

Summer Employment at Nature Camp – 2010

Information and Guidelines for Prospective Staff Members

Please read the following before submitting an application for employment.

Applications may be submitted at any time. If an e-mail address is provided, individuals will be notified upon receipt of their applications. Review of applications will begin in mid-February. Application deadline is **1 March 2010**.

Submit applications to Philip P. Coulling, Executive Director, 835 Sugar Creek Rd., Lexington, VA 24450. Direct any questions to **director@naturecamp.net**.

Mission of Nature Camp

Nature Camp is a private, non-profit, residential, coeducational summer camp specializing in natural history and environmental education for youth. Since 1942 Nature Camp has sought to train a corps of interested and knowledgeable youth, aged 5th through 12th grades, to conserve and protect the environment and to become wise stewards of the natural resources of the earth. Nature Camp operates under Special Use Permit from the U.S. Forest Service. Located in the George Washington National Forest in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Rockbridge County, Nature Camp seeks to foster an appreciation for and love of nature through hands-on, place-based, experiential learning. In so doing we hope to inspire the young people of today to become environmentally responsible and conscientious citizens of tomorrow.

Educational Program and Teaching Responsibilities

The core program of Nature Camp consists of a curriculum of classes in various subjects in natural history and related environmental topics. Resident counselors also serve as class instructors. Seven classes are offered in some form nearly every summer: botany, ecology, entomology (the study of insects), geology, herpetology (the study of reptiles and amphibians), limnology (the study of freshwater ecosystems) and ornithology (the study of birds). Other frequently taught subjects include astronomy, conservation, forest ecology, mycology (the study of fungi, including mushrooms), and wildlife art. Classes in evolutionary biology, meteorology, spiders, beetles, Appalachian studies, dendrology, landscape studies, nature in literature, environmental microbiology, permaculture, and nature journaling have been offered at least once in the past decade. In years past Nature Camp had an active program in archaeology and, later, anthropology.

Classes meet twice daily, except on the middle Sunday and the final Friday of each session. Class periods last 90 minutes—9:00 to 10:30 in the morning and 2:15 to 3:45 in the afternoon. At the beginning of each session, campers choose one subject as their major class. Major classes meet on Tuesdays, Thursdays and the first Saturday, for a total of 15 hours of instruction. Mondays, Wednesdays and the first Friday are minor class days. Minor classes meet just once, and each class group rotates among the subjects other than its major. A full curriculum of classes therefore usually consists of 11 subjects; this number ensures that each class group will have one minor class period in each subject. Instructors thus have the opportunity to get to know a group of campers over the course of two weeks and explore a particular subject in depth, but they also present essentially the same material up to ten times a session to each major class group.

Most classes are team taught by a pair of instructors. In determining the lineup of classes and instructors, I prefer to match up new counselors with experienced staff members. Interest in a subject and a passion

for teaching are more important qualifications than thorough knowledge of the material or the ability to identify every species in a particular discipline. Although everyone should spend some time thinking about your class before the summer begins, we devote considerable time to prepare for classes during the week before the first session of campers arrives. I will work with each set of instructors to develop a “syllabus” appropriate for each class, provide or recommend resources to assist in class preparation, and lend advice and suggestions for subject matter, activities, and field excursions as I am able. At the end of this week, instructors will be expected to have prepared and submitted minor and major project assignments, an outline of the minor class material, and a tentative schedule for major classes.

Varying the curriculum and instructors from year to year guarantees that even those campers who attend Nature Camp for six or seven summers will always encounter a different experience; on the other hand providing a familiar set of classes allows returning campers several opportunities to learn a particular subject. Even so, it requires creativity to ensure that we don’t offer the same old stuff every summer. I am committed both to maintaining the traditional core element of the curriculum and to empowering qualified instructors to present innovative approaches to familiar classes, to reintroduce old classes, or to propose and develop new ones. One effective strategy, particularly for the traditional, taxonomically based classes (e.g., botany, entomology, ornithology), is to focus on a particular topic or taxonomic group rather than to try to present a complete overview of a subject. For example, an ornithology class might focus on migration and explore such issues as the evolution of migration, the costs and demands of long-distance travel, and the effect of habitat loss and fragmentation on populations of neotropical migrants, with particular emphasis on the bird species found around Nature Camp. An entomology class may focus on one order of insects and employ collection and identification as learning tools. Even new campers can appreciate novel approaches to standard classes, as evidenced by the popularity of a class we call “larvotany” which has focused on insect larvae and their host plants the past few summers. It is also critical to recognize that the different educational level and cognitive abilities of campers of different ages dictate that the material, activities and even teaching style change appropriately during the summer, as sessions proceed from high school- to middle school-aged campers.

