

YOUNG BIRDS



TREE HUGGER AMONG HUNTERS:

MY EXPERIENCE AT THE PENNSYLVANIA WILDLIFE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

BY HOLLY MIRALES

On my first day at the Wildlife Leadership Academy's Gobblers field school, I was beginning to wonder what I'd gotten myself into. The schedule was jampacked and quite frankly, pretty daunting. Getting up at six and going to sleep at eleven-thirty? I wasn't sure if I'd be able to make it through the week without passing out. To add to my anxiety, I felt alienated from the other kids at first, as most of them were hunters and trappers who seemed to know much more about the subjects we were learning than I did. They all had so much in common, but I was just some suburban girl who likes to hike and camp. I wasn't sure I was the right type of person for the camp in those beginning moments.

But as the week went on, I learned that there was no "right type of person" for the Wildlife Leadership Academy. It didn't matter if you were a hunter or a simple nature lover like me, there was a place for you at the field school as long as you were passionate about conservation. At the Academy, we learned about safe and sustainable hunting practices and habitat management. The experience opened my eyes to a world of knowledge I had never known and that I don't believe I would've learned otherwise. Prior to my experience at the field school, all I really knew about hunting was that you shoot animals and that there were seasons. But now I've learned why those seasons exist and how they are determined, along with the fact that hunting plays a huge role in keeping populations in check and helping ecosystems.

Every day at the Wildlife Leadership Academy brought something new to the table for me. From learning how to use

turkey calls to tasting my first venison burger, the plethora of novel experiences was never-ending. But one of my favorite parts of the camp turned out to be getting the chance to interact and befriend people from completely different backgrounds than me. As I've said before, I am a simple nature lover, or as some might say, a tree hugger. There was a bit of culture shock at first when I started to talk to my fellow students at the Academy. They had hunting dogs, lived far from the city, were scarily good at shooting guns, and had, most shockingly, never been to a Wawa. They'd hunted deer, turkeys, game birds, and apparently boars, too. I didn't even know you could hunt boars in the United States. I spend most of my time in nature relaxing and getting away from the asphalt and strip malls of suburbia, whereas most of their time was spent in nature, as many told me because there wasn't much else to do where they were from.

The other students must've thought me insane on the one clear night we had during camp. I was walking with my head craned up, staring up at the millions of stars twinkling above us in the sky and wishing I'd brought my telescope and star map that are seldom used at home. There was nowhere near the wide expanse of stars in the sky back home, if the clouds even let us decide to see them. The students from rural backgrounds got to see this all the time, so they wouldn't understand how magical this was for me. Everyday I hoped for a clear night and I got it, so I refused to look down. That moment looking up at the sky encapsulated the whole experience of camp for me. For me and the other non-hunting, non-rural students, the Wildlife Leadership Academy was a chance to learn about and

experience things we couldn't back home. I never would've learned so much about wild turkeys without this experience and now I can actually explain why there's a gang of wild turkeys in my hometown that likes to aggressively surround people's cars on backroads instead of having to accept them as new local cryptids.

Getting to hear from experts on turkeys and wildlife management at the Wildlife Leadership Academy and having them be my first introduction to these novel concepts allowed me to understand them in a fuller way than if I had simply Googled them, which would've been the only way I'd learn about these topics outside of the camp. The experience at field school left me feeling more knowledgeable about the world than I did before, but also showed me how much more there is out there to learn that I don't even know exists.

Even after my experience at the Wildlife Leadership Academy, I still don't think I will ever hunt. I'm content to be a simple lover of nature and hugger of trees. But I have a newfound appreciation for everything that goes into hunting and its complexities that I had never known before. I discovered hunters and environmentalists can share common interests and goals. I left the field school a little more confident, a little wiser, with a new cast of friends consisting of characters I never imagined I'd meet, and a little happier than when I had arrived. For that alone, I believe the Academy is an experience everyone can benefit from, whether they be a hunter and aspiring worker for the Game Commission, or a simple nature lover like me.

