

One June Week at Hog Island Audubon Camp, Maine

Teodelina age 17

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Our rental car, loaded with Californians, made its way from asphalt to dirt roads; it trundled past Hog Island Audubon Camp signs and smiling volunteers; and it came to rest a few feet from the Atlantic, before a sort of dock-house.



And - there it was! The subject of years' longing was visible from the dock: just offshore there waited Hog Island. I stared, and had to blink a few times to shake off the surprise of its nearness - I had assumed that it was an island more along the lines of the ones at home (the Channel Islands, visible 20 miles offshore). A pale New England cottage shone invitingly from its dock with the promise of another life. Now that I was almost there, I could have swum with the guillemots across that little channel.

A cheery Captain Chapman took my sister and I for our first ride aboard the *Snowgoose III* instead, pointing out to us a female Common Eider, shepherding chicks over the smooth water. It was really wonderful weather, which persisted throughout the week to our luck. We stepped onto the dock and rolled our luggage up the ramp and under the famed black-and-white sign with its silent wooden welcome. A bleached walkway extended from the ramp, and this led us up to where the counselors and staff stood waiting to give us each introduction.

Once we got to know each other, got settled in our respective rooms, and had an outdoor dinner, the first evening program was held in the Fish House. Steve Kress, the founder of Project Puffin (which brought puffins back to Eastern Egg Rock, among other islands) presented to us about the project and the applications of its methods. Like many alcids and other seabirds, the puffin is attracted to large congregations of its kind - it disdains to breed in solitude, which made it difficult to recolonize empty islands.

Yet this was the exact objective of Kress and his colleagues. In order to recreate this social aspect, they placed puffin decoys and many-sided mirrors on various outcrops. This proved effective, even though it took a full eight years for the first puffin pairs to

breed on Egg Rock (after more than a century of absence). Today, seabird recolonization programs worldwide are taking a leaf out of Kress's book and ordering new decoys from the original maker of Maine puffin decoys.

The evening programs always ended after dark, and so we trooped a short distance back to our cottage under northern constellations. All the buildings were beautiful in their old-fashioned manner and each had a specific name, including the house hosting the campers, Port Hole. The boys slept on the upper floor with their male counselors, and the girls were on the bottom floor with Heather, who supplied Port Hole with her very own songs on guitar nightly. Birds may be an effective life source, but music is just as necessary, and I am grateful to have been lent that guitar a few times that week.

The house by the island dock was the Queen Mary Lab, where we gathered with the artist-in-residence one morning to practice drawing the specimens. The lab is home to many hundreds of bird specimens, as well as an ocean simulation tank where lovers of marine life collected their living treasures for all visitors to enjoy. Visitors to the tank included glass and rock eels, barnacles, crabs and even a Lion's Mane jellyfish (whose presence was swiftly reconsidered and restored to the Atlantic).



Most memorably, we swirled our hands in the tank one night, lights off, to witness the bluish glow of bioluminescent dinoflagellates. Individuals and agglomerations of them appeared as brief underwater sparks tracing the backflow of our otherwise invisible motions, lighting up our congregation in a ghostly fashion against the surrounding darkness.

We also took turns shining flashlights into the dark waters of the dock at high tide, attracting various organisms on different trophic levels. Lonely yellowish lights, reflected, shook across the black ripples of the channel to our vantage point. The final trophic level, we conjectured, consisted of the sperm whale, which was fated to swallow the dock and its topping of tender birders - that is, all but the conjecturers safely back in the lab!

Nightly expeditions like this were far outnumbered by our morning ventures - most infamously the valiant Thrush Quests, which on two occasions demanded our bleary-eyed

attention from 4:30 A.M. Sitting in the plush moss, we were rewarded with crystalline serenades that resounded in the predawn forest. Later, multiple warbler voices added on as the sun rose; I learned to identify these unfamiliar tunes with the creative help of my colleagues. The Northern Parula, for example, often sings an ascending trill building up to an abrupt sneeze - "Aaaaaahhhh-choo!" Tramping along the trail, our leaders helped us identify the surrounding plant life; while the forest was mainly White Spruce, berries and ferns abounded, and there even was a bog filled with carnivorous plants and skunk cabbage.

