

Somerset

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Somerset youth takes part in Wildlife academy

By MATT CHURELLA Daily American Correspondent Aug 13, 2018 Updated Aug 13, 2018



Members of team "Brace Yourself" are, from left, front row: Hailee Ekis, Hannah Gaibor, Caroline Vancura and Faryn Steckiel; back row: Mary Joe Phillips, Gracie Albright and Emma Olney. Submitted photo

In its 12th summer of leadership and outreach, the Wildlife Leadership Academy held a series of five field schools for 100 Pennsylvania teenagers ages 14 to 17. Among those selected to participate was Hannah Gaibor, 16, of Somerset, who participated in the academy's Pennsylvania Drummers field school.

The field school focused on the ruffed grouse — Pennsylvania's state bird — and was held July 17-21 at the Stone Valley Recreation Area in Huntingdon County. The male ruffed grouse is known for rapidly beating its wings in the air, creating a drum-like sound.

Katie Cassidy, academy program and outreach coordinator, said people must be nominated to apply for an application, which is mailed to those selected. Cassidy said applicants are required to write three essays about their extracurricular activities, which is a factor she considers when deciding whose application to accept.

About 140 applications were submitted.

Gaibor said she asked her 4-H club leader to nominate her for an application. She said that being a 4-H'er motivated her to put herself out more and look for opportunities like the academy.

"I've always loved animals, and so when I saw it, I really was interested in the conversation part," she said. "If I can help the environment, then I'll be able to help with wildlife."

Gaibor, who lives in the Somerset Area School District but is home-schooled, said the academy benefits Pennsylvania's youth.

"I think that youth could really benefit from this because it really does teach you how to put yourself out there and learn all the different activities and reach out to people and be able to communicate with them better," Gaibor said. "I think it really does help with teaching people who are more introverted. There are different interests; it's not only one thing. They actually covered a lot, and I think it can help people find what they're interested in."

She said the five-day field school she attended was a great experience for her, too.

"Actually, the first day we were there, we had 10 hours of lectures. That is a long day, but it was actually fun because we got to go there, and they had a lot of different aspects that I wouldn't have thought of," she said. "We actually got to meet with a lot of conservation people. They took us into the woods and taught us how to identify different trees, and they were able to show us kind of what was out there."

The group was also visited by a veterinarian and a photographer.

"He was able to show us a little bit more about the internal anatomy and external anatomy," she said. "We had a photographer come in and he showed how to take nature photos. We had someone come in and speak to us about nature journaling. So, we all got a different aspect and it wasn't just about the ruffed grouse."

Heading into her junior year this fall, Gaibor said she plans to pursue her education in wildlife studies.

“I would like to become a wildlife veterinarian, so I’d like to be able to work with the wildlife and with that, it would be adding in different environmental aspects and working with different people,” she said. “Right now, I’m working on gaining those assets and learning with all different people because wildlife doesn’t cover just one animal — it’s a whole bunch.”

Cassidy said academy participants must sign an agreement to commit to a year’s worth of outreach after field school. She said participants keep a record book, which she scores after it’s submitted to her and uses those scores to determine who is invited back to the academy to become a peer mentor and work other paid positions.

Cassidy said participants are “in the running for college scholarships” if they return to the academy, a nonprofit initiative involving state agencies and conservation organizations. The academy is designed to take participants from high school into college and earn them a career, she added.

Gaibor said she cherishes a memory from the field school’s final night.

“The last night we were there, we actually had these trifold display boards we were working on. It was actually really different to me. Normally, I’m able to just work on my project and that’s my project. But one thing they focused on was building a team and interacting with others,” Gaibor said. “So, we actually had it that — when I finished my board — I went and helped other people.

“We all just kept going around, and we all helped each other, and it was really different from anything I’ve ever experienced because you really got to see teamwork put into play.”