

First Place Writing – Age 14-18
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A Mother's Day Present

In New York State, Mother's Day often shows some of the peak movements of spring migrants. Many people spend this weekend birding in the excellent migrant traps located around the city and Long Island, but my family spent it on our local Jones Beach.

Although sometimes very productive for migrant passerines, this year's bird flow stayed clear of Jones. The only warbler I saw that day was Yellow. Yet the lack of songbirds was made up by the abundance of shorebirds. In one day, I had a respectable tally of 51 species overall, boosted considerably by the shorebirds; an excellent day.

Overlooking the Great South Bay, the Boat Basin of Jones Beach is often very productive for shorebirds. On the Mother's Day there were Willets, Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plovers, and Ruddy Turnstones scattered around. Then a flock flew in. What's black and white and red all over? There have been many horrible punch lines derived from the line, but a Black-bellied Plover and Red Knot flock works too.

Surprisingly, just as many if not more shorebirds were on the beach side of the park, especially concentrated on the jetty. That one jetty at the westernmost end of Jones Beach is one of my favorite places to bird. Not only is it a nice place to scout for seabirds, but it often has a couple of unusual birds show up during the course of the year. In my earlier years of birding I found a Whimbrel hanging out on the jetty, and I've also seen a Swamp Sparrow foraging around the rocks. A month or so earlier, I was even lucky enough to spot a pair of Harbor Porpoise backs rolling out of the water at sunset. In mid-May, roseate Terns have joined the Common, Forster's and Least Terns. And on this very day, I had what certainly looked like a hummingbird fly off the rocks. Today's highlights were sandpipers. Every time I scanned the tight flock of Sanderlings, something new would appear. First some Dunlins. A Semipalmated Plover, then sandpipers of the same name. A solitary Black-bellied Plover seemed to lead the pack, and a Spotted Sandpiper crept around the boulders that made up the jetty, then flew off on stiff twitchy wings. One turnstone accompanied a small flock of very late Purple Sandpipers. After finally catching all of the sneakiest of the sandpipers on the jetty, I thought the excitement was over. Little did I know that the highlight of the day would be a Sanderling.

Walking back toward my parents, who were propped up against the jetty resting, I spotted a sandpiper that seemed to be struggling to fly. I look down and I see a Sanderling tangled in fishing line. The poor thing seemed doomed – there wasn't a chance that I could climb down and free it – it was too close to the pounding surf. Then my eye followed one of the lines that was entangling the bird, which happened to be draped over the jetty right by my feet. I bet the fisherman who left it there never expected it to be used again. Yet right then and there I started reeling in the bird, very

slowly and delicately. It took a little persuading at my end of the string, but the bird finally was freed of any other obstructing lines at the water level, and the bird swung down between a gap in the rocks and landed in the water right below me. It wasn't moving. I couldn't believe it. The line wasn't wrapped around its neck, or was it? I kept reeling it in gently, and then finally I had the limp Sanderling at my feet. Suddenly it burst into life again, and I could see that the line was wrapped around the wing. Relief flooded over me. Better the wing than the neck, at least.

Luckily I have a Mom who doesn't faint at the sight of small animals. It would be very hard for her to keep up her profession, a veterinarian, with that sort of fear! I ran over to her with the bird cupped in my hands, a trick I picked up from her, to keep the bird from seeing things that would scare it into shock. To calm frightened cats during little exercises like to-nail clipping, a towel is often draped over their head, as seeing darkness is much less frightening than seeing sharp, shiny objects dancing around your feet! Recognizing the technique, she started to ask what I was holding.

"What do you have in your – *oh my goodness! What is it?*" she said, amazed by the sight of the bird in my hand.

"Happy Mother's Day, Mom!" I said. Then I told her it was a Sanderling that was tangled in fishing line.

We parted the feathers on the bird and found the line wrapped around the inner wing. It appeared that it could be removed by unwinding, but somehow the line had managed to tie itself around the wing like a knot, no pun intended. Luckily it didn't seem to have done much damage, except give the bird a small cut. Many methods of releasing the pressure of the string were exercised, and it became obvious that either scissors, some other tool, or very long fingernails were needed to pry the string away. Eventually we found that the only tool that would work was the key of our car, helped by fingernails. It took lots of prying, but in the good hands of a doctor the line was eventually slackened and unwound and the bird was free to recover. It was amazing how incredibly gorgeous that bird looked in the hand. The patient was surprisingly calm during the operation, and I was able to see how amazing these birds are, these birds that everyone takes for granted. I wished it luck, then set it down on the jetty, where it didn't hesitate to fly off and rejoin its flock. Not even a thank-you.

From there the Sanderling hopefully made it up to the tundra of northern Canada, or the expanses of Greenland, where the estimated 300,000 birds that migrate through the Americas breed in early summer. Another 343,000 are believed to migrate across the rest of the world. In mid-summer, the adult Sanderlings will begin their three to ten thousand mile journeys down to the southern US beaches, or northern South America. Like most sandpipers, the newly-hatched juveniles will follow soon after. They will be seen by many people "chasing the waves" on many beaches around the globe, but very few people will have the chance to see one up close and look into their brown eyes, and know that they have saved one of these little bird's lives.

Literature Cited:

1) O'Brien, Michael; Crossley, Richard; Karlson, Kevin. *The Shorebird Guide*. Boston; Houghton Mifflin Company. 2006

2) Paulson, Dennis, *Shorebirds of North America*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Printing Press. 2005