

# BASIC TRAINING

—Becoming an environmental conservation officer or forest ranger

By Ellen Bidell

Photos courtesy of DEC Basic Academy, unless otherwise noted

*“I want, as game protectors, men of courage, resolution and hardihood who can handle the rifle, axe and paddle; who can camp out in summer or winter; who can go on snowshoes, if necessary; who can go through the woods by day or by night without regard to trails.”*

*—NY Governor Teddy Roosevelt, 1899*

Every day across New York there are men and women who work long hours, in sometimes dangerous and hazardous conditions; their jobs range from battling raging forest fires to rescuing flood victims to removing illegal crocodiles from city apartment buildings. The work is demanding, but these men and women wouldn't have it any other way. They are DEC forest rangers and environmental conservation officers.

## ARDUOUS BEGINNINGS

DEC forest rangers (FRs) and environmental conservation officers (ECOs) protect the natural resources of the state and the people who use them. To become an ECO or FR, applicants must first take a civil service exam. Once hired, ECO and FR trainees begin their employment by attending a 26-week residential program at the DEC Basic Academy, currently held in Pulaski, NY. Recruits must pass all elements of the Academy before they are assigned to a work location. Upon completing the Academy, recruits are assigned to geographic areas of the state for two-year probation periods. They become sworn police officers who work long and irregular hours on outdoor patrols.



Former DEC Assistant Commissioner of Public Protection Hank Hamilton greets new recruits.



