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BY DOYLE DIETZ

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DOYLE DIETZ/SPECIAL PHOTO
Wildlife Leadership Academy instructor Gary Alt, who formerly coordinated the black bear and whitetail deer management programs of the Pennsylvania Game Commission and now lives in California, conducts an evening session at last year's Ursids Field School.

PETERSBURG

It is one thing when prospective students filling a waiting list to attend a conservation camp are filled with anxiety. It's quite another when instructors feel those same emotions as they bide their time until an opening occurs for them to volunteer their service.

That, however, is exactly what has been achieved by the Wildlife Leadership Academy, which is administered by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education, on volunteers waiting to get "the call." Each summer the WLA helps the PICE to realize its mission to connect people, nature and community through a cooperative initiative involving state agencies and conservation organizations.

Four separate five-day sessions dealing with a specific wildlife species found in Pennsylvania is the format of each WLA school for students ages 14-17. There are tentative plans to add a fifth school focusing on a species to be determined.

This year the Pennsylvania Bucktails Field School focusing on whitetail deer is Tuesday-Saturday, June 14-18, at Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntingdon County. The Pennsylvania Brookies Field School focusing on trout is Sunday-Thursday, July 10-14, at Sieg Conference Center in Clinton County; the Pennsylvania Drummer Field School focusing on ruffed grouse is Tuesday-Saturday, July 19-23, at Powdermill Nature Reserve in Westmoreland County; and the Pennsylvania Ursids Field School focusing on black bear is Tuesday-Saturday, Aug. 2-6, at Stone Valley Recreation Area.

Last year the curriculum of the WLA was expanded by adding the school on black bears that opened the door for more volunteers to speak on a variety of topics. Longtime friend and a past president of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association Charlie Burchfield was scheduled to present a program on

outdoors media coverage, but at the 11th hour was called away on an assignment.

As the backup to an award-winning writer and broadcaster with the credibility of Burchfield it resulted in one of my most memorable outdoors experiences of 2015. Much to my surprise, each of four teams of five students, who ranged between freshmen to seniors at their individual high schools, came to their session prepared with specific questions.

Each team rotated between the four separate sessions, all of which ran over schedule as the instructors attempted to answer the variety of questions asked. In fact, there was some one-on-one time with several students following the sessions, delaying the start of a presentation by biologist Gary Alt, the former head of the Pennsylvania Game Commission management programs for black bear and deer who traveled from his home in California to be a counselor at the camp.

From a personal standpoint it was disappointing to see that no student from Northumberland or Schuylkill counties attended the Ursids Field School, but Berks County was represented by Conrad Weiser senior Rachel Rathman. There is still time to apply for any of this year's camps, and the main qualification is that a student has demonstrated an interest in wildlife and/or fisheries conservation.

Applicants may be nominated by an adult who knows them well, but is not a relative, and applications can be downloaded from the PICE website at www.pice.org. Accepted nominees will become Certified Conservation Ambassadors upon completion of their WLA field school, returning home having gained extensive knowledge about wildlife and fisheries conservation, leadership experience and communication skills.

Headquartered in Lewisburg, PICE director Michele Kittell said the WLA is a year-round program that focuses on wildlife and fisheries conservation and leadership development. From its formation in 2002 its mission is to empower youth to become ambassadors for wildlife conservation in order to ensure a sustained wildlife legacy for future generations.

"In addition to the five-day residential field school experience that focuses on a fish or wildlife species as a springboard for exploring biology, habitat, and conservation issues, youth also develop leadership skills engaging in team-building activities, educational presentations and mock 'town hall' meetings on current topics," Kittell said. "These activities help students develop leadership skills and considerable knowledge about conservation issues specific to the theme of the WLA program they attended."

Kittell said that anyone with specific questions about the WLA can email her at mkittell@picweb.org or call (570) 245-8518 or contact WLA program coordinator Katie Cassidy at kcassidy@picweb.org or (570) 939-5109.

(Dietz is outdoors editor)

