

PROVIDENCE

## Murders add up, and a feud lives on

Annette Perry Gilliard, the mother of Dimitri Perry, releases a balloon at her son's grave site in the North Burial Ground in Providence on Saturday, as the family marked the two-year anniversary of his murder. [THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / DAVID DELPOI]



### Bad blood rises again among three neighborhoods

By Amanda Milkovits  
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — His family and friends stood by the grave of 23-year-old Dimitri LaQuan Perry in North Burial Ground on Saturday and released balloons to mark the second anniversary of his death.

Meanwhile, miles away at a church in Cranston, the loved ones of 22-year-old Devin Burney gathered for his funeral.

Perry and Burney had been friends when they were children. Their mothers, Annette Perry Gilliard and Shawndell Burney, have known each other for years.

But as the boys became young men, they ended up on different sides in a generations-old feud — determined by where they live.

Both young men were murdered. Their killers remain at large.

This is how it's been for some growing up in Mount Hope, Chad Brown and the South Side since the 1970s. Something that no one remembers anymore sparked a violent feud that has snowballed, with young men wounded or dead over slights and retaliations, and leaving their families to suffer.

Ronald Gilliard knew about the feud, but he hoped his family would be safe. Dimitri was his youngest, Gilliard said, a bright boy who

SEE PERRY, A5

### ENVIRONMENT

## On the brink



Against a rising tide, the **plucky little saltmarsh sparrow** could be headed for extinction, a canary in the coal mine of climate change



Holding a saltmarsh sparrow carefully, Deirdre Robinson crimps a numbered aluminum band onto its leg as part of a study into the dwindling species' numbers and nesting habits at Jacobs Point marsh in Warren. The birds are captured using fine-mesh "mist nets" and banded. Robinson and field ornithologist Steven Reinert, top, are self-funding and directing the study and are assisted by volunteers. [THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO]

By Alex Kuffner  
Journal Staff Writer

WARREN — Deirdre Robinson holds a female saltmarsh sparrow in one hand, cupping her fingers around its delicate body as if she's cradling an egg.

The sparrow's dainty head peeks out between Robinson's index and middle fingers, dusky eyes alert to everything.

Robinson traces the speckling of brown and white feathers that form a necklace around the throat and the dual brush-strokes of yellowish-orange that curve away from the pointed bill to frame the bird's profile.

"You can see the ochre,"



Source: maps4news.com/©HERE GATEHOUSE MEDIA

### Videos online

To see videos of the banding of saltmarsh sparrows at Jacobs Point marsh in Warren, and a graphic video showing the species' race against the tides, go to [providencejournal.com/videos](http://providencejournal.com/videos)

Robinson, who is co-directing a study of the species, says in a mellifluous voice. "Isn't that beautiful?"

Beautiful and besieged. The saltmarsh sparrow is a tiny thing, 5 inches long and half an ounce, and in the drowning marshes of Rhode Island, this resourceful bird is locked in a race with the rising sea. The very species is struggling to keep its head above water.

It is this struggle that has drawn Robinson and others to the salt marsh at Jacobs Point, where they band sparrows for a project that will track the bird's numbers over time.

SEE SPARROWS, A6

### DIPLOMACY

## Trump lobbies for help against 'menace'

After N. Korea's ICBM launch, Japan is on board, China less so

By Ken Thomas  
and Darlene Superville  
The Associated Press

HAMBURG, Germany — Wrapping up his second European tour, President Donald Trump sought consensus with Asian allies Saturday on how to counter the "menace" of North Korea after its test-launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

"Something has to be done about it," Trump said as he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping. In a separate meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Trump said the two were addressing "the problem and menace of North Korea."

The White House said after the meeting with Abe that the U.S. was "prepared to use the full range of capabilities" in defense of Japan. Trump and Abe committed, the White House said, "to redoubling their efforts to bring all nations together to show North Korea that there are consequences for its threatening and unlawful actions."

