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Summer Ecology Camp turns 25

What do you remember about your childhood summers? Many of us fondly recall catching frogs and fireflies, spotting animal tracks and wildlife, or hiking and swimming. This summer marks Archbold Biological Station's 25th year creating memories like these for children attending the Ecology Summer Camp. The camp emphasizes outdoor activities in nature as well as contact with working scientists. It's a science camp designed to meet the needs of all children – future scientists and non-scientists alike.

Archbold's Educator Coordinator, Dustin Angell, offers a mix of lesson styles and activities, "I try to incorporate music, art, physical movement, or gameplay into the learning. For example, this summer when teaching about Florida Scrub-Jays, we first have researchers give short talks about the birds, then let the kids play a game where they physically act out the life of a jay family in team competitions, and finish by letting them share what they experienced."

Research Intern Phoebe Hopkins helped design and run the bird activity: "The energy the campers have is contagious, and getting to share with them our excitement about nature and wildlife biology is a real treat."

Other camp activities include catching tadpoles at a seasonal pond, checking fish traps at a cattle ranch, swimming in a sinkhole lake, and holding a live pine snake. Volunteers from the Lake Placid Art League are leading a nature-themed art activity, where the campers are making collages of wildlife based on the work of Florida conservation photographer Mac Stone (<http://www.macstonephoto.com/>).

Perhaps the best description of camp comes from the campers.

Some campers seem to love everything about camp: “I learned about scrub-jays and trees. It was fun exploring and catching insects. We met Mark Deyrup (Program Director of the Entomology lab, a bug researcher). It was the best year yet! Even though I didn't know anyone at first, now I have two very good friends.”

One child faced her fears: “I don't want to forget how I picked up a tiny cockroach (these are the very small native roaches found in the scrub, not the type in old houses). Cockroaches USED to be super freaky to me, but when I came to Archbold Summer Camp I just went right in to try to pick it up. And when we went to the seasonal pond I held a spider! Archbold really helped me with all my fears in nature and I'm looking forward to coming next year.”

One camper in our first session has big plans: “I don't want to forget this awesome summer camp and the things we do. I also like that we saw a lot of wildlife! The websites were awesome [iNaturalist.org] and we were coming up with new stuff! I will work here and be a scientist because this place inspired me.”

This summer's theme is "citizen science," which refers to scientific research that requires the help of many people – most of them non-scientists. The campers are documenting exotic ambrosia beetles (these beetles attack healthy trees and cause laurel wilt) by setting insect traps as part of the University of Florida's Backyard Bark Beetles Project. They are also participating in a photo bioblitz, photographing as many wild species as they can for iNaturalist.org. The site describes itself as “a place where you can record what you see in nature, meet other nature lovers, and learn about the natural world.” After the campers upload their pictures, naturalists and scientists from around the world help them identify the species, making the bioblitz a cooperative effort.

This science camp is also a community camp. For 25 years, girls and boys between seven and twelve have got to know the area they live in a little better. Angell is proud of the camp's success with local families: “Half of our campers will return next year, and half of them will be coming for at least their third summer. Some return because they want to become scientists, but I think the rest come back because environmental education is inherently fun and sharing nature with friends feels good.” Angell thinks the campers' feelings of safety and belonging lead to a stronger sense of place. “I hope they all fall in love with Highlands County and feel they have a role to play as citizens and environmental stewards.”

Photo 1: Archbold summer campers pose for group photo with Education Coordinator Dustin Angell and camp intern Claudette Conigliaro. Photo by Archbold Biological Station.



Photo 2: Archbold summer campers show off their artwork with Lake Placid Art League volunteer Fran Rolston. Photo by Archbold Biological Station.



Photo 3: Archbold summer campers at Buck Island Ranch. Photo by Archbold Biological Station.

