

Serve, Learn, Earn – Audubon Vermont

Testimony to the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing & General Affairs

Submitted by, Kim Guertin, Director of the Green Mountain Audubon Center

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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 25 years and care deeply about our mission to protect birds and the places they need today and tomorrow. One way we will accomplish our mission, is to build a strong, conservation workforce that will protect the places that birds (and people) need to thrive well into the future. This is why Audubon is a part of the Serve Learn Earn (SLE) coalition.

Over the last four years, Audubon has invested time, effort and resources in building a strong Youth Conservation Leadership Program that engages teens and young adults in our conservation, education and policy work. There are five different branches of our training programs. We offer a Counselors-in-Training program and a Jr. Conservation Technician program for teens (ages 14-18) and Internships and Seasonal Educator positions for young adults. In addition, we host three AmeriCorps members through the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board each year.

Before the Serve Learn Earn coalition was formed in 2020, Audubon hired 4 Seasonal Educators who were paid minimum wage, we hosted 1 AmeriCorps member, and we offered five unpaid internship opportunities. 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 40 teens and young adults paid workforce development training and AmeriCorps service opportunities each year and they all receive a minimum of \$15 per hour.

Most of Audubon's SLE participants are teens and young adults in the career exploration and early professional experience phases of the SLE program. For many of the teens we work with our programs are their first job experience. Today, I would like to highlight our Jr. Conservation Tech program.

Teens in our Jr. Conservation Tech program get a snapshot 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 like building Common Tern chick shelters and puncheons for hiking trails. They also learn skills in forestry, habitat assessment, habitat restoration work and bird monitoring skills.

JCTs work with Audubon during out of school times including school vacations, weekends and when they start summer break. They work in the field with professional Conservation Biologists, a licensed forester, ornithologists and Teacher-Naturalists. Examples of some of the work they do includes, spending time learning to identify and remove invasive plant species. They learn to conduct Bird-friendly maple sugarbush assessments and help with forest management practices like marking trees for a crop tree release. They also have an opportunity help monitor for Bobolinks and a Peregrine Falcon nest and band birds for a morning with a master bird bander. Throughout the program they practice collecting data and submitting it to online databases like eBird, iNaturalist, and Nature's Notebook apps that help scientists track the presence and abundance of birds and other wildlife and plant species.

Last summer, JCTs worked to repair trails at the Audubon Center that were damaged during flooding and this summer they will participate in native riparian plantings that will help repair riverbanks that were destabilized during flooding. Projects like these give teens experience in environmental stewardship at an appropriate scale and skill level. They help teens to build confidence and an understanding that their work can have a positive impact.

These projects also benefit our community. Our trail system is free and open to the public and we will use the riparian planting sites as demonstration sites to teach the public about the importance of healthy riparian areas for flood mitigation.

Since the JCT program was established in 2022 we have engaged 46 teens from 13 high schools (most from within a 45-minute drive from the Audubon Center in Huntington) including the Essex Technical Center.

Audubon's teen programs act as feeder programs into other SLE training programs and/or inspire teens to seek out other opportunities to follow their career interests. We've been excited to see some of our teens go on to take jobs with VYCC on conservation crews and we have seen VYCC crew members come to Audubon. We continue to explore ways we can create a more direct pathways between our programs for our younger participants.

Several of our JCTs have gone on to be accepted to the University of Vermont's Rubenstein School for the Environment and are studying Natural Resources or Wildlife Biology. We were also excited to learn about a JCT who went on to get a job with Shelburne Farms as a Forestry Assistant and then joined a company called Teacher Tree Service.

In terms of credentials teens earn at Audubon, we are currently working with guidance counselors at high schools to encourage their students to apply for school credit through the Flexible Pathways Program. In addition, National Audubon offers a suite of professional development programs. Employees can take online skills trainings, some of which offer skills

badges or certificates of completion. Examples of training topics include helpful to teens include building your resumé, project management, and how to prepare a successful presentation.

To help measure our success, each JCT participates in an exit survey at the end of our program. Results have shown that

- 82% of JCT participants agree with the statement "I am more interested in further work in the conservation field."
- 86% participants agree with the statement "I developed basic job skills (e.g. punctuality, being prepared with proper clothing and tools, communication, job safety)" during the JCT program.
- 92% JCTs agree that they "pay more attention to nature" after their work experience with Audubon.
- 89% agree that they have developed better problem-solving skills.
- 100% of JCTs agree that their naturalist skills have improved.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a quote from a JCT who participated in program last year.

"My time at Audubon has truly introduced me to a whole new world. I spent just as much time outdoors before, but I wasn't sure how I could possibly make a career I loved out of it. Audubon was able to not only give me hands on learning opportunities, but options for the future that I'm not sure I would've found on my own." – Kaitlyn, High School Junior, JCT 2024

Thank you for your time and for your support of Serve Learn Earn.