The Trump administration has tried to press Beijing to rein in North Korea, a major trading partner of China, and halt Kim Jong-Un's development of nuclear weapons before they can threaten U.S. territory. Trump has voiced his frustration in recent days that China hasn't done more, suggesting he may take steps of his own.

But during their meeting, Trump told Xi, "I appreciate the things that you have done relative to the very substantial problem that we all face in North Korea."

Xi said during the meeting that "sensitive issues remain" in the China-U.S. relationship and more work needed to be done. But he said he had built a "close contact" with Trump.

Trump's extensive slate of meetings with Abe, Xi, British Prime Minister Theresa May and others came on the final day of the annual Group of 20 summit,

SEE NORTH KOREA, A10

### Inside

U.S. bombers join Japanese, S. Korean fighters in show of force over Korean peninsula. **A10**

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Complete forecast, B8



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Sunday

# SPARROWS

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Robinson deftly extends the sparrow's left leg so that volunteer Katie Christ can crimp a numbered aluminum band around it. They check that the ring of metal isn't too tight by spinning it around the lower leg, or tarsus, and sliding it up and down.

Robinson attaches a blue plastic band below the aluminum one and then, on the right leg, adds a red band and an orange. The combination of colors will be unique to this bird.

Robinson confirms that the sparrow is nesting by exposing the bare skin on its belly – the "brood patch" that makes for a more efficient transfer of heat from mother to eggs – and then measures the length of one wing, checks the store of fat over the breastbone, weighs the bird, and finally takes a series of photographs.

Only then does she release the bird back to its home on the marsh.

"She wants to go toward the light," Robinson says as the little sparrow flits away.

## Losing ground

The saltmarsh sparrow may be more vulnerable to sea-level rise than any other animal that inhabits the nation's coastal wetlands.

A reclusive songbird, the sparrow is a rare "obligate" marsh species, spending its entire life cycle in salt marshes.

Its numbers have dwindled over the decades as marshes have been drained and filled in to make way for seaside homes, and as roads and rail lines have been cut through them, interfering with tidal flows and drainage.

Found exclusively along a narrow strip of shoreline on the East Coast, the bird summers in marshland from southern Maine to Virginia and winters in a region from the mid-Atlantic states to Florida and around the Gulf Coast to Texas.

The bird has carved out a niche over thousands of years, building grassy nests on the ground in the upper reaches of salt marshes, above the high-tide line. To live in this regularly flooded habitat, it must synchronize its breeding between the extreme tides pulled in by the new moon.

Even a slight change in sea level could narrow the window between moon tides and drown the bird's nests. And as higher waters encroach on marshes, they shrink the available nesting habitat.

## Losing population

In Rhode Island, seas rose 6 inches between 1970 and 2012, about 0.14 inches per year on average, and the rate has since picked up to nearly double that. Since the 1970s, the state has lost 17 percent of its marshland, probably due to rising seas, according to a recent scientific paper.

As habitat deteriorates, other marsh obligates, such as the clapper rail and the seaside sparrow, are suffering, but not nearly as much as the saltmarsh sparrow, which has lost three-quarters of its population since 1998.

There are an estimated 53,000 of the sparrows left, according to the Saltmarsh Habitat & Avian Research Program (SHARP), a network of academic, government and nonprofit researchers. They predict that its numbers will plummet another 92 percent in the next 50 years.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature has classified the saltmarsh sparrow as vulnerable on its Red List of Threatened Species, and efforts are underway to push it up to endangered.

