Wildlife Leadership Academy teaches students about natural environment

By CARA MORGUNIGUT

When Kayley Dillon, of Bloomsburg, was 14, she heard about the Wildlife Leadership Academy to become a wildlife ambassador. Between her freshman and sophomore years in high school last June, Dillon attended a camp on white-tailed deer studies. “They’ve got different camps with different species and different focuses. My camp focused on white-tailed deer. That was my first camp, and I got into what I really wanted to do for my first time through. You go to specifique what you want to do in this community,” she said.

Since 2007, the Wildlife Leadership Academy has been giving students the opportunity to have hands-on experience with wildlife conservation. The Academy is a cooperative initiative of various agencies and conservation organizations. It is coordinated and administered by the Pennsylvania Institute for Conservation Education, a non-profit organization.

The Academy begins with an intensive, five-day residential field school that focuses on a fish or wildlife species as a springboard for explaining biology, habitat and conservation issues. Youth also develop leadership skills through team-building activities, educational presentations and mock “town hall” meetings on current topics. The academy accepts youth ages 14-17 and adults will participate alongside the students in five-day and five-night programs.

“I would say the No. 1 thing is that this is a really good camp for kids that are interested in nature or conservation. The students learn the importance of each component of habitat — plants that are important to their focus species and how they interact. Plants and animals are dependent on one another,” said Katie Cosenza, program and outreach coordinator for the Wildlife Leadership Academy.

Students stay at the camp four days and five nights, all while learning about their specific species and how it fits into the environment. “While teaching students about the species, they also broaden their knowledge of the environment, habitat, nutrition and everything there is to know about their species,” Cosenza said.

The main focus is wildlife conservation. Students are introduced to specialists in the field to see job opportunities in wildlife and science fields, and they are introduced to specialists in the field to see how they can apply to their future careers. “We offer a black bear field school,” said a news release from the Academy. “This is the first year the academy will offer a black bear field school.”

“Of course you learn about the scientific aspects of conservation, but it’s also about learning about the importance of each component of habitat and how it fits into the environment. How one component leaves, the black circle leaves, they are walking back to our car when we came upon a ghostly looking tree,” Dillon said.

Seeing a sycamore tree in either subdued light or fog, as it drifts across the land is eerie. Since there was just enough light for us to see the tree but not enough to take a picture, we returned the next day to take photographs. Through the years, I often have called the sycamore “a ghost tree” and, on that evening, this sycamore tree appeared as one.

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The mission of the Pennsylvania Game Commission’s Conserva- tion Education is an important part of the mission. With the ending of the environmental education programs at PPL, Montour Preserve at the end of last year, we were reminded of the unique role we have in providing education on wildlife, their habits and why they are important to the public. The first organized bird walk I ever attended was at the preserve and led to my deeper involvement in the birding community.

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The Rural Leadership Academy accepts youth ages 14-17 as well as adults, who serve as mentors and participate alongside students.

The deadline for applications is April 1. Students may select one of four field sites, and their dates and locations are:

- Pennsylvania Bucktails – focus on white-tailed deer, June 16-20 at Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntington County.
- Pennsylvania Brookies – focus on brook trout and coldwater conservation focus, July 7-11 at Sgt. Career Center in Clinton County.
- Pennsylvania Drummers – focus on ruffed grouse, July 21-25 at Powderville Nature Reserve in Montour County.

For more information on the camp and how to apply, visit www.eldercare.pennsylvania.gov/Human_Science/Institute_for_Conservation_Education_Director_Michael_Killed/Pages/default.aspx or call Program Coordinator Katie Cassidy at kcasidy@pcwsc.edu or 717-935-5005, or go to facebook.com/wildlifeleadershipacademy.

This pine auklet was photographed on Feb. 14 in the Elk State Forest.

We need more eyes to count the common birds, such as robins and finches, that are found during our field days, said Dana Williams, director of the Pennsylvania Audubon. She mentioned the importance of calling in at the top of each day, adding that the birds are often not seen until they're on the ground beneath the tree line.

This pine siskin was photographed on Feb. 14 in the Elk State Forest.

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