

Seabirds and Citizen Science

The phrase “long walks on the beach” often conjures up romantic images of couples strolling at sunset, but did you know that walking on the beach can also help accomplish conservation objectives for the North Carolina Coastal Reserve? On a warm summer afternoon, a dedicated volunteer joined Central Sites Manager Paula Gillikin for just such a conservation-minded walk on the Rachel Carson Reserve component, this time as part of a citizen science project called SEANET that works to identify and mitigate threats to marine birds.

SEANET, or the [Seabird Ecological Assessment Network](#), is a collaborative network of interdisciplinary researchers and citizen scientists that collect long-term data on beached birds along the East Coast of the United States. The program was created by the Tufts University Center for Conservation Medicine and the Lloyd Center for Environmental Studies in Massachusetts. The year-round surveys conducted by citizen scientists help determine patterns of bird carcass deposition over space and time. Aside from being simple to count and measure, beached birds often signal environmental changes such as oil spills, algal toxins, climate change, and disease outbreaks. SEANET uses bird mortality data to learn more about ecosystem and human health.



Volunteer JoAnne Powell looks for seabirds during a recent SEANET survey.

As they walk along the beach, Gillikin explains that the Rachel Carson Reserve collects data on beached birds with the help of a dedicated volunteer group, and then enters the information into the comprehensive SEANET database. Gillikin thinks that “SEANET is a great citizen science program because volunteer motivation and retention are high due to ease of data collection, a regular survey schedule, and the value of participating in useful long-term research.” The program also increases staff and volunteer presence on the reserve, which provides opportunities to interface with visitors and assess site conditions. Volunteers like JoAnne Powell, who has been birding around the Rachel Carson Reserve for years, are truly committed to environmental stewardship at the Reserve, and dedicate time each month to participate in the beached bird surveys.



A beached seabird surveyed for the SEANET program in December 20102.

The boat ride over to Bird Shoal and the opportunity to stroll a pristine stretch of beach are also nice perks for the volunteers!

Participating in the SEANET surveys allows the N.C. Coastal Reserve to contribute useful data in service of long-term environmental research, engage enthusiastic citizen scientists, and access marine bird data from along the East Coast. And while it may not be the most glamorous walk on the beach, it fulfills a unique niche of citizen science and collaborative monitoring that aids long-term conservation.