The species received the



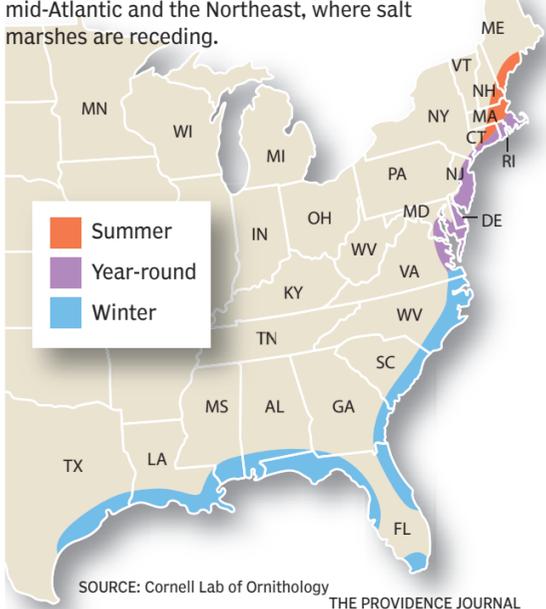
Katie Christ prepares bands on the Jacobs Point marsh in Warren while fellow volunteer Evan Lipton looks for birds. [PROVIDENCE JOURNAL PHOTOS / SANDOR BODO]



Study co-director Deirdre Robinson holds a sparrow carefully as volunteer Katie Christ takes a photo for identification. The wing is extended to record the mottling pattern.

## Shrinking habitat

The saltmarsh sparrow's range runs from Maine to the Gulf of Mexico, but it breeds only in the mid-Atlantic and the Northeast, where salt marshes are receding.



SOURCE: Cornell Lab of Ornithology THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

second-highest possible score for conservation concern on The North American Bird Conservation Initiative's Watch List.

The Audubon Society lists it as one of its 49 "priority" bird species in the United States. And the Connecticut arm of the society warned last year that it could become the first bird to go extinct in the continental United States since the heath hen in 1931.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology is more blunt.

"Extinction by mid-century is likely," says the entry on the species in its

"Birds of North America" database.

## Migration's toll

One day last summer, Robinson was at Jacobs Point looking for nesting birds as part of her volunteer work helping to update the Rhode Island Bird Atlas, an encyclopedia of avian life in the state directed by the University of Rhode Island and the Department of Environmental Management.

While she was exploring the 47-acre salt marsh where the Warren River empties into Narragansett

Bay, she spotted a salt-marsh sparrow with colored bands on its legs.

To find a banded bird is uncommon – and it's exceedingly so for the salt-marsh sparrow.

Surviving even its first summer is a feat, with only about a third of sparrow fledglings living until the fall migration, according to one study. According to another, only 1 in 7 juveniles makes it back from the first migration, and only 4 in 10 adults return from one year to the next.

Curious about where the bird had come from, Robinson called Steven Reinert, a certified master bander and field ornithologist who has studied the sparrow since the early 1980s, when he was a research assistant at URI.

They were able to capture the bird and identify it as having been banded the year before in St. Petersburg, Florida. They discovered that its migration of about 1,200 miles, from the Gulf Coast to Rhode Island, was the longest ever recorded for the species.

"How many more are migrating that far?" Reinert says he and Robinson wondered.

And so their study was hatched.

Robinson and Reinert are bird experts, but they are not affiliated with any university, government agency, or research institution. They are not paid for

their work and are funding everything themselves.

Robinson is a retired professor of physical therapy at URI who went on to get a master's degree in biological sciences, writing her thesis on the behavior of the piping plover, an endangered coastal species. Her fascination with birds goes back to a cross-country bike ride in college when she wondered if the vultures that she spotted out West were considering her for their next meal.

"I noticed that they were circling closer and closer," she says with a laugh.

Reinert is a health-care research analyst who has collaborated on bird studies with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and has been published widely. He currently leads birding workshops for the Audubon Society of Rhode Island and is the data manager for the Block Island Bird Banding Station.

Historical records for the sparrow's population in Rhode Island are spotty, but the most recent estimate by SHARP for the bird's numbers in the state is about 900. Robinson and Reinert aren't expecting big changes in the short term. But their long-term prognosis is gloomy.

The pair have a particular interest in the sparrow, but they also worry about what the bird's plight could portend for other animal species.

"The sparrow is truly the

canary in the coal mine for climate change," Robinson says.

## Dedicated volunteers

On this morning in mid-June, the marsh is alive with birds. Red-winged blackbirds wheel and dart overhead like stunt planes. Willets – "the most annoying bird on the marsh," Reinert says – fly in groups, making loud, piercing calls.

