



# Nature's Classroom

The caterpillar could crawl—but he couldn't hide. "Here's another one!" Chris Chamberlin calls out. Campers hurry to examine the bush as Chris pulls back a branch. "It's a monarch butterfly caterpillar," he says. "See the black-and-yellow stripes?" Kids and counselors learn to care for the environment at Virginia's Nature Camp.

By **James T. Black**,  
photography **Cary Jobe**

After spending a few hours in the classroom, nothing's better than a dip in Big Mary's Creek.

**Classrooms in the Forest** As a veteran instructor at Nature Camp, Chris is an old hand at bringing youngsters face-to-face with caterpillars, crawfish, and other critters. For more than 60 years the unusual summer camp near Lexington, Virginia, has given youngsters the chance to meet and mend the natural world.

Every summer kids from across the country travel to the camp nestled in the heart of the George Washington National Forest. For two weeks they head indoors to take classes on such subjects as botany, ecology, and ornithology, and then move outside for up close-and-personal experiences with birds, bees, and botanicals.

“I was a freshman studying biology at Virginia Tech when I got an e-mail asking if I’d be interested in being a camp instructor,” Chris says. “I just took a chance, and after three days I was hooked. I’ve been teaching here for six summers.”

**Where the Wild Things Are Studied** During that time Chris has introduced campers to a variety of courses ranging from herpetology (the study of reptiles and amphibians) to entomology (study of insects). While the kids spend about three hours a day in classes, they rarely get bored. “They spend little time indoors,” Chris explains. “We get them outside seeing and collecting stuff. The camp is very hands-on.”

Although he came to the camp a little later in life than many of his fellow instructors, Chris shares their love of the place. “I’m kind of unusual because I never went to Nature Camp as a kid,” he says. “Many of the other instructors did, and they loved it. That’s why a lot of them come back every year.”

**Six Decades of Camp** One of those former students now serves as camp director. Philip Coulling first discovered the wonders of the George Washington National Forest as an 11-year-old. Now an ecologist with the Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation, Philip took the director’s job five years ago. Philip says caring for the environment has been the camp’s main concern since its inception.

“Members of the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs started it in 1942 as a way to teach children about the environment,” he says. “They wanted kids to experience the natural world and build a lifelong interest in taking care of it. We’re more environmentally conscious these days, so it doesn’t seem unusual. Back then, Nature Camp was a pretty radical idea.”

While members of the Wi-Fi generation may dress and talk differently from the WWII-era kids who first came to Nature Camp—once they’re in the forest they’re all about the same, Philip adds.

“Today’s campers have to leave their cell phones and iPods at home, but they don’t seem to mind too much,” he says. “They get as excited as the kids I went to camp with when they get outdoors and start studying how it all works.” ●

**Nature Camp:** 316 Nature Camp Trail, Vesuvius, VA 24483; [www.naturecamp.net](http://www.naturecamp.net) or (540) 377-2491. Nature Camp’s 2008 summer sessions run from June 15 through August 9. The camp also offers five-day adult sessions in either June or August. Summer sessions are \$700 per camper; adult sessions are \$210.

It’s not all hard work and studying—campers have plenty of time for fun and relaxation too. **FAR RIGHT:** Instructor Chris Chamberlin hunts for caterpillars with a group of campers. The unique summer camp has been teaching kids about the environment since 1942.



**Alumni to the Rescue**

Nature Camp almost faced extinction when the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs board of directors decided they could no longer financially support the project. “They voted to cease operations in October 2006,” Philip says. Undaunted, Philip and Powell Hutton, president of the Nature Camp Foundation, contacted former campers and counselors for help. “Alumni from around the country donated time and money,” Philip says. “It showed how much people love this camp.”



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**Chris Chamberlin, Nature Camp instructor**

**FAR LEFT:** Director Philip Coulling studies a student-made map of area mushrooms. Like many of the camp’s officials and counselors, Philip first came here as a youngster. **LEFT:** The flora and fauna of the George Washington National Forest give students lots to study.