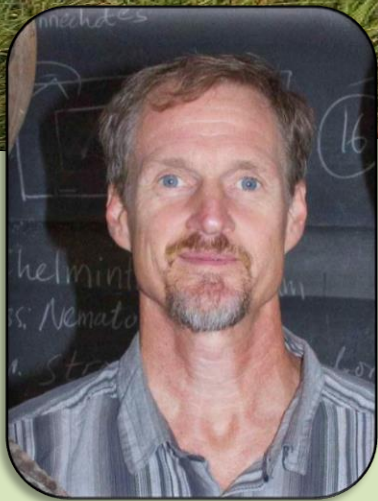


The Coastal Waters Consortium Presents:

Scientist Spotlight



Dr. Phil Stouffer

What is your educational background?

I have a BS in Biology from Bucknell University, and a PhD in Ecology from Rutgers University. After that I had post-docs at Rutgers and at the Smithsonian.

What inspired you to become a scientist?

I suppose I've always wanted to put names on things and then organize them, such as the baseball cards I collected as a kid. Then by high school I started learning how a series of steps could produce something new, as in going from DNA to protein. Finally by college I became fascinated by the evolution of social behavior, and by the realization that I could get out there and collect totally new information. I always loved to observe and catch (mostly catch) animals; it isn't an accident that I ended up as a field ecologist.

Can you describe what you enjoy the most about conducting scientific research?

Of course the best part is collecting data in the field. Alas, the career trajectory of a professor moves away from fieldwork and toward managing people, money, and data. Thankfully it is also rewarding to see a project carried out to the point of revealing something new or addressing some hypothesis. Another real joy for me is seeing the development of young scientists working on our projects.

What is your role as a scientist for CWC?

I'm a co-PI on a project examining how the oil spill affected Seaside Sparrows and, to a lesser extent, Marsh Rice Rats. Our work includes condition of the birds and rats, their population processes, and collaborations with other CWC researchers studying food webs or ecosystem processes that include birds and rats.

Can you summarize your oil spill research and describe any surprising findings you have come across?

Seaside Sparrows ingested oil from the spill, and they incorporated carbon from oil into their tissues. They also showed physiological response to oil contamination. Oiled plots hosted fewer birds after the spill, and their reproductive success decreased. But both birds and rats remain extremely abundant and are remarkably capable of using the marsh despite the perils they face. Our team was amazed at how birds and rats were able to recolonize areas that had been underwater for days due to Hurricane Isaac.

The Coastal Waters Consortium's mission is to assess the chemical evolution, biological degradation, and environmental stresses of petroleum and dispersant within Gulf of Mexico coastal and shelf ecosystems.