Two ospreys swoop back and forth between the river and the nest they've built on a man-made stand, feeding fish to their nestlings.

Reinert and Robinson lay out their equipment on a weathered tarpaulin: colored bands that will allow researchers to identify birds from a distance and numbered aluminum bands that will be used to confirm IDs if birds are captured.

Their team of six includes Christ, a URI senior studying natural-resources science who met Reinert when she was about 7 years old at one of his banding classes. And Kathy Mills, an amateur birder whose license-plate frame identifies her as "that crazy bird lady," has driven from Worcester, Massachusetts, to lend a hand.

The birds returned from their winter grounds in May and are just starting to breed. The current round of nest-building started after the new moon in late May.

Robinson found two nests on the previous day and marked their locations. Next to the nests, the team sets up "mist nets," which Reinert designed and made, planting plastic pipes with fine nylon mesh strung between them into the spongy ground of the marsh.

On a cloudy day like this, the nets are all but invisible to birds. Within minutes, the first female sparrow is trapped. Reinert untangles the bird, gently places it in a pink laundry bag of the type used to wash pantyhose, and hands it off for Robinson to band.

## Deadline: New moon

Why do sparrows nest in such a precarious place? Mostly because tidal marshes are teeming with food, matched only by rainforests in their ability to support life.

"The biomass," says Reinert, "is unheard of." A female sparrow can hunt for beetles, crickets and grasshoppers in the marsh grass and shrimp-like amphipods in pools of water with a minimum of effort and little competition from other birds.

# SPARROWS

From Page A6

Finding prey as fast and efficiently as possible is particularly important because, unlike other species, the female saltmarsh sparrow tends to its nest alone. After breeding, the male moves on in search of other mates — up to five in a single season.

The aptitude of the female saltmarsh sparrow in caring for her nest has been measured in comparison to its cousin, the seaside sparrow, a species in which the male and female raise their young together. The average number of fledglings for both species is roughly the same.

“The seaside sparrow does it with two parents,” Reinert says. “The saltmarsh sparrow does it with only one.”

The female saltmarsh sparrow doesn’t consciously synchronize its nesting with the lunar cycle.

Often a first nest will wash away in the new moon tide after the bird has laid eggs. But when that happens, the sparrow has learned over generations to build a second nest immediately, and in this haphazard way, breeding lines up with the tides.

The sparrow chooses a spot for the nest in the high marsh that, if all goes according to plan, will not flood again until the next new moon, in 28 days’ time.

The sparrow fashions a loose-knit bowl from smooth cordgrass on the surface of the marsh. The nest may be hidden from crows, raccoons and other predators within the woody branches of a high-tide bush or under a tuft of cordgrass.

The female lays her first egg five days after copulating, often with more than one male. Two or three more eggs will follow, but the bird can lay only one per day. Incubation takes about 12 days.

If an unusually high tide washes in and floods the nest in the first few days, the eggs are dense enough to remain in place. But they lose density and gain buoyancy as the days go on, and if the nest floods later, the eggs will float. If the female has built a good nest with high walls or a protective canopy, the eggs won’t go anywhere. But if the eggs float out of the nest, the sparrow has no way of getting them back.

When the chicks hatch, the race against time intensifies. The chicks cannot swim or fly. To survive, they must be able to climb up the nearby grass. But it takes seven or eight days until their legs are strong enough. And on each successive day, the tide creeps closer.

“That’s how tight it is,” Reinert says. “This is the story that plays over and over again for the saltmarsh sparrow.”

