

Hog Island Audubon Camp was one of the best weeks of my life. I had never been birding East of Texas before, so almost every bird was new and exciting. When I arrived on the island, it was cloudy and cool, a nice escape from the dry summer heat of central New Mexico. I inspected the eclectic collection of cabins and old barns, and was directed up a steep, rickety flight of wooden stairs to my room, which featured two double beds, a little nightstand with a lamp, and a window that overlooked the dock. Eager to explore, I dropped my bags, donned my binoculars, and hurried back outside. I wandered around until I found some bird feeders with some conveniently placed wooden chairs, so I sat and waited. No more than a minute passed when a beautiful male Purple Finch dropped in. A common bird to Maine residents, but for a kid from the desert Southwest, it was a long-awaited lifer. My binoculars flew up to my eyes, and I spun the focus wheel a couple times to get a better look at this exciting new bird. Its head and upper body were a gorgeous deep pinkish maroon, a color I had never seen on a bird before. After cracking open a few seeds and warily keeping an eye on me, the bird flew up into a tree and away into the forest. That was the first of over twenty lifers I got at Hog Island that week, from the tiny Ruby-throated Hummingbird sipping nectar from the feeder by my cabin to the Arctic terns that dive-bombed me as I stepped over their nests on Eastern Egg Rock Island. Every day brought new birds, and though I had seen pictures of these birds in field guides before, seeing them fly around, sing, and interact with the world around them gave them new life. Of course, every birder knows this feeling. This is why we chase lifers and try to see new birds. It awakens, even if just for a moment, the part of us that came alive the moment we laid eyes on our “spark bird” or went on our first birding trip, the part of us that fell in love with birding. The whole time I was at Hog Island, that part of me was thriving.

Besides just seeing new birds and getting lifers, I was able to interact with people who were doing what I want to do in my life and learn about the things they were doing and what that meant to the world of science. Each night, all the campers gathered in an old fishing house to listen to a presentation. I won't lie, I fell asleep during a couple of them (the days were long with not much break, and the room was so dark and warm), but the ones I stayed awake for were truly inspiring, and they opened my eyes to the things that could be discovered in the world of birds if I worked on a project like this. The first night, a man talked about some of the tracking work they have been doing on the Arctic Terns on Egg Rock. He talked about the different types of trackers they use on birds, such as GPS and radio telemetry, then he explained how they had been using these technologies to study the birds on Egg Rock. They had put a tracker on an Arctic Tern that bred on Eastern Egg Rock, left it on for a whole year, and taken it off again once the bird returned to the island. What they found was that those very terns that made Egg Rock their home traveled up to the North Atlantic, South of Greenland, to join in a big feeding frenzy, before heading all the way down to Antarctica, making stops off the coast of Portugal, the West coast of Africa, and Argentina. They spent the winter there before doing it all over again, ending up right back on Eastern Egg Rock. I knew before that presentation that the Arctic Tern has the longest migration of any bird on planet Earth, but I had failed to really wrap my head around just how far these birds travel. A bird that weighs around 3.5 ounces (about as much as an onion) and is only a foot long travels the world every year, braving the entire Atlantic. It doesn't need a passport or a plane ticket, it just goes. Getting an inside look at these types of findings was really inspiring and prompted me even

more to pursue my dream of a career working with birds for science and learning more about them so we can find better ways to protect and preserve them and their habitats.

