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Field schools help turn youth into wildlife ambassadors



Submitted

Students at last year's Pennsylvania Brookies camp search a stream for bug life.



By **Bob Frye**

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It was a love of water that drew Helen Fielding to Clinton County.

The 17-year-old from Sewickley Heights never has been able to go on a hike without wanting to explore the nearest stream for fish, salamanders, crayfish and bugs. So when her mother told her about "Pennsylvania Brookies," a five-day camp focused on brook trout and their habitats, she was ready.

Last July, she went. Almost a year later, she still gets excited about it.

She collected, identified and studied macroinvertebrates. She tested water quality. She learned to fly fish. She debated fish management, the environmental impacts of industry and more in mock "town hall" meetings.

And she even slept a little.

Four summer schools ready for applications

Wildlife Leadership Academy is accepting applications from students ages 14-17 and teachers interested in attending one of its four field schools.

Applications can be downloaded at PICEweb.org.

The deadline for returning them is April 1.

The times and locations of this year's field schools are: Pennsylvania Bucktails, with a white-tailed deer focus June 16-20 at Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntingdon County; Pennsylvania Brookies, with its emphasis on brook trout and coldwater conservation July 7-11 at Sieg Conference Center in Clinton County; Pennsylvania Drummers, focusing on

Days at Brookies usually started at 6 a.m. or thereabouts and continued until lights out at 11 or 11:30 p.m.

After it all, she came home a changed person.

"If you really care about nature and conservation, it really makes you feel empowered," Fielding said. "I learned so much more about streams, so I could go out and talk to people about it. And I guess I learned how much we can do as individuals, too."

That's the goal of Brookies and three other camps like it — Bucktails, Drummers and, new this year, Ursids — that focus on white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse and black bears, respectively.

Katie Cassidy, program and outreach coordinator for the Wildlife Leadership Academy, which sponsors the schools, says they are designed to create "conservation ambassadors" among kids 14-17 years old.

Students spend five days at camp learning from some of the top biologists and experts in the state, and occasionally the country, and have fun doing it, she said. But ultimately, she added, the hope is that they will take what they learned to their home communities and share it.

"We try to give them life skills that will make it possible for them to go home and feel comfortable talking to adults, talking to their peers and just being active and involved," Cassidy said.

They do, too. Buckstails was the Academy's first camp. It started in 2007. Drummers followed in 2011, Brookies in 2013 and Ursids this year. All told, about 200 students have gone through the camps.

They have done a collective 932 outreach programs, reaching an audience of more than 20,000 people, Cassidy said.

That's important, said Christine O'Lare of Franklin Park Borough. A ninth-grade science teacher at West Mifflin, she attended the Drummers camp in Rector as an adult leader, shepherding a team of teenage girls as they learned about ruffed grouse.

Some came from an outdoors background, she said. One girl was even a hunter. Others had an interest in nature, but not quite the same amount of time spent afield.

All learned about grouse habitat needs and biology, got to band birds, learned to estimate bird populations, and did some radio telemetry work. They all got to shoot sporting clays, too.

"Some of the girls were a little leery of that, shooting a shotgun. But we got them all to try it," O'Lare said.

Most importantly, they learned how nature is interconnected and how making choices about wildlife, habitat and more often is complex, she said.

"They got to see some real science, which is nice. I think a lot of kids maybe don't like science because all they see of it is sitting in a classroom. But this was science in action," she said.

Students and teachers who attend the camps learn from one another, too. Each school can accommodate 20 students at a time, along with a four "graduates" who return as team leaders and a handful of educators, Cassidy said. They typically come from all corners of the state.

That is something Fielding found especially valuable.

"It was very encouraging, being around a lot of people with the same interests and same concerns, some of them your own age," Fielding said.

Registration for this year's schools is underway — applications are due April 1 — and, if history holds, all of the available slots will be filled.

For some, the schools will help change the direction of their lives. Luke Benzinger of North Huntingdon attended Buckstails a few years ago then went to Drummers as a team leader last summer.

Those experiences helped shape his goals as he's going to start college in the fall to study fish and wildlife management.

"My whole life changed since attending the Wildlife Leadership Academy, where I talked to so many knowledgeable adults who wanted to spend time with other teenagers that were there with me. These adults opened my eyes to what I could do to teach everyone else in the world about the passion I have for the

ruffed grouse July 21-25 at Powdermill Nature Reserve in Westmoreland County; and Pennsylvania Ursids, which will center on black bears, Aug. 2-6 at Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntingdon County.

Teachers who attend the schools can receive college credits and/or 40 ACT credits.

More information also can be found at facebook.com/wildlifeleadershipacademy.



outdoors,” Benzinger said.

Fielding isn't sure what she wants to do with her future yet, long-term anyway. But she knows where she wants to be this summer. She hopes to attend the Bucktails camp and learn about deer.

There may or may not be water nearby, but she'll be happy either way.

“I love the woods as well as the streams,” she said.

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