## Empty nests

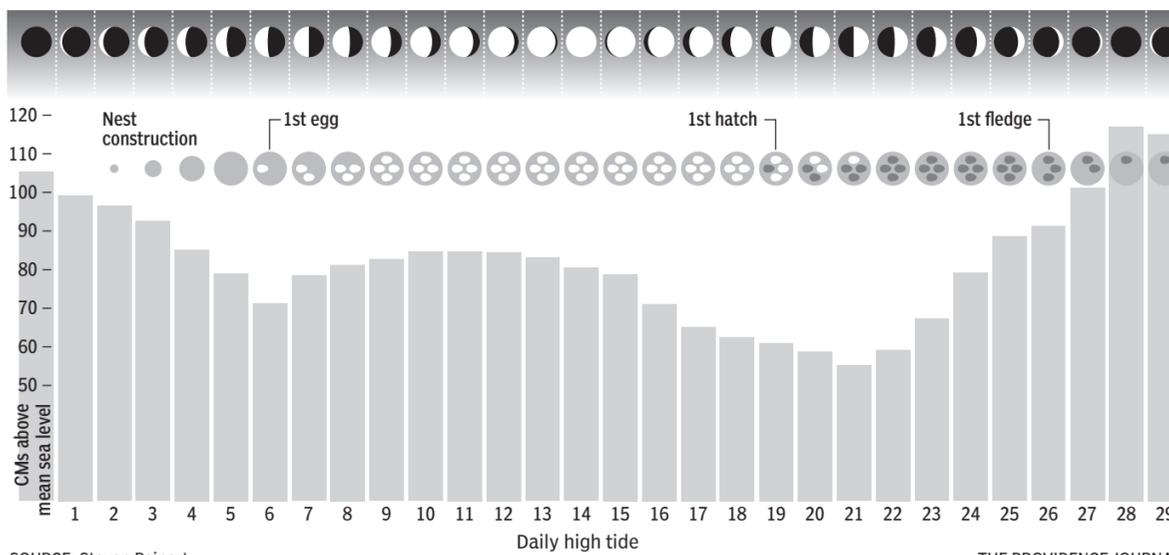
The rate of nesting success is low — on average only about half of nests produce at least one offspring, according to Chris Elphick, associate



The saltmarsh sparrow has carved out a niche over thousands of years, building grassy nests on the ground in the upper reaches of salt marshes, above the high-tide line. To live in this regularly flooded habitat, it must synchronize its breeding between the extreme tides pulled in by the new moon. [THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / ALEX KUFFNER]

## Saltmarsh sparrow breeding cycle

The mother begins building her nest on the surface of the salt marsh as soon as the new-moon spring tide begins to recede. Offspring must hatch and grow strong enough to climb onto the tall grass before the nest is swamped by the next new-moon tide. In this typical example, one offspring is lost as rising sea levels cause higher than normal new-moon tides.



SOURCE: Steven Reinert

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL



Deirdre Robinson crimps a color-coded band onto the leg of a female saltmarsh sparrow. [THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO]

professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Connecticut and a principal investigator with SHARP.

Some years are worse than others. In the summer of 2009, which was characterized by frequent storms, a graduate student working under Elphick

tracked 200 nests in Connecticut and recorded only six fledglings.

In 2014, Charles Clarkson, coordinator of the Rhode Island Bird Atlas, banded sparrows and surveyed their nests at Sachuest Point in Middletown and along the Narrow River in Narragansett as

part of a SHARP study. “The vast majority failed because of extreme high tides,” he says.

The marshes at Sachuest and along the Narrow have deteriorated badly over time as water has pooled on top of them, killing the upper-marsh plants that have adapted only to

occasional flooding. It is those plants that the saltmarsh sparrow relies on in the building and shielding of its nests.

Work has taken place at those sites and about a dozen others in the Northeast to artificially raise marshes by adding sediment on top and replanting them. Such projects are expensive and limited in scope, but they may offer the only hope for the sparrow.

“Some of these new techniques are the best bet that sparrows have,” Elphick says. “If these things don’t work, it’s not clear what can be done for them.”

## A gentle prowl

As other members of the team tend to the mist nets, Robinson scouts for nests.

There is an art to spotting an elusive bird that spends its days hunting within thickets of grass. Robinson takes deliberate steps, careful not to tread on the well-hidden nests. As she moves through waist-high clumps of high-tide bush, she flushes out sparrows.

Robinson can tell their sex by the way they fly. With no responsibility to care for nests, males can afford to waste effort,

taking undulating, circuitous routes as they flee.