For each class (minors *and* majors) campers are assigned a project which is designed to expand on the material covered in class and to provide the campers with tangible evidence of what they learned at Nature Camp and what they are capable of doing. These projects are typically written, and in general campers should be capable of completing each project in no more than one to one-and-a-half hours (or less time for the youngest campers). Projects, particularly those for older campers, often require some research in the Nature Camp library, but may begin with direct observations out-of-doors. In designing projects instructors should consider the age of the campers; high school-aged campers in First Session are obviously capable of more work than fifth graders are. The most effective projects are those that both challenge and engage the campers and which demand critical thought, creativity, and careful observation. Campers should learn something from each project, but also enjoy completing them all. Major class projects may consist of a single assignment or a series of shorter exercises throughout the session, but they should have at least some written component; ideally, campers should be able to work on at least portions of major projects collaboratively and throughout the session, but each camper should produce something tangible and individual, as opposed to a single project completed by the entire class. Major projects should require a more substantial investment of time and effort than each minor project, but should not interfere with the ability of campers to complete their minor projects. The most effective major class projects involve direct observation, examination, and discovery, and activities which require time spent outside investigating nature are preferable to exercises such as constructing models or making posters, which involve less direct experience in the out-of-doors.

Campers turn in their minor projects during the session as they complete them. Each instructor should diligently read each report and provide thoughtful, positive, encouraging comments. It is critical to keep up with this review of projects throughout the session so that unread projects do not accumulate. At the

end of the session, campers compile their projects into a notebook. On the second Thursday night of each session, instructors evaluate projects they have not yet read, and during a meeting the next day, the staff selects the camper or campers who have produced the most outstanding notebooks.

Every minor class will be somewhat different. The particular interests and knowledge of each group of campers, the questions they pose, and the answers they provide to the questions instructors ask them create a unique dynamic in each class period. It is important, however, that instructors aim for consistent and focused presentation of material for all minors and that each group of campers receive adequate preparation for minor projects and the test that campers take at the end of each session (which evaluates the comprehension of material presented in class, as well as the ability of instructors to teach effectively). One major class period is often devoted to the minor class material, but this information could also be spread out over several periods.

Nature Camp emphasizes hands-on, experiential, frequently field-based education. Campers learn in a variety of settings, including classrooms both inside and out, but also behind the eyepieces of binoculars and microscopes, knee-deep in a cold stream, running behind a butterfly net, and on hands and knees with eyes peeled to the ground. Nature Camp is surrounded on three sides by several thousand acres of National Forest land, which provides us with an extensive outdoor classroom of forested mountains and streams. Sit-down lectures or discussions can certainly be appropriate learning tools, and campers do expect to take some notes in class, but instructors should include a significant field component, especially for major classes, and should take full advantage of the wonderful environment available for teaching and learning. Field trips by van are also possible, but must be scheduled and approved in advance; I encourage instructors to explore all possibilities for excursions by foot in and around Nature Camp before resorting to more distant field trips. Similarly, class exercises and discussions should focus on (or at least be relevant to) the environment immediately at hand rather than species, processes, or habitats of other geographic areas which the campers cannot experience during a session.

Each instructor will discover and develop his or her own teaching style and strategy, but campers typically learn more effectively when they are allowed to make their own observations, draw their own conclusions, and come to their own realizations—with, of course, encouragement and deliberate guidance. Instructors should try to refrain from simply presenting facts, particularly in dogmatic fashion, but instead to ask leading questions and allow the campers the time and means to make discoveries themselves. Doing so helps to inspire inquisitiveness and a lifelong love of self-directed learning.

Teaching need not be limited to formal class periods. Birds, for example, are best heard in the early morning; salamanders and moths are most easily encountered at night. I encourage instructors to take advantage of ideal windows to schedule activities outside of class time and to be creative in seeking opportunities throughout the day to engage the campers in more informal learning, such as on hikes or inside on rainy days. Hikes need not focus solely on the destination; hike leaders should always be open to possibilities for teaching and learning during the excursions themselves.

Other Responsibilities of Staff Members

In addition to teaching responsibilities, counselors are assigned daily duties necessary to keep the camp running smoothly. These duties, which rotate throughout each session, include washing dishes after meals; supervising campers in the library, laboratory, and swimming pool; organizing and leading recreational activities, including hikes and games; and directing campers in their duties. On days when not assigned specific duties, counselors should spend most of their available time outside of classes interacting and participating in activities with the campers. The staff also thoroughly cleans the camp facilities every two weeks between sessions.

The entire camp assembly eats three meals together daily in a central dining hall. Counselors are assigned to tables with campers, and meals are a critical time for getting to know campers better and facilitating interaction among campers. Staff members are also expected to attend a program for the entire camp assembly every evening and non-sectarian chapel services on Sundays, as well as to participate in all-day hikes on the middle Sunday of each session.

Days spent working at Nature Camp are long, often beginning before Reveille at 7:30 AM and frequently extending well past Taps (typically 10:00 to 10:30 PM, depending on the age of the session). We tell prospective campers and their parents that individuals seeking a purely recreational experience will not be happy at Nature Camp. Similarly, prospective staff members who simply wish to have fun will not cut it. Complete and uncompromised commitment to the ideals of Nature Camp and a strong work ethic are vital. Counselors are expected to act professionally at all times, to uphold standards of personal conduct and appearance, and to remember that their primary responsibility is not to themselves but to the campers—to teach, nurture, guide, and inspire them. The staff projects the public image of Nature Camp; hence counselors should not have prominent tattoos, excessive body piercings, shaved heads, etc. Any staff member who fails to maintain professional demeanor and behavior will be dismissed.