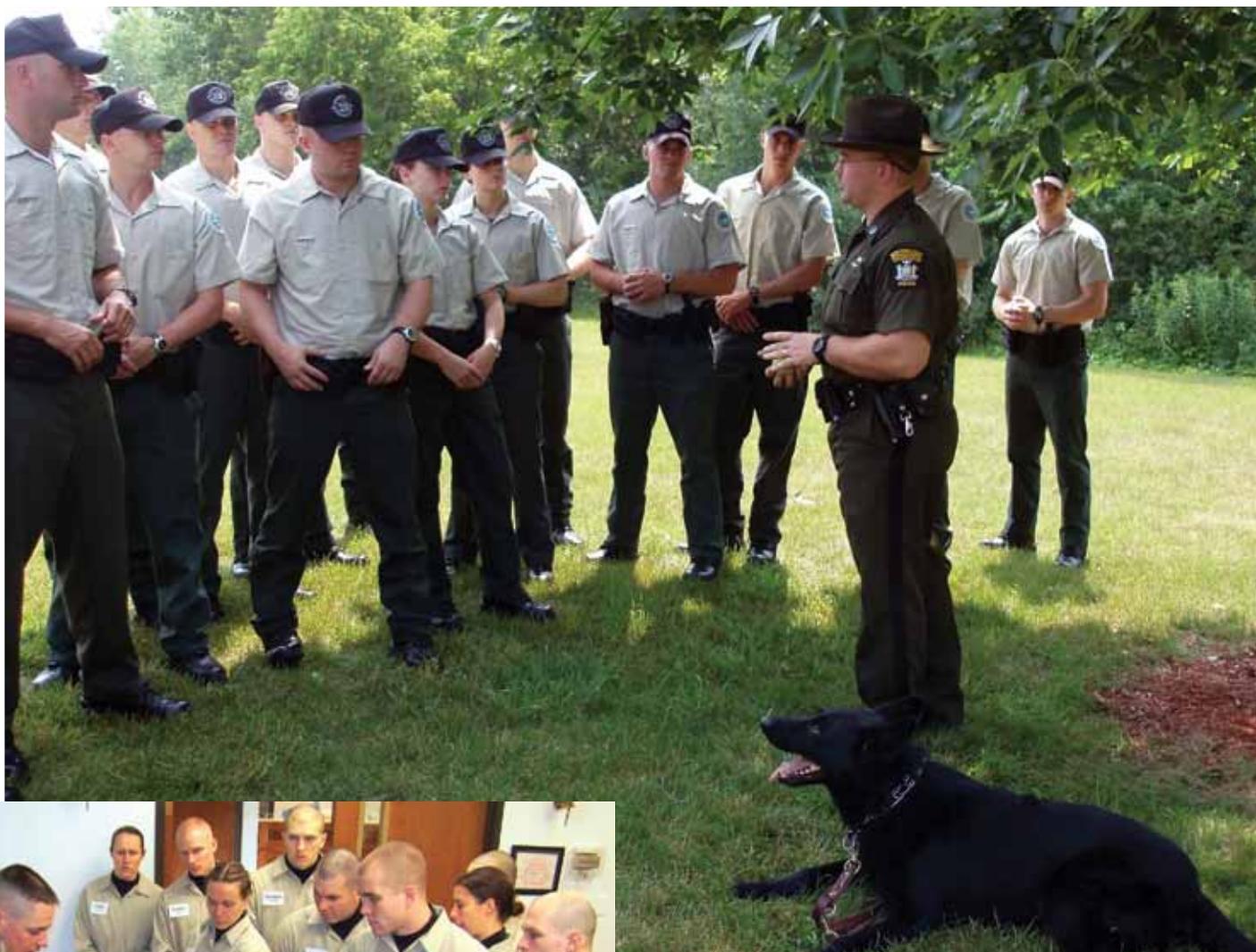
## DEDICATED INDIVIDUALS

Matthew Nichols, class of 2008, became an ECO to test himself, to make a difference, and to truly change the world. His experience at the Academy taught him to challenge himself and test his limits. "You are only as strong as your weakest link. You have to find your own personal weak link, then break it, make it stronger and move on to the next weakest link. By doing this, you're always becoming better and better," said ECO Nichols.

From defensive tactics and firearms training to vehicle operations and land and boat navigation, the Academy includes a lot of training in a relatively short period of time. "All the training adds up to a life-changing experience. You walk away a different person and when you look back, you can't help but smile," ECO Nichols recalled. "A typical day includes early to bed and early to rise...sometimes two or three times a day," he joked. "You wake up, train, take classes, eat lunch, train some more, take a few more classes and sleep (or try to). Then you wake up and do it all over again for six months."

Recruits are taught to handle and operate a variety of equipment (such as snowmobiles, vehicles, boats), as well as various weapons.





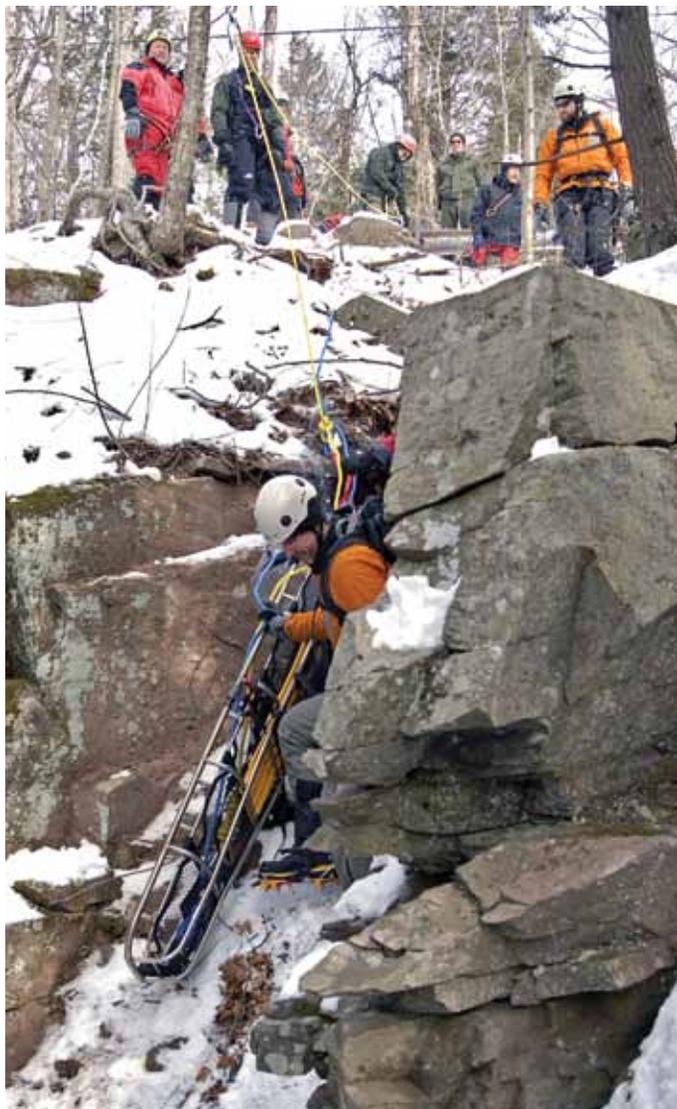
As part of their training at the Academy, the recruits learn a variety of skills, including (clockwise from left) identifying species of fish and other wildlife, working with dogs in the K-9 unit, combat training, and search-and-rescue operations.

