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Girls volleyball: State College's Leath ready to lead Lady Little Lions

Mark Nale: Afield | Pennsylvania's Wildlife Leadership Academies sustaining legacy for future generations

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Several students at the Pennsylvania Brookies Academy take time out to study a nesting hummingbird.

MARK NALE — For the CDT

As many of you know, the leaders of sportsman's clubs and conservation organizations are aging, as are the ranks of hunters and anglers. Go to almost any such club meeting and you will see a lot of gray hair and shiny, elongated foreheads.

This leaves many of us to ponder just who will carry the conservation torch in years to come.

Thanks to the non-profit Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education, all is not lost. In fact, a bright future just might lie ahead.

Administered by the Institute, Pennsylvania's Wildlife Leadership Academies began in 2007 with a goal of sustaining our wildlife legacy for future generations. Their mission — to develop future leaders by

empowering youth to become ambassadors for wildlife conservation.

Since that time, three different Pennsylvania academies have graduated 165 high-achieving youths from 54 counties across the state, as well as two students from Ohio, one from Maryland, and one student from North Carolina.

Patterned after the Texas Brigades, a successful conservation leadership program in the Lone Star State, each Pennsylvania Wildlife Leadership Academy targets a single species to teach leadership, teamwork and resource stewardship in an intensive week-long field school experience. The Texas programs target bass, deer, quail, waterfowl and ranch ecology, while Pennsylvania's academies have so far centered around white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse and brook trout.

"Of course, it isn't just about deer, grouse or the trout," said academy director Michele Kittell. "We use the kids' initial interest in one species as a way to get them curious about and involved in everything that we have to offer."

Tim Smail, a member of the Pennsylvania Wildlife Leadership Development Committee and retired from the Penn State University faculty, has been actively involved in getting the wildlife academies started. He also serves as a volunteer instructor.

"Back in 2003, we sent our first Pennsylvania kids and adults to the Texas program to learn what it was all about," Smail related. "We began to develop a curriculum, and then in 2007, we partnered with the Pennsylvania Institute of Conservation Education to get our academies off the ground."

The Pennsylvania Bucktails, offered at Juniata College's Raystown Field Station in Huntingdon County, was the first academy program, concentrating on the white-tailed deer. This successful program continued at the field station through 2008 and 2009.

In 2010, the Bucktails Academy moved to the Stone Valley Recreation Center, in northern Huntingdon County. Powdermill Nature Reserve, Carnegie Museum of Natural History's field station in Westmoreland County, hosted the academy's second program about ruffed grouse — Pennsylvania Drummers — that same year.

Both the Drummers and the Bucktails academies continued in 2011, but only Bucktails was offered in 2012.

Thirty-five youth, ranging in ages from 14 to 17 and demonstrating leadership skills, were selected to participate in the two field schools offered this year. The Pennsylvania Bucktails, which has endured since the beginning, was held June 18-22. New this summer was the Pennsylvania Brookies Academy, which focused on our state fish — the brook trout. It was held July 9-13, at the Sieg Conference Center, near Lamar.

Smail noted that the academies prefer to target a cross-section of Pennsylvania's exceptionally-talented youth. "We like to see a good mix of country and city kids, farm and non-farm, girls and boys, as well as hunters and non-hunters," he said.

Two local teens, 15-year-old Samantha Gates of Bellefonte and 14-year-old Alex Clapper of State College attest to that desired diversity. Both girls attended the Bucktails Academy at Stone Valley in June.

"I have a passion for wildlife and especially white-tailed deer," Gates said. "My whole family — both my mom's and dad's side — are hunters, and I'm hooked on hunting, too."

On the other hand, all of this was new to Clapper.

"To be honest, I'd rather sit at the computer or play video games than go outside," Clapper admitted. "Although apprehensive at first, I really enjoyed the Academy. I loved shooting the .22 rifle and 20-gauge shotgun at Scotia Range — it was my first time to ever shoot a gun. The academy made me more mature and a much more outgoing person, so much so that I want to go back next year as an assistant team leader."

According to Kittell, these two girls and the other youths have taken the Academy's mission to heart.

"To date, graduates have conducted 745 conservation education, communication, and service projects, engaged in more than 3,000 contact hours with the public and reached an audience of more than 15,000 Pennsylvania citizens across the commonwealth," Kittell said.

As examples of this outreach, Clapper has made a blog entry about her academy experience, and Gates plans to meet with local Boy Scout troops to discuss the Academy.

"These participants are the next generation to speak for wildlife conservation," Kittell added. What gives me the best feeling about the academies is the individual impact that we are having with each student. It is a life-changing experience that really makes a difference. It is not a one-time thing."

Participants have a high regard for their academy experience.

"I've been to lots of summer camps, but this one was definitely different," Gates said. "I really enjoyed the instructors. They offered a lot more than I expected."

Clapper agreed. "I would highly recommend this to anyone," she said.

The Wildlife Leadership Academy is a cooperative initiative involving state agencies and conservation organizations, administered by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education. Expert instructors at the field school include representatives from Dickinson College, Kutztown University, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, the Pennsylvania State University, Quality Deer Management Association, Trout Unlimited, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and many more.

The Wildlife Leadership Academy will announce 2014 field school offerings and locations on their website (www.PICEweb.org) in early September. Applications will also be available in early September —the submission deadline is March 17, 2014. Interested students may also download the 2014 application at www.PICEweb.org. For more information, email Kittell at mkittell@piceweb.org or call (570) 245-8518.

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