This summer, I worked with Aviva Fiske ’12 to observe and monitor a part of the Leach’s Storm petrel population that summers on Kent Island, Bowdoin’s own ornithological and marine field station in New Brunswick, Canada. The petrels, small birds with tube noses and webbed feet, have been studied on the island since the 1950’s, and it was an honor to participate in such a long term scientific study.

Our main goals were to determine in which burrows the birds were nesting in “the Shire” this particular summer, capture both adult birds in the burrow and record information about them, determine when eggs were laid, and lastly, when chicks hatched. All of this work relied on a basic skill, “grubbing,” which means inserting one’s arm into the burrow and gently feeling for the nest chamber and its possible contents. This way, we can physically determine the activities (or lack thereof) happening in any given nest.

The first step of our research was figuring out which nests were active. After finding an egg or an adult in a nest, we marked that nest for consistent checks for the remainder of the summer. All eggs found were measured, and all adult petrels found were either identified by their leg bands or banded for the first time by us. In addition, we measured adults’ weights, wing lengths, and tarsus lengths.

After checking every nest and measuring every egg and adult in the Shire, we moved on to monitoring the eggs and determining their hatch date. When chicks did eventually hatch, our job was to weigh them daily. This was the best part of research this summer, as the young chicks are tiny gray fluffy things that peep insistently. Aviva and I had a lot of fun with them at the end of the summer.

Our research was rewarding on its own, but it was a great bonus that two graduate students on Kent Island were working with the petrels as well. Hearing about Morgan Gilmour’s and Sandy Camarelli’s individual research helped us put our own monitoring into context. We saw how measuring chick weight indicates how much a chick was fed the previous night, or how handling an adult bird for a long period of time may increase the corticosterone levels in their blood. The opportunity to do ornithology research on Kent Island was wonderful – it was not only educational in a scientific sense, but enlightening in that we experienced life as true field scientists.

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Funded by the Bowdoin Scientific Station on Kent Island