

# Butler County Natural Resources Youth Camp Teaches Environmental Lessons for Past Twelve Years

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For twelve years, the FPC has offered this “hands-on” camp for area sixth-grade students without charging the students any fees.

The Natural Resources Youth Camp gives kids the opportunity to learn more about our forest environment and how it relates to Alabama’s economy, as well as the

**S**pending three days and two nights in the deep woods of Butler County is not the typical way most kids spend part of their summer vacation. However, for 26 students from across Butler County, that’s exactly what they did. Interested sixth grade students from across the county submitted applications to their school. Science teachers, guidance counselors, and principals then selected the students who would represent their respective schools by attending the youth camp. Students chosen to attend the camp are selected based on their overall performance during the school year, not solely on grades. These students are then recognized at their respective school’s honor banquet, awards night, or academic celebration.

Selected students spend three days and two nights at Mussel Creek Hunting Camp, a rustic cabin located on private property in north Butler County. The Butler County Forestry Planning Committee (FPC) sponsors the Natural Resources Youth Camp with tremendous support from the forest community, local businesses, and interested individuals.

important role it plays in our everyday lives. Campers leave the amenities of home behind to take part in the camp, as there are no televisions, telephones, or radios. The camp offers students something to do from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.— and often later if they’re the last to get a shower.

The camp begins with students being given their very own compass and then a “crash course” on how to use it. They are also taught how to determine distance with pacing. The students are then broken into groups, with representation from each of the four schools in the county. These groups compete in an orienteering course that stretches across open land and wooden terrain. Of course, snake leggings are not an option; they are a requirement. This activity requires the students to work together individually and as a group

in order to complete the course. Students are required to compete at least one leg of the course alone, without any assistance from their team. Awards are given at the end of camp to the group that can complete the course in the fastest time with the most correctly-located points.

While some students are learning about the orienteering course, others are learning about power line safety from Jason Settle, Engineering Supervisor with Pioneer Electric. Still others are learning about home fire safety from the Greenville Fire Department and that department’s smoke trailer. These two activities work in conjunction with the orienteering exercise to ensure that students have a busy first morning.

After a hearty lunch, the students are treated to Project Learning Tree activities entitled “Tree Identification” and “A Nature’s Journal.” Chris Irwin, Education Coordinator with the Alabama Forestry Association, teaches these activities to the students and even awards prizes to the three students that correctly identify the most trees.

Beth Chastain and Jimmy Massey of the Butler County Natural Resources Conservation Service teach students

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# Youth Camp

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about soil and water conservation with an activity entitled “A Water Gun Runoff.” This activity demonstrates how different land covers can affect soil movement and how the soil movement could eventually impact creek sedimentation. Students follow up this activity the next day with a chance to explore and learn what really lives in a local creek with Mark Sport from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. The students take creek samples using nets, and look at the samples through a microscope to make an evaluation of the creek’s overall condition. Once the condition is determined, the students have time to explore, play, and swim in Mussel Creek.

The kids also learn how to identify different wildlife

tracks with Mike Older of the Alabama Forestry Commission’s Covington County office. Mr. Mike uses the Project Wild activity “Making Tracks” to introduce students to the different types of tracks made by Alabama wildlife. If making tracks isn’t enough, students also learn how to identify different types of wildlife habitat and what it takes to improve the wildlife on their property with Michelle Isenberg, Wildlife Biologist/Products Specialist with BASF.

While there is still some daylight, Heather Wierzbicki, Project Forester with MeadWestvaco, takes the students on a ride on the Project Learning Tree activity, “A Tree Factory.” This activity demon-



strates to the students what is really going on inside the tree.

After a dinner of fried catfish and some “fixin’s” of a Cajun Low Country boil, the students learn about basic first-aid and safety from Chad Phillips, EMS



Coordinator with the Greenville Fire Department. The campers are taught about snake and spider bites, and the “how to’s” of correct bandage application. Luckily so far, there has been no need for an actual hands-on application of what they learn in first-aid! After some really interesting stories and photographs

by Mr. Chad, the kids get serious about hunter ethics and firearms handling and safety from James Altieri and Tommy Atkins with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

The second day starts off with an early morning walk along the dirt road with Charlie Kennedy, President of the Alabama Ornithological Society.

Mr. Charlie, as he is affectionately called, explores the woods of Alabama with the students, looking for a variety of birds both large and small. Next, the students are treated to “A Cooperative Environment” with Jim Stiles. In this presentation, sponsored by both the Alabama Electric Cooperative and Pioneer Electric Cooperative, the students are given a hands-on, up-close encounter with some of Alabama’s local inhabitants. Pine snakes, king snakes, tree frogs, toads, and legless lizards are just a few of the “creatures” that the kids get to touch and hold, if they dare. Even some of the adults opt out of holding a snake!

After spending some one-on-one time with Alabama’s reptiles, the campers are treated to some local Indian history by Charlie Clark, Executive Director of the Crenshaw County Farm Service Agency.



He shares some stories and artifacts he has collected from years of studying the Native American culture.

This year, in addition to time spent on Indian history, Chuck Simon and Neil Faulkenberry introduced the students to a little Alabama history with their “1800s Cow Camp Living History” presentation.

Each night, well after dark, the students are loaded onto the FPC’s tour trailer and driven through the woods of South Alabama. While looking for nightlife and taking time to call up some bard owls, we were lucky enough this year to call up a pair of owls that perched on a limb just above the trailer.

The third day at camp is spent learning to shoot skeet, black powder, .22 rifles, and archery. For some of the students, this is their first time ever shooting a firearm or pulling a bow. And for others, this is their opportunity to show everyone how good they really are, or *think* they are. For the past twelve years, the girl campers have always given the boys a run for the top shooter. Girls, as a general rule, listen to the instructors better and are easier to teach.

Finally, special guests from the Bartlett Nature Conservancy show students the differences between red-tail hawks, bard owls, and the golden eagle. And on occasion, the birds of prey even give a flight demonstration.

To closeout the “camp experience,” the campers are given the chance to win one of only ten water guns that were used earlier in the

water gun run-off activity. Special awards are given for the best shooter in each of the firearm events, as well as top shot in archery. We even give out an award for the “most scared” camper!

“An experience of a lifetime!” . . . that is just how one camper described her camping experience. ☘

