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Marine Robotics

Westerly's lifeguards are trained to use innovative life-saving devices.

Look! Out in the water! It's a fish! It's a boat! It's...EMILY!

While she's not exactly a caped crusader, EMILY is ready to jump into action at a moment's notice, saving beachgoers from drowning and riptides. Her name stands for Emergency Integrated Lifesaving LanYard — oh, and she's a robot. For the past year, Westerly has owned the only two units outside of California and Oregon. "We have the safest beaches on the East Coast," says Lisa Konicki, executive director of the Greater Westerly-Pawcatuck Area Chamber of Commerce.

EMILY is shorter than five feet and weighs only twenty-five pounds, but don't be deceived by her small stature. Her swimming speed tops out at forty miles per hour — though her practical speed is closer to twenty-five miles per hour — and she can keep up to five people afloat until help arrives. And she's a team player. During a rescue, a human remote-controls an EMILY unit while another lifeguard swims after to bring in the distressed swimmer.

Although the town hasn't yet needed to use the units, lifeguards and first responders are ready for future emergencies. "If it saves one life," Konicki says, "it's worth it."

—CHRISTINE PAVAO



Naturalist Mark Bullinger.

Outdoors Inn

The newly restored Weekapaug Inn focuses on al fresco adventures.

On a bright morning, the Weekapaug Inn's resident naturalist, Mark Bullinger, hoists a birding scope over his shoulder, and we stroll toward the beach. He might be the only hotel naturalist in the country, and guided nature walks are one of the many daily activities for inn guests who want to learn about the area's coastal beaches and wildlife. As part of his job, Bullinger also organizes kayaking, paddleboarding, sailing, biking and stargazing adventures, all included in guest stays.

The Weekapaug Inn was originally built in 1899 close to the beach, but after a hurricane destroyed it in 1938, the former owners, the Buffums, decided to rebuild adjacent to Quonochontaug Pond, where it resides today. Last fall, new owners restored and reopened it as a four-season inn that has already earned Relais and Chateaux status. Yet it also appears on the National Register of Historic Places for Rhode Island because architectural elements and furnishings were historically preserved.

Luckily, its current location protected it from Hurricane Sandy, but the beaches and dunes endured changes. "Because there's no development on our beach, it's not considered damage," says Bullinger.

"It's just doing what it does naturally."

We step onto the sand and I marvel at the brilliant blue surf. In the distance, I see Block Island and Long Island, only twenty miles away by boat. I kick off my shoes and we continue our trek along the shore as Bullinger explains Weekapaug's geological composition. "The land is made up of heavy rocks and stable soil, including gravel and clay," Bullinger says. "It's good for foundations and can stand up to waves." Every so often, he collects small, smooth stones of granite and quartz, which he shows guests how to transform into jewelry.

A sandy, tree-lined path leads us to Quonochontaug Pond. He sets down the scope and we look through the lens for birds frequently spotted in the area: piping plovers, egrets and osprey. Along the edges of the pond, I find scallop shells, the remains of rock crabs, slipper limpets and even a giant horseshoe crab. Bullinger says in late-May, during a full moon, thousands of horseshoe crabs migrate to this pond. Much like their human counterparts, they've chosen the ideal respite. 25 Spray Rock Rd., Westerly, 888-813-7862, weekapauginn.com. —J.C.

For a video tour of the Weekapaug Inn, go to rimonth.ly/july2013