The mainland, in comparison, was significantly more diverse with mostly deciduous foliage, so we dedicated a fruitful day to birding several spots close by. Highlights included a cooperative male Chestnut-sided Warbler, a venerated Alder Flycatcher, and a field full of displaying Bobolinks. In this last we sat down to rest a while, whistling with grass and playing bird name games.



Resting times back on the island were different; more often than actually sitting, we birded, and photographed, or talked - or best of all, were preoccupied with a ball someone found in the Fish House. Having designated a field and goals from a clearing behind Port Hole, about half of the campers, myself included, indulged in rousing games of soccer! This was refreshing to us, since most birding is a sport of peaceful thrills - many heroic deeds of goal scoring (and keeping!) were performed while managing to keep a healthy sense of camaraderie between all of us. After these intense matches with my friends, I discovered a renewed love for soccer and respect for its ability to bring people together. Surely, never before were soccer games of this level held on Hog Island!

One morning, after drawing birds at the Lab, we all watched Courtney expertly prepare a Scarlet Tanager specimen as she laid out the anatomy for us and explained each step. The handsome body was gradually separated into two: its delicate skin was carefully pulled up from bottom end up through the head much like one would lazily pull a sock off one's foot, leaving a naked, beakless mass of bird and a separate inside-out skin. Courtney showed us how to take the crumpled thing and turn it into a neat, life-like study skin. After the demo, those of us who wanted to (and not many of us did!) received a dead bird and began preparing it ourselves.

Looking around to table to distract myself from the gore a moment, I noticed with pride that some of us who volunteered, myself included, had been the ones looking away during some parts of the demo, and yet here we were in spite of that, doing it for the sake of experience. That was one of the best parts of camp, because I knew I was achieving something of personal pride in learning to prepare a bird for the first time, and I am sure some of the other felt the same: although my hands got dirty, there was no going back, and I wanted to learn how to do it - so I did!

When we weren't birding on land, we were doing so at sea. The *Snowgoose III* shipped us and our paraphernalia around Muscongus Bay in pursuit of the birds flocking on the water and the numerous rocky islets. The Atlantic was appreciatively pacific (ha!) under our little vessel, and all sorts of treats appeared - Common Eiders, though true to their name, did not fail to astonish with their smart plumage; Black Guillemots were constant and welcome companions; my long-sought birds, a group of Long-tailed Ducks, displayed both summer and winter plumages for our study; and even a breeding male Black Scoter showed off its cheddar-yellow billknob in a raft of equally handsome Surf Scoters.

Perhaps one of the most exciting moments aboard the *Snowgoose III* (indeed, aboard land or sea) was when we took off, full of anticipation, for Eastern Egg Rock. This one trip - this would bring us to the restored home of the puffins, the central idea of the camp! Leaning back on the railing, watching Hog Island fall away over the water, I felt fantastic. The time that I spent working to complete scholarships for this felt most redeemed right then.



An hour later, approaching the island, I did not feel so fantastic. Counting on my good seasickness history, I had refrained from taking Dramamine; but now, first and foremost, I wished to put my swaying legs on steady land! Making it onto the slippery shore, I recovered quickly and soon was able to fully appreciate the seabird spectacle all around our group: three species of terns (Common, Arctic, and Roseate) swooped anxiously on us intruders; portentous, enigmatic Razorbills made short circuits from the stony bluffs; and the puffins! They whirred through the air like footballs, just as it is said; their lifejacket-orange feet spread out from each side of their stubby tails, and they made their

way from rafts on the water up to the little bluffs, seeming purpose and determination written on their comical faces.

On our way up to the human hub of Egg Rock (which was a sort of shack for the interns), we stepped carefully over and beside tern nests. The speckled eggs were the color of peppered gravy and were often rendered invisible in nooks of unforgiving stone and dried grasses; luckily, each nest was either marked with a blue flag or attended by a guardian intern who guided each camper safely past. The terns could not appreciate our intentions and bombarded us with angry clacks and screams given as close to our heads as they dared - we all wore hats, but some of us received a knock or two from vengeful parents!



