

Kristen Noel: Working to preserve seabirds

For biology graduate student Kristen Noel, it's all about the birds. Whether she's attaching a radio transmitter to a tiny Saw-Whet Owl or studying ways to preserve sea ducks, she's living her dream.

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Kristen Noel is passionate about helping to preserve wildlife, especially seabirds, in the face of climate change and habitat loss. A native of Enfield, Nova Scotia, Kristen graduated in 2019 with a BSc in biology from Université Sainte-Anne. While she was there, an ornithology course sparked her interest in birds and in working to protect them.

Her research on the evolution of conspecific brood parasitism in Red-breasted Mergansers took first place at Université Sainte-Anne's student research conference. It was also presented at Science Atlantic's conference.

As an active volunteer, Kristen has monitored the migration of Northern Saw-Whet Owls and the population of Black Ducks in southwest Nova Scotia; the work included banding both species and applying radio transmitters to the tiny owls. Working as a wild bird care apprentice at Le Nichoir wild bird rehabilitation centre in Hudson, Quebec, she examined and treated many species of injured and orphaned birds, including hand-feeding baby birds on a strict schedule.

During the spring of 2019, Kristen volunteered to help with a nesting ecology project, led by Environment and Climate Change Canada, that targeted endangered Roseate Terns in Nova Scotia.

“I spent two months living in a tent on an island while working on a seabird colony monitoring Roseate Terns,” she says. “I was also able to spend two weeks on Sable Island, working on an Ipswich Sparrow study. These experiences reaffirmed that this is my passion, and there is nothing else I’d rather be doing. They also provided me with the skills and tools that will help me grow into a better biologist.”

Conservation begins with education

At Acadia, Kristen’s research project for her master’s degree in biology is intended to help conserve Common Eiders in Nova Scotia. “Common Eiders are large sea ducks with a circumpolar breeding distribution,” she says. “Their populations have been declining at a steady rate in recent years.”

For her project, she will compare their natural nesting conditions to artificial nesting structures that protect sea ducks from predation. “It is critical that we find solutions and technologies to combat the problems that threaten to destroy our planet such as global warming, climate change, and mass extinctions,” she says.

“Conservation begins with education; the more we understand about different species and how they interact with their ecosystems, the easier it will be to put conservation efforts into place.”

An avid birdwatcher, Kristen makes time to go birding nearly every week and has familiarized herself with the majority of bird species in the Maritimes and Quebec, along with their natural history.

Receiving an Arthur Irving Academy Scholarship in Environmental Studies has made it possible for her to fulfill her dream of conducting research that can improve our understanding of wildlife biology and ecology, she says. “I am incredibly honoured to have received the Irving Scholarship, and it has changed my life in so many ways. I will never be able to put into words just how grateful I am for the generosity and philanthropy shown by the Irving family.”

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