



# LOOKING SHARP. STUDENTS, SALT MARSHES, AND THAT ELUSIVE SPARROW

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Kelly Kemmerle is a Student Conservation Association Environmental Educator at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge. She grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey and was introduced to the outdoors by a high school teacher, so she was inspired to pay it forward and help

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*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Charlotte Murtishaw is a Student Conservation Association and Hurricane Sandy youth story corps intern, serving as a communications specialist for the*

*Service's Hurricane Sandy recovery program. She grew*

*up in New Jersey and currently attends Barnard College in New York, where she's an American Studies major focusing on postwar media and culture as well as environmental history (independently and in conjunction with each other). You can find her biking, swimming, and hiking around the Pioneer Valley this summer, usually on the way to the next best bookstore.*

Emma Shelly probably wakes up earlier than you.

Every morning, the University of Connecticut PhD student gets out of bed at 4:30 and hops in the car. She leaves her home near UConn, and drives nearly an hour to Barn Island Wildlife Management Area in the coastal town of Stonington, Ct., picking up her assistants along the way.

The early start does have its perks for the group, though.

"The mornings are really beautiful," says research specialist Christina Cerino. "You catch a lot of good sunrises."

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Site leader Emma Shelly, flanked by her research specialists Christina Cerino (L) and Jeanna Mielcarek (R). Credit: Charlotte Murtishaw/USFWS

Emma and Christina are both in their second summer working for [SHARP](#)—the Saltmarsh Habitat & Avian Research Program. The program was founded by a [group of academic, governmental, and non-profit collaborators](#) to provide critical information for the conservation of tidal-marsh birds. It evolved from more than a decade of saltmarsh sparrow surveys conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, states and other partners on national wildlife refuges throughout the Northeast, ultimately expanding to more than 900 current sites. The Refuge System’s [Inventory and Monitoring \(I&M\) program](#) is supporting development of standardized data collection methods and a database that will help SHARP participants evaluate population and habitat status and develop targets for future conservation needs.

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Last year SHARP gained additional resources through a Hurricane Sandy grant from the [Department of the Interior](#) for a comprehensive [tidal marsh bird project](#).

The money not only continues to support SHARP efforts to gauge the effects of climate change on threatened species like the saltmarsh sparrow and clapper rail, but also engages youth and graduate students with Sandy projects. Opportunities often involve hands-on field experience collecting data, such as the work at Barn Island.

Because the project had already gathered so much data on tidal marsh birds and their habitat before Hurricane Sandy hit in October, 2012, researchers are able to make easy comparisons between healthy habitat and current conditions, such as sea levels and bird populations. But SHARP isn't just for the birds. With more than 20 sites stretching from Maine to New Jersey, the program is a chance for students in environmental fields to get hands-on experience in conservation, as well as dabble in their own research. While she works on SHARP as a crew leader, Emma also gathers information for her Ph.D., on the mating preferences of the notoriously polyamorous saltmarsh sparrow.

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In the field, Emma, Christina, and another research specialist, Jeanna Mielcarek, set up fine mist nets to catch incoming birds, and band the female saltmarsh sparrows with identification tags. They take weight, wingspan, and other measurements at the same time, and comb the marsh for nests to flag and track.

Other animals pop up in the salt marsh, which is among one of the most biodiverse habitats in the world, ranking up there with the tropical rainforest. Jeanna finds a praying mantis, and retrieves a bright goldfinch from the mist net. At Barn Island, anything goes.

“We catch a lot of birds we aren’t targeting for,” Christina says. “There are surprises every day.” Blackbirds, she said, are grabby and nippy; male sparrows are more aggressive (but she hastens to clarify all observations are anecdotal).

Christina got her start last summer under UConn professor and site leader Chris Elphick. “[Christina] came out as a volunteer last year and learned some

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basics and this year has picked up a lot more,” said Elphick, who’s been birding since childhood. “We have to stagger experience a little bit so we’re training people we can hire next year as the more experienced person.”

SHARP is a breeding ground for burgeoning biologists and conservationists. Though the main corps is made up of graduate students, UMaine assistant professor and principal investigator Brian Olsen emphasizes that exposing students to hands on experience is built into the framework of the project.



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“We try to slide in an undergraduate or two as well to train somebody up, so we usually have at least one person who’s never done anything on the crew and then that mixes in with the experienced hands,” Olsen said.

In Emma’s case, that meant assisting as a field tech last summer before being promoted to her leadership position.

“I was really grateful to come out here the year before to learn the ropes and how to set up the arrays and do all the bird handling and things like that,” she said.

Now, she’s in charge, arranging the schedule and making decisions while shouldering her personal research. “You work really hard, but you don’t have anyone breathing down your shoulder about it, so it’s all up to you to be self-motivated.”

On-site, it doesn’t seem like anybody needs much extra motivation. “This is sort of what I want to do as an actual career, wildlife conservation,” Christina said.

Why?

“Everyday you’ll do something new. Every day there’ll be something exciting that happens, even small things, and it’s never boring. You do feel satisfied with your job, even if you’re tired and muddy and really hungry at the end of the day, you still had a great time out in the marsh and got to interact with animals.”

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A salt marsh sparrow nest, full of newly hatched babies, is nestled in the tall grasses at Barn Island WMA. Credit: Margie Brenner/USFWS

[View a video clip about the SHARP surveys at Barn Island](#)

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*SCA intern Charlotte Murtishaw is part of the Service's Hurricane Sandy youth story corps, which provides communications experience to college interns as a part of our agency's commitment to engaging youth in conservation.*

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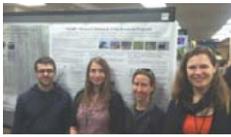
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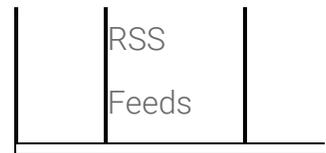
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