Columbia County (looking for everything from marijuana farms to illegal camps), DiCintio allowed me to tag along with him while he patrolled the Hudson River one beautiful June morning. Despite the weather, there were only a few people out, but Ranger DiCintio explained how things change quickly out here when the kids get out of school and the river fills with weekend boaters. “We have a lot of drinking parties with underage kids on the beaches along this 30-mile section of the river,” said DiCintio. “Breaking up those parties is one of his biggest problems when the weather—and the action—heats up. I will start working later hours at this point, well into the evening.”

One of the things Ranger DiCintio is most proud of during his years on patrol is keeping ATVs off the shoreline. “Years ago, several of these beaches were destroyed by ATV tracks. I kept showing up to write tickets and word eventually got out not to ride your ATV on the beach,” he said. Now, the shoreline is filled with lush vegetation and is home to deer, eagles and osprey.

ECO Nichols is currently assigned to Kings County. Typically, new ECOs are assigned to New York City during their first few years on the job. “I once had to take an albino kangaroo out of a house of a motorcycle gang member who was dealing drugs. It sounds like the start of a really bad joke, but it’s true,” he said. “This career can take you anywhere. It can be what you make it...the only limit to how much of a difference you make in the world is you.”

For Forest Ranger Chris DiCintio, class of 2000, the grueling days at the Basic Academy seem like a lifetime ago. Now responsible for patrolling nearly 7,000 acres of public land in



James Clayton

There are no lost campers or injured hikers in need of rescue the day I tag along, but that isn't always the case. In the Albany area alone, forest rangers conduct more than 40 search-and-rescue operations each year. Rangers battle bad weather, darkness and endless hours of searching—the most physically and emotionally demanding aspects of the job. Fighting wildfires also takes its toll—Ranger DiCintio not only responds to fires in the Albany area, but has fought six large fires in the western United States as part of a cooperative state-to-state program.

Ranger DiCintio learned how to deal with these situations during his six months at the Academy. He wasn't prepared, however, for the lack of sleep at the Academy from constantly getting roused out of bed by the instructors. "It was tough not only physically, but emotionally as well. The instructors are constantly yelling at you—they tear you down to build you back up," he recalled. "The Academy is what you make of it. For me, I met some of my best friends there and most of us are still rangers.

"Everywhere I go, people tell me they always wanted to be a forest ranger. Whenever someone tells me that, I tell them to go for it; they won't be disappointed. And I am so glad that I took that chance and went through the Academy. It is one of the best jobs in the world. I protect the lands and waters of New York—in a boat or canoe, hiking, skiing or snowshoeing," he said.

Tom Caifa began his career as an ECO on Long Island, like many new recruits. A lieutenant now, Caifa supervises six ECOs in eastern New York. "Every day is different and I think the type of person who becomes an ECO likes that constant change. One day you may be checking hunters; the next you may be at an oil spill. But everyone's favorite is usually the fish and wildlife work," he explained.



