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Volunteers get wild in Alaska

Vacationing volunteers leave the beaten path for a hands-on experience in coastal studies.

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HOMER, ALASKA

A sea otter glides by, its sinewy tail gently snaking through the water a stone's throw from the floating dock where I'm eating a PB&J sandwich. Taking a break from preening its belly fur, it looks at me with baby-doll eyes, sizing me or my sandwich up. I realize that otters are much cuter in real life than in photos. Deciding that grooming is more interesting than my snack, the otter resumes combing thick fur with its teeth and dainty paws.

This moment is why I've traveled to the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies' (CACS) Peterson Bay Coastal Field Station on the Kenai Peninsula to see wildlife and aid in its conservation.

"Volunteers usually spend two days with us," says Beth Trowbridge, acting executive director. On the first day, I participate in field-oriented educational programs, oohing and aahing over animals that live in the bay's shallows and exploring the upland spruce forest that contains insect-eating bog plants and a pond stuffed with waterlilies.

CACS believes that if people have a personal experience with, say, a sea cucumber creeping across their palms, they're much more likely to make decisions that preserve the invertebrate's tide pool habitat than if they just see a picture of the caterpillarlike creature in a magazine.

The service-oriented project that takes place on the day of volunteering is tailored to participants' skills and talents. "If folks have carpentry skills, I'll give them a hammer, or if they are [artists], they can make signs," says Dan Pascucci, field station program coordinator. Volunteers recently repaired the two-mile trail system zigzagging around the field station, pond, and beach, trimming shrubs, building boardwalks over mucky areas, and pounding steps into steep grades.

The journey to the field station from Homer is an educational experience in itself. In a small boat, I skim across Kachemak Bay and around Gull Island. Flotillas of common murre bob in the surf surrounding our boat as other residents watch from rocks – tufted puffins, red-faced cormorants, horned puffins, and pigeon guillemots.

Turning into a tiny cove, Captain Scott maneuvers the boat alongside a floating raft where Mr. Pascucci greets me with a grin. I clamber aboard with my overnight gear and a bag of groceries (CACS offers no

meals but provides a fully outfitted kitchen), and we pull the raft across the tiny inlet to steps leading to the field station.

It was once a vacation home, but now the two-story house serves as the field station's activity hub, where visitors plan outings, prepare meals, eat, and digest the day's adventures.

The facilities remind me of my childhood summer camp, only upgraded – the tents are heated yurts with bunk beds (BYO sleeping bag), and the outhouse is a composting toilet.

Late night finds us sitting around a humongous, egg-shaped fire pit, roasting marshmallows, munching s'mores, and singing songs, swaying to Pascucci's mandolin as he croons about the FBI (fungi, bacteria, and invertebrates) and sea stars: "Ay, ay, ay, ay. Sea stars are not starfish. Sea stars are not vertebrates. Starfish, never heard of it...." he sings to the tune of "Cielito Lindo," a popular Mexican song.

Early the next morning we head to China Poot Bay, a short hike from the field station. Pascucci wants to take advantage of the minus tide and hunt for interesting life trapped in shallow basins and tucked under boulders. He gently lifts up what looks like a rock covered with slimy algae. Pushing aside rubbery kelp, he reveals red sea cucumbers with flowery tentacles, red and purple sea stars (I'll never refer to them by any other name again), and a scurrying brittle star.

Pascucci picks up a 16-armed sunflower star and hands it to me. The arms drape over my wrist and its suckers seek a firm hold and tug at my skin. I gently peel it off and tuck it into the rock's hollow.

Before heading off to trim plants growing into the trail, I return to the floating dock to eat a quick snack. The sky is lupine-blue. A bald eagle glides above a spruce tree. Hanging over the dock's railing, I take a bite of my PB&J and think that the setting couldn't get better.

That's when I spy my companion, the lolling sea otter. It rolls toward me, and our eyes meet. I wonder if it's feeling as satisfied as I am – the otter about its well-groomed fur and me about helping to preserve its home. •

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