Qualifications

Nature Camp is first and foremost an educational camp, and it is the emphasis on natural history and environmental studies which truly sets us apart from other summer camps. Hence three important qualifications for summer employment are a passion for teaching, breadth and depth of knowledge of the biota of Nature Camp and vicinity (plants, birds, herps, insects, etc.), and an infectious interest in natural history and outdoor learning. Yet the much larger portion of each day at Nature Camp is spent outside of formal class periods. Therefore other qualifications are at least as important as teaching ability and knowledge of a particular subject. These include the ability to work with, engage, and supervise youth; the flexibility to work cooperatively with other staff members; the ability to express oneself clearly and effectively; respect for tradition and authority; and maturity, integrity, self-discipline, self-confidence and professionalism. Extensive experience working with children, teaching in supervised settings, or working at other summer camps generally elevates one's qualifications. Other characteristics of strong candidates for staff positions include extensive coursework or research experience in a field related to a Nature Camp class and superlative recommendations from references. I seek to employ several certified lifeguards on staff each summer, and this qualification will also improve one's standing as an applicant. Nature Camp may be able to cover at least part of the cost of Red Cross certification or recertification for lifeguards.

A cohesive, amiable, gregarious and hardworking staff enhances the quality of the experience for campers. I want and expect everyone who works at Nature Camp to have a great time; the fun that you have will rub off on the campers.

Most staff members are college students or recent graduates, but I will consider recent high school graduates who have particularly distinguished themselves as exceptional campers.

General Information

The summer staff typically numbers 20 to 25. In addition to general (bunkhouse) counselors (including head male and female counselors), the summer staff comprises an assistant director, two cooks, canteen operator, EMT/nurse, and office assistant. I seek a balance of age, experience, and familiarity with Nature Camp. Returning staff members receive precedence, but new counselors, including those who have never been to Nature Camp before, are always welcome to apply; each summer the staff usually includes at least one counselor entirely new to Nature Camp. Because available housing permits a larger

number of girl than boy campers, the female bunkhouse staff is usually larger than the male bunkhouse staff.

The summer schedule at Nature Camp consists of four, two-week sessions from mid-June to mid-August. (See Summer 2010 Schedule for specific dates for the upcoming summer.) The staff typically congregates the Tuesday before First Session begins for five days of staff training in crisis management, protocol, and CPR and First Aid; class preparation; and getting the facilities ready for the summer. A shorter period after the close of Fourth Session is devoted to conducting a complete inventory of equipment and supplies and to preparing the facilities for the winter. (These opening and closing weeks count as full weeks in computing staff salaries.) In hiring staff I give strong preference to individuals who can serve for the entire 10-week period. The opening week before First Session is absolutely critical for new staff members, and I rarely consider for employment any applicant who cannot be present for that entire period.

Staff members must submit to criminal background and sex offender registry checks and complete a health form. Accepted applicants will receive requisite forms before the summer.

Summer staff members receive a weekly salary, which varies with experience, education, and position. Staff members are paid during the summer—at the end of Opening Week, after Second Session, and at the end of the summer. All staff members receive one day off per week, as well as roughly 20 hours off every two weeks between sessions (Saturday afternoon to Sunday morning).

Most staff members reside with the campers in separate bunkhouses for girls and boys. Because personal space is limited, counselors should refrain from bringing an excess of unnecessary items. Shared laundry facilities and, beginning in 2010, wireless high-speed internet service are available to all staff members. Other facilities include male and female bathhouses (known as “T-houses”) with hot showers; staff house, which contains the central office; infirmary; educational building with well-stocked library, natural history museum, and lab; canteen, or camp store; and chlorinated swimming pool. A playfield provides space for such games as Frisbee and kickball and is bordered by rustic volleyball, tetherball, and basketball courts and horseshoe pits.

Nature Camp is located in a narrow mountain valley. It is not uncommon to experience high temperatures in the 90s and lows in the 50s or occasionally even 40s. Humidity is nearly constantly high during the summer, and limited direct sunlight delays the drying of anything.

Spiritual Element

Nature Camp is not a religious camp and has no religious affiliation. Nevertheless spiritual practices have always had a vital and integral place in the daily program. Staff members lead grace before every meal, we sing “The Lord’s Prayer” at the end of every day, and non-sectarian services are held on Sundays in the open-air, stone-hewn Reeves Memorial Chapel. Staff members are expected to respect these traditions and the religious beliefs of all campers and other staff members, to attend all chapel services and to voluntarily deliver chapel talks. Nature Camp attempts to maintain these traditions in a manner that is neither obtrusive nor confrontational.

Summer 2010 Schedule

June 15: Staff arrives

June 20 – July 3: First Session (grades 9–10–11–12)

July 4 – July 17: Second Session (grades 8–9)

July 20 – July 31: Third Session (grades 7–8)

August 1 – August 14: Fourth Session (grades 5–6)

August 18: Staff departs

Nature Camp offers equal opportunity to all employees and prospective employees without regard to race, color, sex, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation.