My experience started in the Spring of 2014 where I saw the Wildlife Leadership Academy booth at the eastern chapter of the Wild Sheep Foundation convention. The Pennsylvania Drummers field school piqued my interest because as a young hunter, I realize how very important it is to conserve all species for future generations, and I knew the Academy would give me the opportunity to learn more about my interest in conservation.

When my parents and I first arrived, just like any 15-year-old boy, I was just a touch nervous. After introductions, I knew we were in for long but fun-filled days. The first day, I realized that this was in fact a school, however unlike most of my school lectures, I was interested in what was being taught. These sessions were all about grouse - we learned what grouse eat, how to tell the difference between a male and female, and even when hunting, how to identify the best grouse habitat.

As a hands-on-learner, this field school was perfect for me. We did interactive activities including dissecting grouse and travelling to the field to look for birds in early successional habitat. During one of those adventures we actually flushed a woodcock! Another hands-on-activity included going afield to identify what grouse may be eating around us from plants to insects. We also visited a bird-banding station that was part of the facility. At this banding station, we saw how they capture birds of all species, band them, and then release them hoping to recapture them at another location and learn more about their migration patterns.

In addition to learning about grouse, we participated in team-building and leadership activities. One of these involved everyone being blindfolded, everyone grabbed a long rope and the person in front of you had to communicate the directions to the person behind them, and so on in order to move forward. This was a good leadership activity - if everyone tried to speak at once, it would not properly work. We learned to listen and communicate with each other. We had to learn how to keep order and communicate properly. One of my very favorite parts of the school was the sporting clays shoot, and even though I shoot competitive trap, shooting with such a great group of people was so much fun!

A highlight of this school was all of the wonderful people - all of the teachers and instructors were so helpful and willing to answer any questions. We met many people who are involved with the Ruffed Grouse Society. I was particularly awed to hear the President John Eichinger talk to us about his life experiences around a simple campfire. I was excited because I was able to relate to him and his past experiences in conservation. We also had the opportunity to talk and interact with the RGS Wildlife Biologist Dr. Linda Ordiway and Manager of Public Education Ron Burkert who taught us about grouse habitat and ecology. Hearing from these professionals was helpful because before field school, I was still not sure what I wanted to study in college. Now, I am planning on going to college to become a wildlife biologist.

This PA Drummers field school was a great way to spend part of my summer. Conservation is so important to me and my family. I believe that to fully understand conservation as a whole you must be involved in it, and I also believe that if it wasn’t for conservation organizations like the Ruffed Grouse Society, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Wild Sheep Foundation and others, we wouldn’t have the abundant wildlife we do today. I think with the support of these conservation organizations and programs like the Wildlife Leadership Academy, we are raising the next generation of conservationists including myself.

The mission of the Wildlife Leadership Academy is to empower youth to become ambassadors for wildlife conservation in order to ensure a sustained wildlife legacy for future generations. The Academy offers high-achieving youth, ages 14-17, a comprehensive study of specific wildlife species, including classroom and field-based, hands-on education. Led by experts, including biologists and educators from across the state and beyond, the program also engages participants in team work, friendly competition, and an awareness of their natural world. Applications for the 2015 summer field schools including PA Drummers are available January 1, 2015; the submission deadline is April 1, 2015. Interested students may download the 2015 application at www.PICEweb.org. For more information, contact Wildlife Leadership Academy Director Michele Kittell at mkittell@piceweb.org or (570)245-8518.