Females are more conscious of conserving their energy stores and will head directly to a clump of grass or a bush nearby. They are also reluctant to move too far from their nests and will often “spy hop” from bush to bush to keep an eye on any perceived threat.

If Robinson thinks she has found a female, she will back off, crouch down and wait, watching for the bird to return to the nest.

“She doesn’t want to leave the nest for more than 15 minutes,” Robinson says. “She’s programmed that way. She doesn’t want the eggs to cool off.”

Robinson quickly finds two more nests. One of them holds four chicks. They are only six days old, but that’s mature enough to be banded. Although the chicks’ legs will grow longer as they age, they will not grow thicker.

“Surprisingly chubby legs,” Robinson remarks.

She carefully lifts the nest out of its hiding place in a high-tide bush and places it in Reinert’s baseball cap to give it support. The chicks’ mouths gape open, but they are silent. As ground-nesters, they instinctively know that any sound could attract a predator.

Robinson and Christ work quickly to minimize any stress to the chicks. When they’re finished, Robinson puts the nest back where she found it.

On this morning, the team bands eight adult sparrows and seven nestlings. They will continue their work through August, when the sparrows start their migration south.

In the mid-1980s, Reinert authored a study on a group of red-winged blackbirds that built ground nests on the marsh at Hundred Acre Cove, in Barrington. Since then, the marsh has receded badly — a probable factor, Reinert says, in the disappearance of nesting blackbirds from the area.

Of course, red-winged blackbirds also nest in trees, fields and freshwater wetlands and are among the most abundant birds in North America. The saltmarsh sparrow is just the opposite, a specialist whose numbers are in decline.

A loss in marshland on a wider basis would be catastrophic for the species.

## Hope remains

As June comes to a close, Robinson sends an email reporting on the status of the four sparrow nests, as well as two others that she found on different days on the Jacobs Point marsh.

Two were destroyed by raccoons or other predators and three flooded in the moon tides that washed in at the end of the month. Robinson and the rest of the team confirm the survival of only one fledgling from the lone undamaged nest.

They name the young bird “Hope” — for the state motto of Rhode Island and, says Robinson, for the Emily Dickinson poem.

It’s the one that begins, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers.”

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## CLIMATE CHANGE

# Raimondo shields research from records requests

The Associated Press

PROVIDENCE — Gov. Gina Raimondo has signed into law legislation that shields Rhode Island climate scientists and other university researchers from public records requests.

Both chambers of the state General Assembly approved bills to exempt researchers at state institutions from

having to disclose preliminary drafts, notes and working papers. Reports from completed research are not exempted.

Proponents have said the legislation is meant to help guarantee academic freedom, especially for those whose study of climate change has been impeded by a barrage of records requests from opponents of the research.

The legislation was signed last week by the Democratic governor.

University of Rhode Island professors supported the bill.

Opponents have called it an affront to transparency but other open-government advocates didn’t object, arguing it merely adds clarity to an existing exemption in the law.

It took effect immediately.

## MASSACHUSETTS DIGEST

### Police seek charge against taxi driver

BOSTON — Massachusetts State Police are seeking to charge a taxi driver who drove into a group of cab drivers near Boston’s Logan International Airport this week.

Police said Friday the decision to seek an endangerment charge follows an investigation that determined the Monday crash was caused by the driver, 56-year-old Lutant Clenord of Cambridge. A clerk magistrate will

determine whether there’s sufficient evidence to charge him.

Authorities say Clenord’s taxi jumped a curb and struck a group of people gathered at an outdoor break area for cabbies, injuring 10 people.

An attempt to reach Clenord was unsuccessful.

### Dancing man falls on train tracks

BOSTON — Police say a man who fell onto train tracks in Boston told authorities he “missed a

slick landing” while dancing on the platform. Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority police say the man fell into the pit at the Park Street station Thursday and hit his head and ankle. He was taken to Tufts Medical Center.

Surveillance video appears to show the man walking near the yellow line along the edge of the platform.

He then falls on his back and some passengers wave their arms to signal an approaching train to stop.

— The Associated Press