



Into the Wild

Kids across the state get back to nature with the Young People for Parks program.

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ndeterred by several inches of November snow, a shivering group gathers in the woods near Blackwater Falls, a few yards from the Yellow Birch trailhead. Three adults and two teenagers, hands burrowed deep in their pockets, bob and swivel to stay warm. At the head of the group is

naturalist Paulita Cousin, whose bright green eyes match her park uniform. She clasps the leaves of a rhododendron, West Virginia's state flower, in her unglowed hand.

She has just explained how deer, on their way through the woods, often stop to nibble on the leaves. "Can you eat it?" Cousin asks.

"You can try," ventures Noah, 14.

Cousin smiles slyly. "It's poison," she says.

The group is on the Spruce Bog Walk, one of the many activities offered through the Young People for Parks (YPP) program, a youth outreach initiative provided by state parks across West Virginia including Blackwater Falls, Cacapon Resort, Chief Logan, North Bend, Pipestem Resort, Tygart Lake, and Watoga. The program is designed for young people aged 6 to 16. Participants don't just learn facts that could aid in their survival—like not to eat the leaves of the rhododendron. They also get a sense of the history of the ground beneath their feet.

"Did you notice we have a lot of rocks?" asks Cousin, who often employs the Socratic style of teaching. "How'd they get here?" The group stands in silence, considering. "At one time these rocks were in the soil," she hints. "What happened to the soil?"

When no one answers, Cousin begins to unspool the history of Davis, going from the voracious timber industry of the late 1800s to the early environmental movement of the 1930s. She walks the group through the consequences of over-lumbering a dense, lush forest: as the sun dried out what had once been a cool, damp ground cover, wildfires ravaged much of the Canaan Valley. The heavy boulders that dot the park emerged after that organic matter burned away, tough little survivors of a tragic human miscalculation.

"Does this mean that where we're standing, the ground used to be above us?" asks Naomi, a 16-year-old who has been held rapt by Cousin's every word.

"In a lot of areas, yes," she replies.

A Taste for the Outdoors

At most parks, the YPP program runs from Memorial Day through Labor Day, though some naturalists like Cousin offer activities nearly year-round. Participants run the gamut from one-day, drop-in visitors to locals who come back again and again. Other young adventurers seek out the program each time they visit a new park.

Participants who complete three YPP activities offered at a park may earn a certificate and a patch. The YPP patch design represents some of West Virginia's iconic symbols as well as the state park system. For return visitors who have already participated in the program, a second-tier reward may be available: a story pin. Blackwater Falls' pin features a rattlesnake, Watoga's is a bat, and Pipestem's is an owl, to



TOP A naturalist talks with kids at North Bend State Park.

BOTTOM A Young People for Parks activity at Chief Logan State Park.

name just a few examples. At the moment, there are six pins in all.

A full-time naturalist oversees each park's YPP program, determining the activities and awarding the badges. Certain skills are fostered across all the parks—identifying trees, birds, and animal tracks, for example. But naturalists also customize their programs. Cousin has a clear interest in history that bleeds into her walks and presentations. Over at Watoga State Park, Chris Bartley has developed a statewide reputation for his outdoor culinary demonstrations. He has traveled to other parks when possible to teach and encourage cast iron cooking techniques.

"I call it 'campfire cooking,'" Bartley says. Young people help put everything together, mixing ingredients

STEVE SHALUTA PHOTOGRAPHY, LAUREN COLE



and preparing the food for cooking. Bartley explains the process while the food cooks in a Dutch oven over the flames, and participants get a chance to sample the cuisine afterward.

Bartley says it's these hands-on activities that tend to draw the biggest crowds. Another popular draw is the Creekside Critters program. "Participants go out and they're looking for different things. It could be crayfish, salamanders, turtles—any kind of aquatic life. It's just being out there, lifting up rocks. Basically learning about habitats in a fun way," he says.

Good for all Ages

More and more, child development specialists are learning how outdoor play contributes to a young person's well-being.

Richard Louv's 2008 book *Last Child in the Woods* coined the term "nature-deficit disorder," which Louv blames for a variety of issues from diminished respect for the environment to depression and anxiety. A 2014 article in the journal *Children, Youth, and Environments* found that nature playscapes encourage creativity, problem-solving, and self-determination—qualities that can be harder to achieve through indoor play alone.

Although YPP is geared toward kids and teenagers, participating adults get plenty from the experience, too. For Bartley, this is one of the best parts of the program. "It's not just the kids that are interested in whatever it is—it's the adults that are enjoying it too," he says. "The kids are receiving the benefit of going through the whole process, but when their parents or grandparents are engaged and wanting to learn and wanting to spend time with them, it just makes it that much more special."

Back on the Yellow Birch Trail, Cousin is encouraging teenagers and adults alike to take a hands-on approach to the hike, running their palms over rhododendron leaves and rugged tree bark. She stops under a towering conifer, which she identifies as an eastern hemlock. The tannic acid from these trees is responsible for the name "Blackwater Falls," she explains. It stains the water a deep, rusty black.

She goes on to tell the group that hemlock trees are rapidly dying off as a result of a non-native insect infestation, hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA), and by the time they return with their own children, the hemlocks may be gone. She encourages participants to take a closer look and to take pictures of the tree. She also talks about the seed bed sprouting new trees for years to come, but there is still no cure for HWA. She lets this news sink in.

"Just don't drink it!" one of the older men in the group jokes a minute later.

"Poison hemlock is what killed Socrates," Cousin says, smiling. "Eastern hemlock has actually saved a lot of people—it has a lot of Vitamin C. They used to keep it on ships to prevent scurvy."

In this brisk 70-minute hike, Cousin provides lots of life-saving advice. At the end of the walk, she tells participants what they need when going into the woods, which can be broken down into six Cs: coverage, a container, combustion, a cutting tool, cordage, and candleage. That's in addition to a history about Davis and a short lecture on invasive species.

It's not just facts and tips that Cousin's group will take away from Blackwater Falls, though. Like all the YPP participants across the state, they will also leave with a deeper understanding of the natural world and the wonders that it holds. 🌿

Kids who complete three activities may earn a certificate and a patch featuring some of West Virginia's iconic symbols.