At the shack, we were divided into rotating groups: half of us were tasked to different intern activities, and the other half was sent into the blinds on different points of the island. I chose to go with the latter half, and climbed into what looked like my own personal lifeguard station. To my delight, I found that terns nested all around me, Black Guillemots rested on the nearby bluffs, and puffins popped abruptly out of the rocks in front of my vantage point. Apparently, there was a puffin nest or two, because a pair or so of them kept taking turns coming and going, sometimes loaded with silvery fish; and it was always a happy surprise to see one climbing up suddenly into sight from its burrow!

The lives of these birds went on all around me, each its little soap opera. I could have sat all day and watched the terns squabble and tend to each other, or the guillemots squeaking and walking awkwardly along the boulders, or the puffins with their amiable sociality, demonstrated in their tendency to follow each other in order to stand on the same rock. I sat there in a sort of astonished bliss, writing and photographing, for an hour that seemed to last three. I could see others in their blinds, in singles or threes, doing the same, smiles evident on their faces.

Once it was time for me to switch out with someone, I followed an intern back to the shack, where I used a spotting scope from the roof, hacked at overgrown trails as a part of the "veg group", and learned to tie slipknots which are used to catch puffins for examination. Every single thing, even clearing messy paths, was so much fun with my friends and the birds all around! The magic of that we were on Eastern Egg Rock doing these things got to all of us, I think.

After about two hours (and what a two hours!) on the island, we regrouped, but there was still one thing to do before we left. The path we first followed branched off at one point to little area rather similar to a cemetery - a hedge of grass surrounded by a rectangular cleared area. At even intervals by the roots of the "hedge" there were little dark openings leading down into the earth at an angle: each the doorway to the burrow of a Leach's Storm-petrel. I knew from past camps that they don't show everyone a storm-petrel every camp, so imagine my excitement when they told us to line up to meet the little bird as soon as it came out!

One of the interns got down and reached deep and carefully into a burrow. There was a moment of delicate struggle; and then she slowly pulled out a beautiful soft grey storm-petrel, a trim little creature the size of a robin. We all had a turn to look at and smell it - no one could resist smiling as they leant down to sniff it. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply through my nose (the soft feathers on its head ruffled against my nose and mouth) and finally collected the evidence for my burning question: what does a storm-petrel smell like?

Well... if you took only a faint citrusy sweetness, and paired it with a slightly musty and alcoholic undertones, that is what it smelled like. What a bizarre scent for a plankton-eating seabird! If a perfumer managed to concoct something similar enough to what I experienced (without actually using storm-petrel!), I might wear it and consider myself a fashionable ornithologist.



After this, we trooped back, under a thickening sky, to the waiting dory and were in groups rowed back to the waiting *Snowgoose*. What a morning it had been - one morning for all your life, as it is said! Sitting in the back of the dory with my colleagues, watching the rocky shore recede in slow yards behind us, I asked them how they felt; and it seemed they lacked words, for they shook their heads and repeated the simplest ones over and over: "Incredible. Just amazing."

That, I think, paired with the look on their faces and the feeling in the air, summed it up rather well.

The first morning boat of the final day was to leave at seven, and technically some of us could sleep in; instead we all were up and at the docks to give farewells, which extended onto the mainland as some of us climbed into cars, others into vans headed for the Portland airport. One thing, the instructors said, one thing we could bring home as a souvenir. I remembered this only as I was getting into the car, having hugged everyone; and quickly I picked up a grey pebble from the stony shore. It rests, heavy with memories, on a bookshelf in my room even now.

Remembering all this, my sister Justina and I are so grateful for those who made it possible for us to attend Hog Island CMBS I 2018 this summer - a big thank you to National Audubon, and to *Pasadena Audubon Society*! I hope that this short account can convey to would-be campers a fraction of the amazing experience that is Hog Island.



For one such simple and beautiful moment, as when I sat in the blind, alone but not; seeing my friends in neighboring blinds grinning as puffins whirred by, and delighting in my unimposing audience to the bird lives threading all around me in all their private tenderness, unforgiving reality, and fierce tenacity... such a moment defines a day, a summer, and a year of youth.