Starting out with iNaturalist

iNaturalist is free and fun! It's a global, on-line community of naturalists, focused on exploring the natural world. With an iNaturalist account, you can track what you've found, learn how to identify species new to you, and contribute to citizen science. There are five easy steps:

1. **Join**
    To sign up, go to inaturalist.org. Pick a username and answer a few questions to complete your profile. Next, visit the Getting Started section to learn about using the website. The short video tutorials are particularly useful to get you started. iNaturalist contains a lot of features, but you can discover these as you use it.

2. **Make observations**
    The foundation of iNaturalist is observations of <u>wild</u> species, both native and exotic. An observation consists of four elements: a photograph or sound, a date, a place, and an observer. Photographs are the easiest observations to collect, so they will be discussed here. Observations can be made through the iNaturalist app (which incorporates your smartphone's camera and GPS capabilities), or by using a digital camera of any sort.

3. **Post observations**
    If you make an observation with the app, you then have to upload it to the iNaturalist website, when you are in wifi range. If you make an observation with a camera, you must then download the photo and upload it to iNaturalist from your computer. Both ways have advantages and disadvantages. For example, photographing birds with a phone is not easy, so you'll probably prefer using a camera if you concentrate on birds. On the other hand, plants are fairly easy to photograph with a phone.

    No matter how you upload observations to iNaturalist, it's worth double-checking your observations once they are in iNaturalist. The easiest way to do this is in the Edit Observations page (click on the arrow to the right of your user icon in the top right-hand corner). Check that the name of the species is correct, and that the date and place were uploaded correctly.

4. **Check back**
    Once you've uploaded your observations, the rest of the iNaturalist community can see them. For many common species, someone else on iNaturalist will likely "agree" with your identification of whatever you photographed. If enough people agree to your ID, and no one disagrees, your observation gets a designation of "Research Grade."

    If someone disagrees with your ID, often that person will make a comment about why they disagree. Then it's a good idea to pull out your field guides and double-check your ID. Maybe you made a mistake, or maybe there's a new name that you didn't know about, or maybe the other iNaturalist user is wrong. Often, it's not really possible to identify a species using only a couple of photographs.

5. **Confirm observations by others**
    After you've gotten used to entering observations, consider reviewing observations other users have made. Click the Explore or Identify buttons. You can search a certain location or seek out easy-to-identify species to get started. Look carefully at the photos, see if the location and date make sense, and click Agree if you think the ID is correct. You'll be helping other naturalists and scientists confirm their identifications.

The main goal: Explore the natural world!

You can learn so much from using iNaturalist – and it's fun! You're sure to make some mistakes, but you'll learn from them. Here are some additional tips for using iNaturalist:
- Like anything, iNaturalist gets easier the more you use it. Take your phone or camera with you every time you take a hike, and try to post a few photos every week.
- Take good photos. Get close, capture multiple angles, and keep it in focus.
- Follow other people who make lots of observations, and see what they find. Feel free to follow us on iNaturalist; our username is masswildlife.
- If you're going somewhere new, zoom to that spot in iNaturalist and see what other people have found there.
- Please do document both common and exotic species, because, over the years, the ranges of these species are likely to shift and iNaturalist is one way to track those shifts.
- Join a project, such as MassWildlife's All Wildlife Biodiversity Project, which is targeting the biodiversity of 15 Wildlife Management Areas across the state.

If you have questions, email Lynn.Harper@mass.gov.

rev. 2/25/2020

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