

## Serve Learn Earn

House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry

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Hello, my name is Kim Guertin. I work for Audubon Vermont as the Center Director at the Green Mountain Audubon Center, in Huntington. I have worked for Audubon for more than 20 years and care very deeply about our mission to protect birds and the places they need today and tomorrow, especially here in Vermont. One way we will do that, is to build a diverse conservation workforce that will protect the natural places that birds and people need to thrive well into the future. This is why Audubon is a part of Serve Learn Earn.

Over the last three years, Audubon has invested time, effort and resources in building a strong Youth Conservation Leadership Program that engages diverse teens and young adults in our conservation, education and advocacy work. More specifically, our programs employ youth through Internships, seasonal Environmental Educators and a Jr. Conservation Technician program and a Counselors-in-Training program for teens. We also host AmeriCorps members through VHCB each year.

Before Serve Learn Earn, Audubon offered just five unpaid internship opportunities and one AmeriCorps service position each year. Our internship program was strong, but it was only available to those who could afford it. Today, thanks to the generous public funding the SLE coalition has received, Audubon is now offering more than 40 teens and young adults paid career training and AmeriCorps service opportunities each year and they all receive a minimum of \$15 per hour.

Our program participants learn valuable skills and gain on the job training. For many of the teens (ages 14-18) we work with through our Jr. Conservation Technician and Counselor-In-Training programs, they are often applying for a first job. They have to submit a resume and go through their first interview process. Once hired, they learn to set goals and work as part of team. Our CITs build their natural history knowledge and learn how to share that knowledge with others. They also learn how to manage a group of children and how to build engaging lesson plans. Working in our environmental education programs alongside Audubon's professional education staff on a daily basis, inspires many of them to pursue a degree in education or seek jobs as environmental educators.

As an example of this, our current Education and Outreach AmeriCorps member, Kyra Monsam, is in the middle of her second term serving with us. Through her work in environmental education at Audubon, Kyra has been inspired to go back to school to get a degree in early childhood education. Her dream is to run her own licensed Forest Preschool Program here in Vermont.

Teens in our Jr. Conservation Tech program get a snap shot of several types of conservation work and complete meaningful conservation and trail projects. They learn how to work with hand-tools on small-scale construction projects. They learn invasive plant identification as well as how to properly remove and dispose of the plants. They also learn basic forestry and bird monitoring skills. Last summer, they worked to research native plants, mapped out a garden site and installed a new Plants for Birds Garden at the Audubon Center. This conservation project will benefit birds and pollinators for years to come and they took pride in knowing they were making a difference for wildlife. Audubon is able to design and implement projects like this, that give teens experience in environmental stewardship at an appropriate scale and skill level.

We were excited to see some of our teen alumni go on to take jobs with VYCC on a conservation crew and we are exploring ways we can create a more direct pathway between our programs.

Our Conservation and Bird-Friendly Maple Interns, who are in college, learn bird-monitoring techniques, some learn to band birds, others learn to use GIS and mapping software, they conduct forest inventories, habitat assessments and learn to write land management plans. These skills, learned through active fieldwork alongside an Audubon Conservation Biologist or forester, are directly applicable to real life work in conservation.

We have seen our interns and AmeriCorps members move into jobs at the Vermont Agency of Transportation, The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Atlas Environmental and the Vermont Center for EcoStudies. We have seen our environmental education alumni become teachers at Champlain Valley Union High School, Williston Central School, and Shelburne Farms. We have even hired two AmeriCorps members into full-time roles on our Audubon education team.

Our program alumni also gain a greatly expanded professional network, through the SLE partners and Audubon's conservation community nationwide.

As an aside, National Audubon has recognized Audubon Vermont's Youth Conservation Leadership Program as a model program helping to grow the next generation of conservation leaders. We will be working with Audubon's network of Audubon Centers around the country to scale up the youth leadership programs we have been able to grow in Vermont through Serve Learn Earn.

Vermont needs the next generation of conservation leaders to be prepared to help solve the daunting environmental challenges of our time. That is why Audubon is investing in our youth and providing work experiences, they need to discover their true passions and make critical career decisions. We are helping to move these young people into the conservation workforce.

Thank you for your time and for your ongoing support.