Another inspiration was getting to visit the researchers on Eastern Egg Rock Island. On the third morning of the camp, all the teens boarded the *Snow Goose III*, Hog Island's boat that would take us about eight miles out into the Atlantic to land on Eastern Egg Rock. On the boat ride over, we saw tons of awesome Northern East Coast birds, like Black Guillemot, Common Eider, and Roseate Tern, and I even spotted a Red-throated Loon, rare for the area at that time of year. As we approached the island, we started to see the Puffins, which are the main reason most birders visit coastal Maine. There were hundreds of Atlantic Puffins floating in the water and flying around, and they swam quite close to the boat, allowing for some great photos and amazing looks. They were joined by more Black Guillemots, Razorbills, and even a Common Murre. It was seabird central out there. Egg Rock's purpose is to be a nesting area for the seabirds, so there is no dock or anywhere developed for a boat to land. Instead, we had to step into a very rocky wooden dinghy, row a little ways to shore, and land on some seaweed-covered rocks. There were people at every stage of the journey to make sure we didn't slip and fall or flip the boat, which I am very grateful for, since the water in the North Atlantic is frigid year-round, and I don't think my body or my camera equipment would agree very much with below sixty degree saltwater. Once we all got on the island, we had to carefully hike through the tern colony to get to the research station. At 6' 3", I was the tallest in the group, so naturally I was the main target for the angry Arctic Terns. They were fierce, and I was repeatedly struck by tern bills, feet, and wings. I don't know if you've ever seen a tern bill, but they are used for spearing fish in the water, so you can imagine they're not blunt. I didn't mind, though. If some giant monster was stomping around near my babies, I'd poke him with my bill too. After a little walk up a trail, we got to the little shack where the research is conducted. Nicknamed the Hilton, this tiny wooden shack was maybe big enough for five or six people to fit in and still have room to breathe, and that was where the team of researchers on Egg Rock hung out, compiled data, and cooked their meals. There was a separate little outhouse for a bathroom, and the researchers slept in tents just outside the Hilton. One of the researchers, a college-age girl with light hair and green eyes, gave me and a few other people a tour of the Hilton. Even though it was small, something about it just drew me. I imagined making some rice and beans on the one-burner stove as the sun set over the Atlantic after a long day of working with puffins. Something like this is where I want to be when I grow up. We talked a little bit about the research they're doing there and what life is like on the island, and then we got to go photograph some seabirds and see Leach's Storm-petrels in their burrows. It was a lot to take in, and I was well and truly inspired to keep pursuing a life in the field. I was also really happy to get an inside look at the conservation efforts that are going on for some of the world's most vulnerable birds.

I didn't just meet adults who inspired me. During the week, I got to spend time with people my age who shared some of the same interests and passions as me, which is something that is not so common in today's world. Most people my age would laugh at the idea of spending a week on an island with little cell service doing nothing but looking at birds, so being on that island with a bunch of other people my age who wanted to be there was unusual and really cool. I connected with everyone there, but the people I spent the most time with were a smaller group of guys from all around the country, all around my age and all phenomenal

birders and photographers. We all crowded around a picnic table at dinner, making jokes and pretty much talking birds the whole time. We all shared a passion for exploring and a motivation to get out and see some birds, evidenced by the fact that we went on the optional early morning bird walks instead of sleeping in another hour. We shared some good times throughout the week, and the moment that I remember the best was on the very last night. We had just eaten a massive lobster dinner and we were all sitting on a wooden balcony that overlooked the whole Muscongus Bay. The sun had set, and a storm front was rolling in. Occasionally, there would be lightning on the horizon, and the air smelled like rain. We all sat there in the dark, talking and just taking in the moment. I think none of us really wanted the week to end. I think that moment solidified the bond between us, and to this day we have a text group chat where we share our bird sightings and our photos and talk about our recent adventures. One of the guys, Isaiah, has pioneered something called a "lifer dance", which is pretty self-explanatory: you get a lifer, you do a dance to celebrate. Traditionally, they are improvised on the spot, but you can incorporate elements of past lifer dances to tie them all together. During our week at camp, many lifer dances were done, and we are carrying on that tradition virtually, sending videos of lifer dances to the group chat whenever we encountered new species. The thing that stands out to me about the lifer dance is the uniqueness of it. Nobody's lifer dance is the same, and everyone's has their own unique style that shows through every time. It makes getting lifers just that much more special and personal. Things like the lifer dance are why I love the birding community and I love connecting with people my age who have so much creativity and ingenuity and come up with these types of things. Being around so many other young birders inspired me to be who I am and embrace my passions and interests, and it felt really freeing. The whole week just felt really freeing.