



Fall 2003

Five Rivers Environmental Education Center

FINDING MY PLACE

The ultimate goal was “to explore and connect to the natural world and tap into that ancestral sense of the native that resides within all of us.” The immediate goal was to watch, listen, feel and be aware of aroma. I could do that. So I started an afternoon with Dr. Bruce Coles, or Bruce, as he preferred to be called.

I had accompanied Bruce and his “students” on this, the first day of his program here at Five Rivers: “Finding a Place in Nature.” We humans, Bruce explained, are sight-dominant, and more accustomed to motion than to sitting still. Although each animal may favor one particular sense; for example, a fox relies mostly on smell, rabbits use their hearing to a greater degree-- most animals tend to use all their senses. Animals have it all over us when it comes to patience. For them it can be a matter of survival; the mouse holding still waiting for the hawk to pass, the spider motionless in its web waiting for the next meal to get caught.

Bruce, who has been mentored by Tom Brown and other like-minded environmentalists, offered to work with us to develop the skills that would help us

blend in with the natural world, so that we might be privy to the hidden beauty and wonders we have often missed.

After a few more directions, I set out to find my “place.” Bruce had said not to go to any particular spot; rather let the place draw you. My first encounter was a family of geese coming up a trail from the pond. A gosling was leading the way and it stopped when it saw me. It obviously wanted to pass but it wasn’t sure what to do. One of the adults-- the larger of the two, so I guessed it was the male-- came up alongside the gosling. The male bobbed his head in the agitated manner of geese, and eyed me suspiciously. I sat down. By now the other adult, probably the female, and the four other goslings were pressing upon the front runners.

The size difference between adult and gosling was clear, but there was also a difference in coloration. The chin straps of the two adults were definitely white. The other five had greyish markings. Where the adults bobbed and moved deliberately, the goslings showed indecision and lack of confidence. Now you may say I was anthropomorphizing, but the inexperience of youth was the strong image I got as I watched them.

As I sat in the hot sun, and the geese reluctantly decided I was safe to pass, a sweat bee landed on the back of my hand. Since any movement on my part would have scattered the geese and the bee posed no threat, I opted to let it stay. My attention was now divided between the geese which were within ten feet of me and this minuscule insect feeding off the salts of my skin. The birds were pulling on blades of grass. One awkward gosling lost the tug-of-war with the grass and fell down. It tucked its feet under its belly and continued to pull and eat grass from a prone position. I guess I wasn't too much of a threat. The male, however, kept an eye on me as he ate. The quarter-inch black bee with white stripes tickled the hairs on my hand as it moved back and forth lapping up salty sweat.

I was fascinated. I had only been five minutes into my hour alone and already I had been accepted, albeit reluctantly, by the geese and whole-heartedly by the bee. I becoming aware of my own condition. I was relaxed. The necessity of fulfilling my assignment was gone. I was getting into this.

The bee left and I felt I could move without disturbing the geese. Near the pond I found an inviting tree trunk and sat in the shade. For the next fifty minutes I watched, listened, was aware of changing aromas coming in on the shifting breezes and totally enjoyed myself. A kingfisher rattled his call

overhead, a walking stick walked with his shaky gait past my tree, and a bull frog croaked his love song not five feet away. The ground was littered with the scales of spruce cones; a sturdy vine reached up for the lower branches nearby and bound together many of the small trees; there was the skull of an animal not three feet from me. Dappled light filtered down to create patterns on my skin and passers-by did not even see me.

I was not a disruptive intrusion, I was part of this small piece of the environment.

I rejoined the others to find they too had had these experiences. It was truly magical, and all of us wanted to expand on this encounter. Bruce asked us to draw a map of our "place," then to go home and write about it. He also encouraged us to read about the plants and animals we had shared our time with. Along with the others, I will meet with Bruce over the summer and expand my skills through his teaching and from my "place."

Dr. Bruce Coles will continue sharing his unique gifts and skills with us here at Five Rivers. If finding your place in nature appeals to you, check our schedule for information on Bruce's next workshop on October 25.

–Nancy Payne

DIRECTORS NOTEBOOK

SCA/AmeriCorps Staffers "Graduate"

In August our two SCA/AmeriCorps staffers completed their terms and went on to study at the School Of Hard Knocks.

Tiffany Fleming, who began her ten-month stint with us last October, developed an innovative "classroom aquarium" program which drew rave reviews up and down the Hudson River valley, reaching thousands of people, young and old, whom we would otherwise have been unable to serve. Tiffany's SCA/AmeriCorps partner at Five Rivers, Nicole Donato, also helped develop this program, but left to take a job at a biology lab downstate.

Charise Watras began her tour of duty this spring and completed an eleven-week stint, providing a range of programs including guided instruction, staffing exhibits at special events and conducting roving interpretation at our "Nature's Place" outdoor exhibit during the summer.

In addition to building our environmental education capacity, our SCA/AmeriCorps program has also helped to build the interpretive profession, as five of our six previous SCA/AmeriCorps "graduates" have gone on to further their conservation careers at other environmental education facilities (the other went on to pursue graduate studies in education).

