

## **“Ghost Fishing”: Discarded Fishing Gear Poses a Threat to Waterfowl and Marine Life**

By Skip Dommin, Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor

Monofilament synthetic fishing line has been the choice for anglers since the material was first invented back in the late 1930s. Improvements over the years have made it stronger, less visible to fish, and resistant to UV light. While fishermen welcome these qualities, improperly discarded fishing line can remain in the environment for years and present a serious threat to wildlife. With over 500 lakes and ponds, 30 miles of streams, and 1,600 miles of coastline on Long Island (<https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7951.html>), the problems created by “ghost fishing,” or entanglement by discarded fishing line, are widespread.

CSHH water monitors have seen the harm discarded fishing line and hooks have caused to birds around Hempstead Harbor. In one instance, an osprey chick



*Osprey (l) with wounded foot and cormorant (r) with fish hook and line in its chest  
(photos by Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor)*

was unable to fledge because its foot was entangled in line that was attached to its nest. Although the osprey was rescued with the help of a volunteer rescue and rehabilitation organization, the osprey had to be euthanized because its foot became deformed and was unable to perch. In another instance, a cormorant was seen on a dock in Glen Cove Creek with a hook and line attached to its chest. The cormorant could still fly and could not be rescued.

As a rescuer for Volunteers for Wildlife, a nonprofit Wildlife Hospital and Education Center, I see too often the injuries sustained as a result of fishing line left as refuse in our wetlands and on shorelines. Recently, a great blue heron struggled to make it across West Shore Road in Port Washington only to be found nearby with a hook in its foot and attached fishing line tangled and causing life-ending injuries to its wing.



*Great blue heron (l) with injured wing and hook in its foot  
(photos courtesy of Volunteers for Wildlife)*

Alicia Grubessi, Clinical Supervisor at Volunteers for Wildlife’s hospital, offered her experienced perspective and explained that handling these cases from rescue to rehabilitation should be attempted only by those with experience and special training: “...if you ever find an animal entangled in fishing gear, please do not attempt to free the animal yourself and release it. These animals will often need extensive care and medications before they are fully healed and ready to return to the wild.” Constrictive injuries from the fishing line digging into tendons and blood vessels can result in loss of limb function or even amputation. Both bird and turtle patients have been also admitted to the wildlife hospital as a result of swallowing fishing hooks.

Fishing and a love for being close to the water are part of the Long Island culture. Statewide recreational fishing statistics for New York reveal not only the widespread popularity of this sport, but also the important economic impact this activity has on our state and local communities. According to an article by the American Sportfishing Association (“Economic Contributions of Recreational

Fishing Within U.S. States and Congressional Districts, January 2019), over 2 million state residents and nonresidents put up the “gone fishing” sign each year while contributing to the creation of over 20,000 related jobs to the industry and over \$200 million in state and local tax revenues. During these troubling pandemic times, we can especially appreciate the value of being outdoors and enjoying nature. Recreational fishing and wildlife conservation can work together. Below are some tips on how we all can help:

- Whether fishing from a boat, a pier, or some other location along the shoreline, bring all of your trash back with you for proper disposal in trash cans or recycling bins, including all pieces of snagged fishing line and other fishing gear.
- While boating, properly stow and secure all trash on your boat—including fishing gear that must be disposed of—so that it won’t be blown or washed overboard.
- Get involved in shoreline cleanups and help remove all trash from beaches and ponds that can pose risks to birds and marine life. (Contact CSHH at [www.coalitiontosavehempsteadharbor.org](http://www.coalitiontosavehempsteadharbor.org) or 516-801-6792 about scheduled cleanups around Hempstead Harbor.)
- Encourage local municipal representatives, tackle shops, and marinas to provide easily accessed disposal containers for discarded fishing gear and other trash and to include fishing-line recycling programs. (In 2015, the Town of North Hempstead, installed fishing-line recycling containers in several waterside locations and was collecting the line and sending it annually to Berkley Conservation Institute in Iowa for recycling.)

For more information, see National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Reeling in Marine Debris, A Reference Guide to Recycling Monofilament Fishing Line,” [www.marinedebris.noaa.gov](http://www.marinedebris.noaa.gov) and “Staying Calm In The Face Of Trauma: Reflections of a Student Assistant,” <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/science-blog/staying-calm-face-trauma-reflections-student-assistant>, and NYS Department

of Environmental Conservation, "Fishing Responsibly in New York State,"  
<https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/9223.html>.