

# CHANGING YOUNG LIVES WITH ROCKING THE BOAT *Catherine Heller*

In July 2012, while rowing in an industrial section along the Bronx River near Bruckner Boulevard and the ABC Warehouse, Marcus Caceres spotted an elusive green heron (*Butorides virescens*). His sighting advanced the goals of both NYC Audubon and the Bronx's Rocking the Boat.

NYC Audubon's longest-running program, Harbor Herons, monitors nesting populations of wading birds (herons, egrets, and ibis) as well as other water- and shore-birds in New York City's harbor estuaries. The Bronx River and its termination point at the East River provide habitat for many of these species. Recruiting volunteers to follow these birds at this location has been difficult, especially since the best way to observe them is from the water.

Since 1996, Rocking the Boat has been working with students who live mainly in the Hunts Point section of the South Bronx. This is the poorest Congressional district in the country, and the organization strives to empower its young residents by helping them develop self-confidence, set ambitious goals, and gain skills necessary to achieve these goals. Students, ages 14-18, learn wooden boat building techniques and how to handle these rowboats on and around the Bronx River.

NYC Audubon and Rocking the Boat have collaborated on a program that teaches students not only how to row expertly out on the Bronx River estuary (the southern end of the river at Hunts Point Riverside Park), but also to identify and count the



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water birds at six designated areas from Concrete Plant Park to just north of the East River. The students become true citizen scientists by gathering data using established NYC Audubon protocols. Their data reveals that these bird populations are in decline in this particular region of the Harbor Herons complex.

According to Chrissy Word, Director of Public Programs at Rocking the Boat, pigeons are the only birds that these young people can initially identify. After taking part in this collaborative project, the students delight in observing and identifying herons, egrets, and ibis and marvel at the persistence of nature in the City.

But back to that green heron. Marcus was always interested in nature and the environment, and when Rocking the Boat visited his

high school several years ago, he knew he wanted to participate in the program. He is now 22 and completing his Associate's Degree in biology at Bronx Community College. He is also a program assistant at Rocking the Boat, teaching students about boats, navigating waterways, and the science and joy of birding. It's hard to imagine a more successful example of melding the missions of NYC Audubon and Rocking the Boat.

Explore the Bronx River with Rocking the Boat by joining an NYC Audubon trip Saturday, May 3. See page 10 for details.



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