

Pennsylvania's Wildlife Leadership Academy: Teaching conservation

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Mark Wilsey likes to fish on the opening day of trout season and absolutely loves going to Lake Carey in Wyoming County to fish for a variety of bass in the summertime.

But the 15-year-old freshman at Quakertown High School learned more about fish biology and ecology than he thought possible last summer.

Wilsey took part in the annual Wildlife Leadership Academy program conservation camps with the Brookies group, which centered on all things vital about Pennsylvania's state fish, the brook trout.

"We studied their life cycle in a stream by the camp," Wilsey said of Fishing Creek in Clinton County on the property of Seig Conference Center, where the Brookies program was held in July.

"We had instructors come and teach us about trees, plants and animals and how good or bad they were for the health of the stream."

Teaching high school students about invasive plants, species and important structures, like riparian buffers, is part of the Wildlife Leadership Academy's mission not only to help produce the next generation of conservationists, but to help others to realize that we all have a role to perform to keep the Earth healthy.

The Wildlife Leadership Academy is a cooperative initiative of various state agencies and conservation organizations that is coordinated and administered by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education. Its mission is to empower youths to become ambassadors for wildlife conservation to ensure a sustained wildlife legacy for generations.

The initiative began in 2007 and has graduated 165 youths, who have reached out and spread the conservation method through media, exhibitions and public appearances to an estimated 15,000 Pennsylvanians.

The WLA (www.picweb.org) has four camps concentrating on specific animal life. This year's camps will be: Bucktails (white-tailed deer) June 16-18 at the Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntingdon County; Brookies (brook trout) July 7-11 at Seig Conference Center in Clinton County; Drummers (ruffed grouse) July 21-15 at Powdermill Nature Reserve in Westmoreland County; and Ursids (black bears) Aug. 2-8 at Stone Valley Recreation Area, Huntingdon County.

"The WLA taught me many things about streams, plants, animals and ways we as students can make a difference," Wilsey wrote in an essay as part of his outreach effort.

During a phone interview last week, he expanded on that.

"We learned about the habitat of the trout, and how a stream needs to be very shaded and cold for brook trout to be able to spawn," Wilsey said. "We looked at the stream there and we loved how it was a healthy stream, but there

were some areas of it where it wasn't healthy, so we talked about what we could do to improve the stream's health. Then we looked at streams closer to where we live and talked about how we could make them better for brook trout."

Brook trout face many dangers, particularly from man-made waste, and Wilsey wrote eloquently about it in his essay.

"Brook trout are threatened by many human and natural causes," he wrote. "One human cause is acid-mine drainage. Acid-mine drainage is the acidic runoff from old coal mines where small iron deposits oxidize and run into the streams. When there is too much iron runoff the pH of a stream skyrockets. One main problem with pH is that, if it is too high, the fish in the stream will lose the ability to breathe through their gills. Also, when the eggs are laid, the acid in the water can break down the outer 'shell' and kill the trout inside. Acid-mine drainage is a huge problem with brook trout."

The Brookies group also did a lot of team-building exercises and even learned to tie flies and cast with fly rods. For Wilsey, who uses spinning gear, that was a new chapter of fishing.

Students ages 14-17 are encouraged to apply for the camps based on their area of interest.

The WLA is looking for students with a passion for conservation and the outdoors. The organization is also looking for qualified teachers seeking to become mentors for the young conservationists.

For more information or to get an application, go online to <http://www.piceweb.org>.

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