.

Watermen have found the animal’s egg cases, which resemble yellow shag carpet. “That gave us an indication that they were breeding here,” Mann told the Daily Press of Newport News.

When the state gave Mann $1,000 for the bounty program in 1999, he thought he would never spend it all.

“The $1,000 went in a week,” he said. “We’ve never had a bounty season like that since.”

In Asia, octopus and large crabs feed on adult rapa whelks. In the Chesapeake Bay, humans and large sea turtles are likely the only predators for large rapa whelks. The whelks’ shells are too wide and thick for other animals to get to them.

“This thing is in Fat City,” Mann said. “It’s quite happy.”

Mann suspects the animals came here from Europe inside the ballast tanks of ships, which hold and release sea water for stabilization. Maritime agencies are debating how to regulate the exchange of ballast water to prevent future invasions.

In the spring, whelks congregate in table-size piles on the sea bottom.

The problem is, these mating parties only last a few hours, and they happen at night. Scientists and experienced watermen have had trouble targeting the congregations using dredges and sonar.

A better approach may be studying how the animal causes a stink, Mann said.

Like most snails, rapa whelks produce slime. During mating, globs of purple mucus create an
underwater stench that attracts more animals to the nocturnal mating parties.

The question is: Can scientists chemically produce an attractive snail scent and use it as bait, much like how a waterman uses rotting fish to attract crabs to a cage?

"Rather than you finding them, they have to find you," Mann said.

Although the snails aren’t reproducing like rabbits, dealing with them now is key. Mann doesn’t want them sneaking up the East Coast.

"By that point, exterminating them is just not going to be practical."

**Fowler may take cause to court**

Judging by Bernie Fowler’s sneaker index, the Patuxent River is not getting any cleaner, and he could take the issue to court.

The former Maryland state senator conducted his 18th annual “wade in” in June to measure the health of the river, but it was a short stroll—the water was only 21.5 inches deep when he could no longer see his white shoes. That was less than last year, when the water was 31.5 inches deep before his sneakers disappeared.

“Our river is dying,” he said. When the 81-year-old Fowler was growing up near the river, he said crabs could clearly be seen in the water when it was chest deep. If the water is not cleaner in another year, Fowler said, he may take legal action to make sure goals for the cleaning up the river are met. “I’m not getting any younger,” said Fowler, a longtime champion of cleaning up the waterway.

**Tax break for PA farmers proposed**

Two Pennsylvania lawmakers are proposing legislation to expand agricultural conservation easements in the state to to help farmers keep producing crops and livestock instead of selling their land to developers.

Rep. Noah Wenger and Sen. Michael Waugh proposed new tax breaks for farmers and cuts in farm-related inheritance taxes to ensure that the $45 billion-a-year agriculture industry stays strong in the state and attracts younger farmers.

Although Pennsylvania has preserved more than 300,000 acres of farmland through the purchase of development rights by the state, it is losing 113 acres of farmland a day, and the average age of farmers is 53.

“We’ve become efficient and effective at preserving the land, but it is time to preserve the Pennsylvania farmer and a way of life that is so important to this state,” Waugh said.

To reverse the trends, the legislative package proposed by Wenger and Waugh would create a property tax rebate for farmers who choose to preserve their land. That may also entice Plain sect farmers, who will not take money from traditional farm preservation programs, to preserve their land because they would be more likely to accept a tax rebate.

The package would also reduce the inheritance tax on farms, and use a portion of the realty transfer tax revenue on agricultural land to be used for farmland preservation. The measures would also help farmers find alternative uses for excess manure by revitalizing the state’s Agriculture By-Product Management Technology Board.

**Wildlife service buys island**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has purchased the 198-acre Garrett Island at the mouth of the Susquehanna River near Havre de Grace, and will permanently protect it as a national wildlife refuge.

“This island offers all of us a place to learn about the Bay, its history, and its ecological importance,”
said U.S. Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, R-MD, who sponsored the legislation authorizing the purchase. “It is an important component of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem, and I'm pleased that it will forever be protected and become another public resource for all of us.”

The island is largely undeveloped and provides important habitat for migratory birds and fish, including spawning areas for shad and striped bass. It is the only rocky island in the tidal waters of the Bay.

The purchase, announced in June, culminates a six-year effort to protect the island from development. Two area residents, with support from the Cecil County Land Trust, bought the island to conserve it in 1999 when plans were announced for a luxury hotel and amusement park.

The Conservation Fund purchased the property in 2004 with the intent of transferring it to the USF&WS. The island will be managed as part of the Chesapeake Marshlands National Wildlife Refuge Complex, which also includes Blackwater, Eastern Neck and Martin refuges and several other Chesapeake Island refuges in Maryland.

**Flows to Bay down in May, June**

After a wet start to the year, river flows into the Chesapeake dried up during the months of May and June, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

River flows into the Bay averaged 20.5 billion gallons a day in June, which was 52 percent below normal. In May, flows were 43 percent below normal.

Low flows into the Bay generally mean less nutrients and sediment are delivered to the Chesapeake, which may improve water quality.

**Birders squawk over bridge ruling**

A decision to limit access to prized bird-watching areas on three of the four islands along the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in the name of national security has ruffled the feathers of some frustrated birders.

“The people who are expressing their feelings right now are kind of injured,” said Bob Ake, who worked with fellow birders and staff members of the bridge-tunnel commission to allow some continued access to the islands.

Birders say they are being targeted for restrictions. But bridge-tunnel officials say the crossing is a critical link to Hampton Roads—the location of the Navy's largest base—and must be protected from a potential terrorist attack. The decision was actually part of a compromise between birders and bridge-tunnel administrators, who agreed to limited access after initially forbidding any access to the three islands.

The rules that went into effect July 1 require bird watchers to give advance notice of visits to three of the 17.6-mile crossing's four islands and pay $50 an hour for a security escort. They also must provide photo identification and be willing to have their belongings checked. Researchers and scientists will pay $50 for a yearly pass that may require a background check and references.

The islands attract bird species that are seen nowhere else in the region, particularly during storms, birders say.

**Various sources contributed to this story**