



## MY EXPERIENCE *at the* WILDLIFE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

by EMMA OLNEY

This past July, I enjoyed the wonderful experience of attending the Wildlife Leadership Academy's Drummers Field School in Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania. The Drummers Field School is one of five field schools available to select youth, ages 14–17, through the Wildlife Leadership Academy. Each school (or camp) focuses on a particular species of wildlife or fish species, its habitat,

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and connection with other species. There are five field schools: Bucktails (white-tailed deer), Bass (bass), Brookies (brook trout), Drummers (ruffed grouse) and Gobblers (wild turkey).

When I arrived at Stone Valley Recreation Area in mid-July, I had little to no idea of what I was getting into. While I knew that the camp would be geared towards learning about the ruffed grouse and improving leadership skills, I did not know exactly what activities I would complete or what people I would meet. A mixture of nervousness and excitement coursed through my veins during that first afternoon, when, after some icebreaker activities, we jumped straight into informational PowerPoints.

After getting to know everyone on my team, I quickly formed a strong bond with them over our love for school and our passion for the environment. Looking up at the bunk bed above me from my sleeping bag that night, I knew, comfortingly, that Stone Valley Recreation Area would soon feel like home. Throughout the course of that week, we flew through sessions with experienced wildlife biologists and foresters at a breakneck speed, covering everything

from how the ruffed grouse's scientific name, *Bonasa umbellus*, refers to its umbrella-shaped feather ruff to the fact that a lack of young forests is one of Pennsylvania's most pressing environmental issues.

We often ventured into surrounding forests to learn more about forest management and its importance to a variety of species. I also participated in a mock debate on the ethics of pipelines in communities; dissected grouse, woodcock, and owls; and created an informational tri-fold display and PowerPoint presentation on the ruffed grouse, all while connecting to the other students, volunteers, and staff at the Drummers Field School.

Never before have I felt such a kinship with my peers: driven, academic, adventurous, and friendly teenagers, who made an excellent group of friends that I am still in touch with today. One of the revelations that has struck me is how much the knowledge I've gained at this camp now influences my opinions on important environmental matters.

For example, before attending the academy, I was very much against hunting. I had never seen anyone in my circle of family and friends do it, let alone participate in the sport myself. I hated the idea of killing



The Ruffed Grouse is nicknamed the drummer because of the noise the male grouse makes with his wings to attract female grouse to his territory. The male grouse rapidly beats his wings against the air, making a drumming noise. A male may drum from the same spot, using the same log or stump for several years.



animals, and besides, I thought, ...”doesn’t hunting hurt the environment?”

When I arrived at the camp, I came to realize how much hunting can actually help the environment. I learned that hunting can help regulate population sizes to keep the ecosystem in balance, something that

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***–Emma Olney***

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Pennsylvania very much needs. Although I may not hunt personally, I have a newfound appreciation and respect for the sport and its positive impact on the environment.

The Wildlife Leadership Academy instilled in me many qualities that I cherish—an increased passion for the environment, a greater interest in leadership, and a new appreciation for different perspectives, to name a few. I have also grown through the outreach work I have completed in my school and community: displaying my tri-fold board on the ruffed grouse and its forest habitat in my school’s library and writing for the Wildlife Leadership Academy’s Next Generation Blog as a youth correspondent. As for the future? I hope to major in environmental studies in college to work towards a better environment—both for humans and for the ruffed grouse!

THE WILDLIFE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY (WLA) is a Pennsylvania-based, year-round program for high school-aged youth that begins with rigorous summer field schools that focus on wildlife/fisheries biology and conservation, as well as leadership skills development. After the camp’s completion, students return to their communities and engage in outreach—environmental work and education, that put them on the path to becoming certified Conservation Ambassadors. Continued support is offered to WLA alumni to prepare them for success in their professional lives. Advanced educational training on conservation themes and a one-year leadership and professional development program serve the alumni’s needs as they grow from high school to college to workplace. For more information on the Wildlife Leadership Academy, call 570-245-8518 or visit [wildlifeleadershipacademy.org](http://wildlifeleadershipacademy.org).