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## Stewards protect dunes

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**By Fred A. Mohr**  
Staff writer

Gabrielle Wheeler sees it happen almost every day at Deer Creek Wildlife Management Area.

Someone walks or climbs the sand dunes lining the mile-long beach, unwittingly damaging a critical piece of the ecosystem in the 1,200-acre area straddling the towns of Richland and Sandy Creek.

"I try to take an educational approach and explain how important the beach grass is to (maintaining) the dunes," said Wheeler, a senior at the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

Wheeler is one of five dune stewards working this summer to help protect and study the dunes along eastern Lake Ontario and educate the public about the dunes' importance.

"The wetlands would be demolished and the lake would be more polluted" without the dunes, said Wheeler, a biology major from Dundee who is assigned primarily to Deer Creek. The dunes protect the wetlands, which serve as a natural filter, keeping runoff from percolating into Lake Ontario. Wetlands also provide a haven for a variety of plants, fish and birds.

Walking on dunes erodes them and destroys the beach grasses that hold the sand in place. Bare areas can result in blowouts, or breaks in the dunes that allow sand to blow into the wetlands, reducing their effectiveness.

Wheeler's job is part monitor, educator, surveyor and garbage collector. She patrols the mile stretch of beach, encouraging visitors to use the wooden walkovers and trails, doing head counts, conducting visitor surveys, stringing snow fence to help repair dunes and picking up trash left by careless visitors or washed

up by lake action.

"We had a hot water heater wash up once," she said. "I have no idea where that came from."

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The job is physically demanding, Wheeler said. It's not unusual for her to hike 10 miles during the course of her day, which usually runs from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. five days a week. Her service began with the July 4 weekend and runs through Labor Day. Stewards receive \$2,500 stipends for the summer.

"The first week I would just go home every night and crash," Wheeler said.

The work also can be lonely. Deer Creek doesn't get a lot of visitors, but she said the surveys are the best part of the job.

"The conservation aspect, dealing with people in an educational manner, that's the most rewarding part," Wheeler said.

She asks visitors how often they visit the area and how they use other parts of the Eastern Lake Ontario Dune and Wetlands Area, a 17-mile strip of coastline that contains the largest freshwater dunes system in the state.

She's required to do 50 surveys by the end of the summer.

The steward program began about a dozen years ago, said Molly Thompson, a New York Sea Grant dune specialist who coordinates the program for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, along with the state Parks Department and The Nature Conservancy.

Wheeler and four other college students with backgrounds in natural resources patrol beaches at Deer Creek, Sandy Island Beach and Sandy Pond Beach in Oswego County, and Southwick Beach and Lakeview and Black Pond wildlife management areas in Jefferson County.

The stewards also contribute to Sea Grant's photo monitoring program, documenting continuing efforts to rebuild the dunes. The photos, which go back 15 years, show the progress at Sandy Island Beach, Sandy Pond Beach, Southwick Beach and the Black Pond-El Dorado wildlife management area.

"The program is a great visual way to show how the dunes can be restored when the proper protective measures are taken," Thompson said.

Wheeler said while most people understand the need to protect the dunes, several parties held over the July 4 weekend caused damage and left broken bottles and other litter that she's still cleaning up.

"They just trashed the beach, and after I'd talked to them (earlier in the week), too," she said. Wheeler - who has applied to the Peace Corps to work in Latin America after graduation - said her experience has taught her to take a long-range view.

"I've learned that not everyone cares, but that what I do makes a difference, even if I can't see it," she said. "The results of my work won't be visible for a couple of years, but I know it's helping."

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