As this issue goes to bed, Congress is debating whether to provide necessary emergency funding to continue the AmeriCorps program into School Year '03-'04. So in addition to thanking Tiffany and Charise for their dedicated service, it behooves us to take this opportunity to thank the entire SCA/AmeriCorps program for doing so much for so many thru this most productive program.

Another Successful MAPS Season

For the last three years, DEC biologists have operated a bird banding station during the bird breeding season in the old Exhibit Shop (Building 5) to Monitor Avian Productivity and Survivorship. On nine appointed "run days" during the summer, the staff deploy ten invisible "mist nets" throughout flyways on the grounds to catch unsuspecting birds on the fly. The birds are carefully retrieved and brought to the station, where they are identified, weighed, sexed, leg-banded and released unharmed back into the wild.

On a decent day, biologist may handle forty to fifty birds. Birds of interest which were handled this summer include several ruby-throated hummingbirds, which, as you can imagine, require special handling and the tiniest of leg-bands.

Thanks go to all the biologists who worked at the station and helped make this important research initiative a vibrant part of our interpretive scheme. Special thanks also goes to DEC raptor specialist Scott Crocoll who, upon learning that an immature Cooper's hawk had been netted here last year, was able to locate the (again active) nest on Center grounds this spring.

Craig D. Thompson

Saturday, September 20 WHERE THE HUDSON BEGINS 10:00 a.m.

Countless upland rivulets throughout the Hudson River watershed wend their way downstream through cityscape and countryside, ultimately becoming part of America's "first river". Join us for an "in depth" study of the ecology of the Vlomankill headwaters, just one of many *Hudson River Ramble* interpretive programs held this weekend throughout the watershed. Old sneakers or waterproof boots helpful but not necessary.

Sunday, September 21 NATIONAL ORIENTEERING DAY MEET register 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

Join the Empire Orienteering Club for a map and compass scramble at Five Rivers in celebration of National Orienteering Day. No prior experience in map and compass navigation is required. Instruction will be provided for those new to the sport. Participants may choose their own skill level, from beginner to advanced, and may compete individually or with family/friends. For more information about the event, contact the Club at 766-3648 or visit empo.us.orienteeering.org. Nominal fee.

Saturday, September 27 *An Historical Tour: THE OLD GAME FARM* 10:00 a.m.

Conservation techniques developed at the Delmar Experimental Game Farm (now called Five Rivers) revolutionized the game management profession and helped shape America's attitudes toward wildlife. Commemorate National Hunting and Fishing Day with us on this walking tour of Five Rivers' former game propagation areas as we recall our heroic past.

Saturday, October 4 FALL FOLIAGE 2:00 p.m.

As broadleaved trees shut down for the winter, the woodlands become a riot of colors. Many of these pigments are already present in the leaves, but are hidden by the green pigments of photosynthesis. Other colors form only as sugars are trapped in the dying leaves. Join us for an outdoor study of the trees of the season and learn how to identify trees by color.

Wednesday, October 8 BIRD SEED SALE ORDERS DUE

This is the last day to pre-order bird seed for The Friends of Five Rivers' Annual Bird Seed Sale. This benefit sale not only helps the birds, but also generates supplemental funding for Five Rivers programming. Order forms will be available at the Center in late August. Bird seed pick up date is Saturday, October 18. For more information, please call Friends of Five Rivers at 475-0295.

Saturday, October 11 *Watchable Wildlife: GREY SQUIRRELS* 2:00 p.m.

With the first frost, the grey squirrels are busy gathering nuts for the winter. Their endless activity is easy to see and hear as the trees begin to shed their burden of leaves. Join us as we wander the woodlands to watch the squirrels harvest this year's crop.

Saturday, October 18 WATCHING WATER 2:00 p.m.

Join us as we commemorate World Water Quality Monitoring Day, with an exploration of the Vlomankill Trail and the beautiful stream that has created the Vlomankill valley. We will use biomonitoring techniques to assess the health of the stream.

Saturday, October 25 A PLACE IN NATURE 2:00 p.m.

Guest naturalist Bruce Coles will prepare participants to choose a "personal place" in nature, and share observation skills and techniques. Call to register by October 22. See cover article for more information.

Sunday, October 26 HALLOWEEN OPEN HOUSE 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Want an alternative to Halloween activities that are too violent or too scary? Come help us celebrate the animals of the season at our Slightly Scary Open House! Learn about bats, spiders, owls and snakes, look at skulls and bones, handle snakeskins. There will be games and activities around the themes of Halloween with a natural history twist, and some live animals to see. All activities are on-going; come in costume if you wish.

Saturday, November 1 PROJECT WET WORKSHOP 10:00 a.m.- 3:00 p.m.

This workshop will introduce "Project WET" (Water Education for Teachers). Participants will receive a manual of activities suitable for teaching about water science, aquatic wildlife, and environmental issues. Pre-register by October 29. Dress for the outdoors. Teacher in-service credit can be coordinated through the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center.

