

Junior RGS



WILDLIFE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

By JACKIE ROSENBERGER Photos COURTESY OF WILDLIFE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

What is the best thing you can give a child? No, the answer is not a cell phone or a computer or a car. *It is an education.* Conservationist Baba Dioum said, “In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we have been taught.”



The Wildlife Leadership Academy (WLA) is a driving force in the world of conservation, and it fulfills its mission, to empower students to *become ambassadors for wildlife conservation*, by providing them with an extensive knowledge about wildlife, equipping them with necessary leadership skills and planting within them seeds of inspiration.

The Wildlife Leadership Academy is a program for students ages 14 to 17 who have an interest in biology, ecology and conservation and who are highly motivated to serve as leaders in their home communities. The Academy is facilitated by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education, which hosts week-long field schools during the summer. In the summer, PA Bucktails (white-tailed deer focus), PA Brookies (brook trout focus), and PA Drummers (ruffed grouse focus) will be offered. Field schools focus on a

single species, which act as springboards in order to teach concepts in biology, habitat management and conservation.

Three years ago, at age 15, I attended PA Drummers, eager to learn about conservation through an ornithological point of view. I had the pleasure of sitting through classes and field activities taught by experts from many organizations and agencies, such as the Ruffed Grouse Society, Pennsylvania Game Commission, Audubon Society, Penn State University and many more. Among these activities were a necropsy, plant collection and habitat evaluation. The necropsy was led by PA Game Commission wildlife veterinarian Walt Cottrell, who provided us with a plethora of information about the internal and external anatomy of the ruffed grouse.

Last summer I happened upon a road-killed grouse along a back road in northern Pennsylvania. Armed with the

knowledge I acquired from Dr. Cottrell, I determined that the bird was an adult male, judging by the smooth round edges on the outer primary feathers and the presence of two white spots on its rump feathers. It also had a taste for berries and slugs, both of which were present in its crop.

Habitat evaluations and plant identification go hand-in-hand, since grouse utilize over 300 species of plants for food and cover. Ruffed Grouse Society Regional Wildlife Biologist Dr. Linda Ordway emphasized the importance of early successional habitat when managing for birds such as grouse and woodcock. At first, I had difficulty accepting that clear cuts and prescribed burns could actually benefit wildlife and the environment in which they live. But, now, as I drive through woody landscapes, I view the land through a conservationist's eye. I quickly classify habitats according to their

value to species such as ruffed grouse. In the field, we evaluated three different plots of land and debated which of these would better suit grouse, on the basis of food, cover and possible drumming sites. To aid in our understanding of habitat, we learned to identify many species of plants that are important to grouse. Now I possess an adequate knowledge of plant identification, which helps me better understand the environment around me.

To supplement our scientific knowledge, we learned the role that hunting plays in wildlife management and spent an entire afternoon shooting clay birds on a range. Firing a shotgun was intimidating at my young age, but with encouragement from my fellow students, I decided to give it a try. Now, shooting is a hobby of mine and I enjoy using my Remington 870 12-gauge to turkey hunt.

A local trainer provided us with a bird dog demonstration. After some of my fellow students hid young pheasants in a nearby field, we observed the dogs track and point at the birds' hiding places. It was absolutely phenomenal watching the dogs locate the pheasants, and afterwards, the trainer described the challenging process of successfully training the pups.

The PA Drummers field school was one of the most fun and inspiring weeks of my life. But, the unique aspect of the WLA which makes it a driving force in the world of conservation, is the fact that it is not a one-time program. The Academy focuses on developing young leaders who feel motivated to share their knowledge and experiences with the community. Throughout the year following field school, students are expected to complete at least three outreach projects which fall under the categories: Education, Service, Media, and Creative Arts.

Since its creation in 2007, WLA has graduated 165 high achieving youths who have reached over 15,000 people across Pennsylvania. These graduates have conducted 745 projects in the areas of conservation education, community service, and media communication, putting forth 3,300 hours of outreach activities. Based upon these statistics, WLA has a significant influence, not only on students who attend field school, but on communities throughout Pennsylvania and beyond.

Personally, the Academy has served as a source of inspiration, motivation, and assurance. Using the skills I acquired at field school, I have given presentations, manned trifold displays, authored articles for local and state-wide publications, and assisted wildlife biologists with their research. Two years ago, I had the



opportunity to assist Dr. Ordiway with the Ruffed Grouse Society booth at the Harrisburg Eastern Sports and Outdoor Show. I displayed my trifold that I had constructed at field school and spoke with visitors about aging and sexing ruffed grouse.

The WLA has also helped to verify my career interest of becoming a wildlife biologist. My experience at the Sportsman's Show helped me to understand the importance of strong communication skills in the field of wildlife biology, as Dr. Ordiway clearly communicated to visitors the mission and goals of the Ruffed Grouse Society. These experiences were very enjoyable, and I aspire to someday fill the shoes of the great individuals with whom I was volunteering.

The Academy also introduced me to the sport of hunting, and now, it has since grown into a lifelong passion. Hunting has brought me even closer to wildlife and the natural world and has taught me many life lessons. My passion for hunting has transformed me into a more effective conservation ambassador and has enabled me to better connect with local conservation organizations.

The WLA is the best conservation education program of its kind. It relays the conservation message not only to the students but also to the community. The Academy has no intentions of letting up and thanks to many organizations, like the Ruffed Grouse Society, who support WLA's initiative, the program will remain for many years to come, training and inspiring the next generation of conservation ambassadors. ♦

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