

The Next Generation

by Molly Diefenbach

It was no surprise to some of my friends, that because of my love for the outdoors and hunting, I would not be going to the beach or Disneyland like so many of my peers. Instead, I went to a week-long camp in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania that focused on grouse, grouse hunting, and managing grouse habitat. Attending the Wildlife Leadership Academy was the best decision I made this summer.

My earliest memories of hunting are of tottering alongside my father on a deer hunt, a pink .22 for my seventh birthday, and finally, the day I turned twelve and could go on my first hunt with a gun slung over my shoulder. It wasn't until just recently, however, that I began to see grouse hunting as more than screaming for your bird dog and watching, helplessly, from a thicket of thorns as the only grouse that day flushed 80 yards ahead of you.

You do not have to be hunter or desire a career in a wildlife field to have fun and learn at the Wildlife Leadership Academy (WLA). As long as you are 14 to 17 years old, WLA could be the perfect summer opportunity, with a variety of activities including doing necropsies to learn about the anatomy of grouse, participating in team building challenges, and engaging in discussions with a range of different instructors from wildlife biologists and researchers to nature photographers. The grouse camp, or PA Drummers, is not even the only camp offered. Students have the choice between the grouse camp or PA Bucktails, a similar camp but with a focus on Pennsylvania's white-tailed deer. If you know someone 14-17 years old, I would encourage you to talk to them about enrolling in this program.

After returning from the five day camp, and in true fashion, the first question out of my parents' mouth was "Did I have fun?" The answer to that question was easy, "Yes!" But their second question took a lot more thought, "What was my favorite part?" Well, there was the trip to the shooting range, the bird dog demonstration, learning tricks and tips about photography, a trip to a bird-banding field station, competing with the other teams for a chance to go on a guided grouse hunt in the fall, and making new friends. So I had to tell Mom and Dad that I would have to get back to them on that one if they wanted a short answer.

Five days out of your next summer break from school could be the few days you actually remember about that summer, so think about applying to the Wildlife Leadership Academy. If you do not meet the age requirements, encourage someone who does. It's time for the next generation to step up and keep the traditions and memories of hunting and the outdoors alive, which can only be accomplished with knowledge and understanding of wildlife management.

You can learn more about the PA Drummers and PA

Bucktails programs at www.piceweb.org. 



Molly dissecting a grouse

NOTE: *The Conservation Officers of Pennsylvania Association (COPA) was approached Last year at the Eastern Sports Show in Harrisburg by Michele Kittel who is the program coordinator for the Wildlife Leadership Academy (WLA). Ms. Kittel requested that COPA consider getting involved with the WLA. The Academy holds two field workshops each summer for interested students ages 14 to 17. Participants must file an application with WLA and pay a monetary fee in order to take part in a one week camp devoted to learning about Pennsylvania's natural resources. This year's programs were an in-depth study of the ruffed grouse and related subjects in the southwest region of the state or a week-long seminar similarly focusing on the white-tailed deer in northeastern Pennsylvania. COPA responded by offering a two hundred dollar scholarship to a deserving student picked by WLA. That scholarship went to Ms. Molly Diefenbach of Bellefonte, PA. On behalf of its membership, COPA welcomes such opportunities to provide financial support toward worthwhile outdoor educational programs such as WLA. We certainly encourage our readership to make us aware of similar meaningful outdoor learning programs designed for Pennsylvania's youth. Likewise, we want to take this opportunity to thank Molly for sharing her experience with our readers.*