## Take the Test

Before you can attend the Academy to become a DEC Environmental Conservation Officer or Forest Ranger, you have to take a civil service test. Click on "Job Seekers" on the Civil Service website at [www.cs.ny.gov](http://www.cs.ny.gov) to view upcoming exams, learn more about tests, sign up to receive email notifications of new exam announcements, and much more.



After only a year on the job, Lt. Caifa was asked to bring a new recruit into the field. He didn't know what to do to get the new officer excited about his job, so he brought him to Port Jefferson. "It was one of those perfect days that gets everyone outside. We were overwhelmed checking on anglers and boaters. One would come in with illegal fish and just as quickly, someone else would show up. It went on like that all day, but after that, he was hooked on the job," Lt. Caifa said, referring to the new recruit.

But things can get difficult in the field. "One time, I was sent out to check on a complaint of hazardous materials at a warehouse in a bad part of town. No one was around and the place looked abandoned. I knocked on the door and someone inside asked who it was. When I told him it was the police, he shouted, 'You better be, because I have a gun pointed right at you.' For the first time in my career, I had to draw my weapon, and let the individual know that I had a gun pointed right back. He peeked out the door, saw that I was a cop and quickly apologized."

Situations like that are why instructors at the Academy are tough on recruits. "They constantly yell at you," said Caifa, "even if you are doing something

right. They wake you up several times during the night, even though you don't get much sleep to begin with. They want to see how you handle stress.

"After about three weeks, they lighten up so you can focus on school work. As ECOs, you have to know both the Environmental Conservation Law and the Penal Law, and they are adamant that you get good grades."

## FUTURE RECRUITS

What advice does Lt. Caifa have for someone considering a career as an environmental conservation officer?

"Be patient, be honest and be physically prepared for the fitness test—spend the month prior to attending the Academy getting in shape. And stick with it, because when you are done, this is the best job you will ever have."

Tech Sergeant Keith Isles has been an ECO for more than 30 years. He is currently in charge of the K-9 unit, working with his dog, Shamey. "I love the flexibility of the job; it never gets tiring. You get to decide in the morning what part of your sector you are going to patrol," he said.

"Stick out the hard times at the Academy," offered Tech Sergeant Isles. "Any time that people are pushed

together in a stressful experience, they come out with solid friendships. I have the best job in DEC, and the first step to getting it is taking the test and going through the Academy."

Lt. Deming Lindsley has been teaching at the Basic Academy since 1977, which he compares to a military boot camp. "It is tough," explains Lindsley, "but when the recruits are finished, they have great jobs and they build bonds with fellow academy members that they will have for life."

As Lt. Lindsley put it: "After 39+ years, I still enjoy going to work because we make a difference. Our victims are mother earth and the fish and wildlife that live here. They can't call 911, so we have to be proactive in our efforts." And that is the message he instills in the recruits. "The Environmental Conservation Law is one of the most important laws in the state, and we help make New York a healthier place to live."

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# About the Job



ECOs enforce the laws protecting the state's natural resources and environment. They investigate complaints about pollution, check hunting and fishing licenses and ensure that boats and ATVs are operated safely. ECOs also protect wetlands and enforce our recycling laws, such as the Bottle Bill. Some ECOs work with K-9 detector dogs to detect illegally killed wildlife. ECOs meet with school groups, service groups and hunter and angler clubs to promote compliance with the law.



Forest Rangers are responsible for state land protection, conduct search-and-rescue missions for people lost or hurt in the wilderness, fight wildfires and educate the public about outdoor fire prevention, conservation of wildlife, safe hiking and wilderness survival. They patrol wilderness areas throughout the state, always watching for fire dangers, and they may be the first to respond to a fire emergency.

For more information about the job requirements and duties for ECOs and FRs, visit the DEC website at [www.dec.ny.gov/about/571.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/about/571.html).