



# Enjoying the World “Unplugged”

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**S**pending over 72 hours in the deep woods of Butler County is not the typical way most sixth graders would want to start their summer vacation; however, for 27 students from across Butler County, that is exactly what they chose to do this past June.

The Natural Resources Youth Camp is sponsored annually by the Butler County Forestry Planning Committee (FPC), with tremendous support from the forest community, local businesses, and interested individuals. Because of such support, the FPC has offered this “hands-on” camp for area sixth grade students – at no cost – for the last 18 years. Once selected by their school to attend the camp, students spend three days and two nights at Mussel Creek Hunting Lodge, a rustic cabin located on private property in north Butler County. Campers leave behind their smart phones, iPhones, iPods, iPads, Kindles, NOOKs, televisions, radios, and text messaging to take part in this one-of-a-kind adventure.

The camp offers kids the opportunity to learn about Alabama’s forest environment, how it relates to the everyday economy, as well as the important role it plays in our daily lives. The camp also provides students something to do from 7am to 11pm – and even later if you’re the last one to get a shower.



## **Lost . . . and Found**

The camp begins with students being given a compass and a “crash course” on how to use it, as well as instructions on determining an unknown distance by “pacing.” Campers are divided into teams with one adult leader, carried to a starting location, given a pair of snake leggings, and wished a fond farewell. They then compete in an orienteering field exercise that stretches across wooded terrain. Completing this rugged course requires the students to not only work together as a team, but also individually. Each student is required to complete at least one leg of the course without any assistance from their team. At the end of camp, awards are given to the team(s) completing the course in the quickest time and locating the most correct points. Only twice have we had a team to get so completely turned around that they missed a portion of the course. On a side note, this year we were lucky to finally find “Fred,” an unfortunate camper that’s been missing since 2011!

## **Keeping it Safe**

While some students are becoming skilled at orienteering, others are hearing about power line safety from Mr. Phillip Baker, System Engineer with Pioneer Electric Cooperative. Still others are learning about home fire safety from the Greenville

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Fire Department and their smoke trailer demonstration. These three activities work in conjunction with each other to ensure the students experience a busy first morning.

### Name that Tree

After a hearty lunch, Mr. Chris Erwin, Education Coordinator with the Alabama Forestry Association, takes the students on a walk around the property for two Project Learning Tree activities: “Every Tree for Itself” and “Tree Identification.” Using the differences in overall appearance, leaf characteristics, and tree bark, they learn to identify different tree species.

### Dirt Pie, Anyone?

Following tree identification, students are treated to a soil education activity entitled “Dig It.” Mrs. Beth Chastain and Mr. Jimmy Massey, both with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, show students how different land covers can affect soil movement, and how this soil movement could eventually impact creek sedimentation and possibly even their drinking water. This exercise ends with the campers creating some “edible” soil . . . with Oreo cookies, gummy worms, sprinkles, pretzels, and a cup cake. I really don’t remember dirt tasting this good when I was a kid!



### The Great Outdoors

Next on the agenda, students study different types of wildlife habitat, and what it takes to improve this habitat, with Mr. Thagard Colvin, Wildlife Biologist, Retired, with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Following a super supper of fried fish, they hear about open water/boating safety from Mr. John Bozeman, Marine Police Officer with the Department of Conservation. Finally, a discussion on Hunter Ethics and Preserving Our Hunting Heritage is delivered by Mr. James Altire, Hunter Education Instructor with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the last scheduled topic of the day before we take a “hay ride” into the dark woods.

### Wild Nightlife

Each evening, well after darkness falls, the students are loaded onto the FPC’s tour trailer and driven through the deep forest of South Alabama. The purpose of these nighttime excursions is to look for nocturnal

wildlife, and again this year we were lucky enough to call up a pair of owls that perched on a limb just above the students’ heads.

### Making Tracks

Early on the second day, the kids find out how to identify wildlife “footprints.” Using the Project Wild activity, “Making Tracks,” Mr. Mike Older, Forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission, introduces students to the different types of tracks made by Alabama wildlife. Following this presentation, Mr. Mike Sievering, Wildlife Biologist with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and Mr. Jerry Fiest, Wildlife Biologist with the USDA Animal and Plant Health



Inspection Service, teach the campers about fur bearer population management and trapping techniques used in Alabama. They learned how and what it takes to control nuisance animals by trapping as a safe and effective way to limit damage.

### Creature Features

Next, students are treated to an educational “live flight” demonstration from a few of Alabama’s birds of prey. Mr. Dale Arrowood with the “Winged Ambassadors” raptor program provides the kids an up-

close and personal look at these birds and what an important role they play in the environment. After spending time with the birds, campers are presented with “A Cooperative Environment” by Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Stiles. Mr. Stiles is an Environmental Services Analyst with PowerSouth Energy Cooperative. The students are given a hands-on, close-up encounter with some of Alabama’s local inhabitants. An alligator, a pine snake, a king snake, tree frogs, toads, and legless lizards are just a few of the “creatures” that the kids get to touch and even hold, if they dare.

### In the Creek

The next activity offers students a chance to explore and learn what really lives in a local creek with Mrs. Mona Scruggs Dominguez, Water Quality Education Specialist and 4H/ Youth Development Leader with the





Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Campers take creek samples using nets, then look through these samples to make an evaluation of the creek's overall "condition." Once this condition is determined, the students have time to swim, play, and just explore Mussel Creek.

After cooling off in one of Alabama's creeks, the campers are presented with some local Native American history by Mr. Charlie Clark, Executive Director, Farm Service Agency, and Ms. Elishia Ballentine, Publications Specialist with the Alabama Forestry Commission and "Living History" interpreter who portrays an 18th century Creek woman. They share artifacts, pottery, and animal hides with the students, as well as stories of Native Alabama cultures.

### Civilizations from the Past

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### Going Hog Wild

New this year on the second evening, following a delicious dinner of barbeque ribs and all the fixin's of a Cajun low country boil, students were treated to a "wild game" tasting. This challenge was not only to sample the seven different Alabama wild game "mystery" meats, but also identify as many as possible.

Several campers were brave enough to participate in the challenge, and before it was over, almost all of them had at least tasted the wild-life dishes which included wild hog, white-tailed deer, raccoon, rattlesnake, goose, duck, and alligator. This activity was such a success, it will no doubt be repeated next year featuring some new mystery meats from the wild woods of Alabama.



### Firearms 101

While allowing their supper to settle and in preparation of the next day's exciting activities, the students were introduced to firearms handling and safety by Mr. James Altieri.



### Bird Walk

The third and final day starts off with an early morning walk with Mr. Charlie Kennedy, President of the Alabama Ornithological Society. Mr. Charlie, as he is affectionately called, explores the



woods with the students looking for a variety of birds, both large and small.

### Top Guns

After the bird walk this year, campers enjoyed an archery demonstration by champion archer, Mr. Justin Martin of Justin Martin Outdoors. The remainder of the final day of camp is spent learning to shoot skeet, black powder, 22s, and archery. For some of these students, this is their first time to ever shoot a firearm or even

pull a bow. For others, it's their opportunity to show everyone how good they really are, or how good they really think they are. Over the past 18 years, the girl campers have given the boys a run for "top shooter." As a general rule, girls listen better to the instructors and are easier to teach. However, this year proved the exception to that rule; we had no female "top shots."



### Going Home

To close out the "camp experience," students are given several Audubon Field Guide books, the *Longleaf* novel by Roger Reid, and other nice prizes for "surviving" camp. Special awards are presented



for the best shooter in each of the firearm events, as well as top shot in archery.

All of this natural resources experience is funded in part by tremendous community support as well as grants from the Alabama Forests Forever license plate and Rayonier Foundation. In a few years, when the campers look back at their time at Mussel Creek, we hope they remember us fondly and think of this camp as an experience of a lifetime!

