

Bird Watching with Duke Marine Lab Students

On a recent afternoon, a row of students gathered on the sandy beach of the Rachel Carson Reserve, binoculars pointing towards the low-lying marsh grass, where a group of ibis wade along the edge of the water. The students are from the [Duke University Marine Lab](#) (DUML), and visited the Rachel Carson Reserve for a Marine Ecology lab activity focusing on identifying and counting shore birds. DUML shares a campus on Pivers Island in Beaufort, NC with the North Carolina Coastal Reserve & National Estuarine Research Reserve (NCCERR), and the institutions collaborate on research and educational initiatives.

Marine Ecology professor [Dr. Doug Nowacek](#) designed this lab activity so that students could gain an appreciation for the diversity of avian wildlife adapted for life in an estuarine environment. Students were tasked with identifying each species of bird observed during their



trip to the Rachel Carson Reserve, as well as collecting abundance estimates for each observed species. After the first lab session in late August, the class will return to the Reserve in November to determine how species composition and abundance change seasonally, as many birds migrate during the fall months.

As an experienced birder and naturalist, Central Sites Manager Paula Gillikin was an invaluable resource for the young scientists as they skimmed copies of bird identification books and peered through a high-powered Celestron spotting scope. Ms. Gillikin recently assembled a comprehensive [Bird Checklist](#) for the Rachel Carson Reserve, and regularly monitors bird populations at the Reserve with the help of dedicated birding volunteers, so her knowledge



of local bird species was especially sought after by the internationally diverse students in the Marine Ecology course. The lab group ultimately recorded observations of more than a dozen bird species, including egrets, terns, pelicans, and gulls.

For many Duke students, this trip was their first experience at the Rachel Carson Reserve. The Reserve provided a pristine “outdoor laboratory” for students of marine biology and coastal management to explore the vital estuarine systems right in their own backyard. As Beaufort neighbors and leaders in coastal research and education, DUML and NCNERR continue collaborative efforts to inspire future generations of conservation leaders, one pair of binoculars at a time.