Saturday, November 8 *How To Do It:* FEEDING BIRDS 10:00 a.m.

Birds do not need to be fed in winter as much as we have a need to provide them food. And what a treat in can be, for birds and people! Join us for an in-depth indoor workshop on how to feed birds and how to deal with health and safety issues such as disease, vermin and predation.

Saturday, November 15 *Watchable Wildlife:* WHITE TAILED DEER 2:00 p.m.

Mid-November is an excellent time to go "scouting" deer. Deer are very active at this season, fattening up for the winter and chasing prospective mates. Tracks, trails, pellets, rubs, scrapes, beds and mast are all indicators of the season's activity. Join us for a field study of the natural history of deer and learn what's what.

Wednesday, November 19 FRIENDS OF FIVE RIVERS ANNUAL MEETING 7:00 p.m.

The Friends of Five Rivers cordially invites members and friends to its annual membership meeting. A business meeting reviewing Friends of Five Rivers' accomplishments of the past year will precede the program. Free.

Friday, November 21 AUTUMN NIGHT WALK 7:00 p.m.

A crisp autumn night is a great time to visit Five Rivers! Night sounds are intensified, bare trees form strange shadows in the sky and much of the wildlife is more active. To experience Five Rivers by night, join us after hours for this flashlight-less ramble. Dress warmly!

Saturday, November 29 TALK AND WALK TURKEY 2:00 p.m.

Wild turkeys have staged an amazing comeback! They're the symbol of Thanksgiving, but they're also the symbol of a conservation success story. We'll discuss the lifestyle and success of this beautiful bird, then walk a forest trail to explore turkey habitat.

Saturday, December 6 N.A.R.P. FOR THE HOLIDAYS 10:00 a.m.

N.A.R.P. stands for Naturalists as Reading Partners. Join us for a cozy indoor reading of a winter nature story, geared to grades pre-k through 4. Then bundle up as we go outside to search for animal tracks and traces in the snow, then we'll finish up with hot chocolate and popcorn as we watch birds at the feeders. Please call to pre-register by December 4. \$1.00 per person. Adults and children must accompany each other.

Friday, December 12 NIGHT WALK 7:00 p.m.

A cold winter night, believe it or not, is a great time to visit Five Rivers! Night sounds are intensified, bare trees form strange shadows in the dim sky and much of the wildlife is more active. To experience a different face of Five Rivers, join us after hours. Dress warmly!

Saturday, December 13 HOLIDAY DECORATION–IT’S NATURAL 2:00 p.m.

Who needs plastic wreaths when the spruce tree has wonderful branches! Why not make some holiday gifts from recycled materials? This will be a busy afternoon. There will be natural materials for making decorations and ideas for gifts from recyclables. If you would like a list of items you can bring to augment our supply, call the Center and ask for a ‘stuff list’ for this program. Materials fee per family - \$3.00 members; \$6.00 non-members. Call to pre-register by December 10.

Saturday, December 27 NOT A CREATURE WAS STIRRING 10:00 a.m.

Animals have but one problem going into winter: how to come out the other side! Happily, critters have come to cope with the season in many different ways. Join us on an outdoor study of winter survival strategies and see how various animals get by.

Tuesday, December 30 N.A.R.P. FOR THE HOLIDAYS 10:00 a.m.

N.A.R.P. stands for Naturalists as Reading Partners. Join us for a cozy indoor reading of a winter nature story, geared to grades pre-k through 4. Then bundle up as we go outside to search for animal tracks and traces in the snow, then we’ll finish up with hot chocolate and popcorn as we watch birds at the feeders. Please call to pre-register by December 28. \$1.00 per person. Adults and children must accompany each other.

Thursday, January 1 ANNUAL NEW YEAR'S DAY BIRD COUNT 9:00 AM

Come help us celebrate Albany’s “First Morning,” as we search high and low for our fine feathered friends. In the 23 years of this annual foray, over 66 different species have been recorded. Bring binoculars and dress warmly.

Staff: Nancy Payne, Anita Sanchez, Dee Strnisa, Craig D. Thompson, Lori Whiting

FALL FESTIVAL COMING UP!

Once again, we're planning for Five Rivers Center's **FALL FESTIVAL!** This annual event is scheduled for Saturday, September 13 , from 12 noon - 4:00 p.m. Can you help us?

***RECYCLE BOOKS, BASKETS AND PLANTS.** Your donated discards will be someone else's discoveries at the Friends of Five Rivers' *Books, Baskets and Bouquets Sale*.

***BAKE** some brownies, cookies or other treats for the *Bake Sale*.

***DONATE** new merchandise or coupons for goods or services to the Friends of Five Rivers' *Silent Auction*, where festival visitors may bid on items from area merchants.

***LEND A HAND** on Festival Day. Volunteers are needed to help with fun, educational activities for kids as well as to work at the *Refreshment Stand*, the *Bake Sale* or the *Books, Baskets and Bouquets Sale*, and a host of other activities.

Please call the Center if you can help, or bring donations to the Center the Friday before the Festival. Thank you!