

Hog Island Audubon Camp 2018

Justina age 15

August 2018

I woke up to an Ovenbird singing its whimsical tune outside the window, its powerful voice echoing across the forest. All packed and ready to go, my sister Teodelina and I got in the car, both eager for a new experience. My heart was beating quickly when I stared out the window as the trees and roadside wildlife rushed past, and all I saw was green, green, and even more green. Car doors were swung shut and suitcases were carried to the little boat which was named the "Snowgoose III", where our



captain was. We met our instructors and looked across the water to find the island only a couple of miles away, silent and sitting there, awaiting our approach. "Today is the start of something new," I whispered underneath my breath.

Blurry photographs of Black Guillemots diving underneath the salted waters of the Atlantic Ocean were taken, as a family of Common Eiders swam away in the background. The staff gave us a warm welcome as we stepped on land, admiring the view and the cottage on stilts by the ocean, which was called the "Queen Mary Lab." Hands were shaken, hugs were taken, and faces smiled as we got to know the other teen campers from different parts of the country.

Dinner was served and our evening program took place in the Fish House, where a gannet, carved from wood and hanging from the ceiling, was accompanied by the scent of ancient books on avifauna lingering in the air. The plucking of guitar strings and lullabies were heard softly echoing across the hallway as our heavy eyelids were closing... and almost immediately the cracks of fiery

orange sunlight glowed and lit up our dorm rooms the next morning. We trekked across the island, exploring the many ferns and birdsongs as our skin slowly began to swell with mosquito bites.

After breakfast, we boarded the Snowgoose III and explored the area around the island, identifying Greater Black-backed Gulls and terns flying smoothly overhead, my shaky handwriting documenting the bird action as the fresh morning air greeted my lungs. I began to feel very cozy that day, for I noticed how the campers were eager to help and learn from each other as they identified the seabirds and submitted checklists. It was a good start to the day.



After much chattering and skipping of rocks, we carefully observed some instructors as they taught us the art of bird banding and skinning. We explored the island further to find that the tide pools around the area include many crabs, eels, fish, shells, and limpets. Some we turned in to the running tanks inside the Queen Mary Lab, where we could observe the wildlife clearly and from a different perspective. After another exquisite meal we headed to the Maine shore,

where some houses stood, one of them being a seabird decoy workhouse that works with Project Puffin.

The story behind Project Puffin: it was created by the National Audubon Society in 1973, for the sake of the Atlantic Puffin. There was once a colony of Atlantic Puffins dwelling on Eastern Egg Rock, an island in southeastern Maine in the Muscongus Bay area. Hunters wiped them out in 1885, so Project Puffin took action and transplanted numerous young puffins about 10-14 days old from Newfoundland to Eastern Egg Rock. They were fed by hand and banded once they fledged. Puffin decoys also helped lure breeding puffins in, and by 1977 the transplanted alcids returned to the island. In 1981, four happy puffin pairs nested on Eastern Egg Rock, and today, there are about 170 pairs nesting there.

After looking at the decoys, we returned to the island and some campers headed to the Queen Mary Lab and filled out the "mystery of the day," which consisted of answering ornithology questions formulated by the instructors. At the end of the week the one who got the most answers right received a prize, yet the best part was that you learned the answers at the end of each day. 4:30 AM the next morning everyone was up and leaving for the annual "Thrush Quest 2018," which was unsuccessful and yet a beautiful experience to see the island slowly light up and increase in wildlife activity.

The aftermorning activities included a bird sketching workshop and a bird skinning workshop. I did both, but the bird skinning was an experience I will especially cherish and never forget. Some campers had to share, but most of us got our own birds that were accidentally killed, either by cars, windows, or other unintentional circumstances. Because we had little time, we did the wings only, and later tagged and labelled them with information, including who prepared them.



We birded on the mainland the next day, where most of us got lifers, including Chestnut-sided Warbler, Bobolink, Alder Flycatcher, and other interesting wildlife including Alewives (a type of fish), Snowshoe Hare, and Pitcher Plants (which we observed in a large bog). After we cleared our clothes of ticks we returned to the island and I found myself playing a very fun game of soccer with some of the campers, which was concluded with a deep observation of jellyfish and other sea life by the docks under the light of the stars.

The next morning we began with another thrush quest, and then the big moment came when we boarded the boat again and cruised for an hour, heading towards Eastern Egg Rock Island. All of us were very excited, for we were eager to observe puffins and other nesting seabirds and could not wait to meet the interns who work on the island banding, counting, and taking care of the birds nesting on it. The canoe met the slippery rocks and helping hands were offered as a large flock of angry terns screeched above our heads. The worker ladies separated us into groups, and gave us three tasks: 1) 60 minutes to observe puffins through blinds, 2) cutting plants off the trails for path management, and 3) helping create a puffin trap so the interns can band them.



The terns flew above and pecked hard at our heads as we walked down the trail bordering their nests. I climbed into a blind where I had a good view of the island's large mossy rocks with Black Guillemots, Laughing Gulls, Razorbills, and Arctic, Common, and Roseate Terns. I leaned out a little and took pictures of a Common Tern that was caring for its nest a few feet away. As I was sketching, the tern began circling my blind, screaming loudly and

giving me angry looks. It later grew tired and as it swooped in front of me, it expertly aimed and landed its waste on my field notebook and clothes. I quickly cleaned up but left the mark on my notebook, for it was a moment I did not want to forget, and was proof of the bird's behavior. All of a sudden I hear heavy flapping, and I look up to encounter an Atlantic Puffin standing on a rock decorated with green lichens, holding about seven fish in its mouth and staring curiously. I could not believe my eyes; I have waited



all these years to see a puffin and there it was, only ten feet away, looking at me. After a few seconds the bird walked down the tilted rock and into a burrow, where a chick was likely waiting for its meal. That was one of the biggest surprises of my life, and one I won't forget!

The Snowgoose III slowly rocked back and forth, peacefully. Everyone was quietly sitting and looking back to what a memorable day it had been, as we slowly headed back to Hog Island. The sky was beautifully dark and clouded, so I looked up and closed my eyes to taste the sweet rain as it slowly fell upon us.

We were tired when we arrived, but the fact that we were going to have a fresh lobster feast that evening kept my energy going. The day ended with multiple awards and a small guitar performance, as well as some delicious puffin-shaped pastries for dessert. We were all very sad that it was our last night together, but we knew that this was a special camp, and it had been a week filled with a lifetime of memories. The morning sun greeted our sleepy eyes as the ocean waves caressed the pebbles, and hermit crabs were rushing across the seaweed and slippery rocks when the boat left the island. We had packed our bags, and said our goodbyes. I picked a wild red clover (*Trifolium pratense*), which I had commonly encountered on the upper East Coast, and laid it in my flower presser, so I could take a little piece of Maine home with me. I turned and looked through the car window as the peaceful little island grew smaller and smaller.



For those of you who would like to read further about Project Puffin, visit projectpuffin.audubon.org for more information! A big thank you to the Pasadena Audubon Society as well as the Hog Island Audubon Program for making this trip possible for my sister and I, it has been a very special week and I really appreciate the help you offer us young birders to experience something new!