

(1) Before 1600

Before 1600, indigenous people lived, farmed, hunted, trapped, and fished for survival in Rhode Island. There were six tribes in the state, the Narragansett, Wampanoag, Niantic, Nipmuck, Manissean, and Pequot, that used natural resources, like fish to eat, beaver pelts to make clothing, and trees to build shelter. Members of these tribes still live here today and continue to use wildlife resources as part of their culture.

(2) 1636

In 1636 Roger Williams founded the first European settlement in Rhode Island. He settled in Providence, where he bought land from the Narragansett tribe on the Narragansett Bay.

(3) 1740

In 1740, settlers cut down forests to build colonies and to create room to grow crops. They hunted and trapped as many animals as they could because there were no laws or limits. Many people also killed our native predators, like wolves, mountain lions, and bears.

(4) 1800

In 1800, the American black bear disappeared from Rhode Island because of habitat loss and other human impacts. Forests disappeared and were replaced by farms and houses, and bears were chased away or killed because people didn't understand the way they acted, so they were afraid. The green on the maps shows where black bears lived before European settlement (top), and after (bottom). Since we have learned more about their behaviors, and many forests have grown back, today black bears are beginning to return to Rhode Island!

(5) 1830

In 1830, the greatest amount of forest was cut down to make room for more colonists to move in and raise their livestock and crops. People started to hunt more animals than they needed so that they could send them back to Europe, or sell them to make a profit. This was called market hunting. Market hunting led to the overharvest of many birds which caused their populations to shrink.

(6) 1900

In 1900 the Lacey Act was signed. This was the first law put into place by the federal government to protect wildlife. Basically, it states that it is against the law to buy, or sell, or travel with any wildlife that was taken or sold illegally. This allowed the government to limit the number of animals being hunted, sold or transported, which ended market hunting.

(7) 1910

By 1910, many farms were abandoned because people moved to cities where there was more work, or moved westward for better farming opportunities. Trees began to grow back, and forests took over the fields that were no longer being maintained. Once they grew large enough, people harvested the trees for timber and used them for building material.

(8) 1918

In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed. Basically, it states that it is illegal to hurt, hold or have wild birds or their parts, like feathers, eggs or nests, unless you have a special permit. In the 1900s, feathers were in high demand for women's fashion, especially for hats. Because so many people wanted feathered hats, many birds were killed just for their beautiful feathers, which is not a responsible way to hunt. This law made it so only a limited number of people can hunt birds, so they are harvested sustainably.

(9) 1934

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Duck Stamp Act, which required all waterfowl hunters to purchase a Federal Duck Stamp each year. The money that these hunters spend on the Duck Stamp (98 cents out of every dollar), goes towards buying wetland habitat so that ducks, geese and swans will have a clean and healthy place to live.

(10) 1935

In 1935, the “Rhode Island Division of Fish and Game” was created, which included law enforcement officers. Game wardens and environmental police officers help make sure that everyone is obeying the laws that protect wildlife. They look out for poachers, who are people who take animals illegally. Poachers don’t follow rules and might take too many animals and sell them, which is against the Lacey Act, or harvest birds without permits, which you need to have according to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

(11) 1937

In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Pittman-Robertson Act. This act places a tax on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. The money from this tax, is split up and given to each state by the by the federal government. The states must use the money to buy, manage or restore habitat, do research on bird or mammal species, or educate the public about hunting.

(12) 1956

In 1956, the hunter education program was created in Rhode Island to ensure safe and ethical hunting in the state. Hunters are trained on how to use the natural resources in the state responsibly and are taught about the important role they play in managing wildlife populations. With our large predators gone from Rhode Island, the wildlife populations could grow so much that they could become unhealthy, hunters help keep the balance.

(13) 1960

In 1960, coyotes were first seen in Rhode Island, after they expanded their range all the way from the central United States to the east coast. Wolves and mountain lions used to help control the small mammal populations in the east, but when they disappeared, they left their job open. This allowed the rabbit, squirrel, and mouse populations to grow. Upon their arrival, coyotes found the open job and took the place of the wolves and mountain lions by keeping the small mammal populations balanced.

(14) 1973

In 1973, the Endangered Species Act was signed. If scientists are studying an animal and they see that it is at risk of going extinct, they can list it as “Endangered” or “Threatened”. Once it is on the list, both the animal and its habitat are given extra protection, and more research and conservation work are done to help the population to recover.

(15) 1976

In 1976, beavers returned to Rhode Island after being trapped nearly to extinction for their warm and waterproof pelts. Beavers are an important part of the ecosystem because when they flood areas to create their homes, they also create habitat for many other wetland animals, like turtles, ducks and frogs!

(16) 2000

In 2000, State Wildlife Grants were provided to help animals that could be at risk of becoming endangered, called Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). These animals may need help because there are not as many as there once were, or because their habitat is disappearing. To receive this grant, each state created a Wildlife Action Plan to figure out what animals need the most help, why they need help, and how we are going to help them!

(17) Present Day (Today!)

Today, the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife continues to protect, restore, and manage wildlife populations and their habitats. Thanks to the laws put into place in the past and the lessons we have learned, many of Rhode Island’s native species have recovered and both the animals and their populations are thriving!