



UNDER THE GUIDANCE of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department personnel, cadets participate in electroshocking to learn how biologists conduct fish studies.





THE TEXAS BRIGADES

Opportunity Knocks. Who Will Answer?

Article by Helen Holdsworth
Photos Courtesy of Texas Brigades

JUNE 16, 5:30 A.M. – THE GROUP OF FIVE PILES out of the truck, journals and pens in hand. They are in the middle of a ranch, 25 miles from the nearest town. It is still dark, but sunrise is near. The instructor whispers that they are to spread out around the edge of the tank and find a comfortable place to sit. The task at hand is to use their senses and describe what they see, hear and smell as the sun peaks over the horizon.

For some of these teenagers, this is a first, seeing a sunrise in the country. No city lights, no city noise. Silence, except for the wind rustling the leaves of the mesquite and the water lapping at the bank. As the sun shows itself, things start to move. A fish jumps, or was that an alligator? The bobwhite quail calls. A deer stamps its foot and snorts. How does it feel to listen to the sounds of the natural world waking up?

For most teenagers, summer is the time to kick back after nine intense months of school, sports, band and other activities. Many get summer jobs to earn money for that car or for college. Some go to camp. Some do nothing.

A chosen few open the door when opportunity knocks. A chosen few go to the Texas Brigades. And, it is not only an opportunity for youths. It is an opportunity for anyone with a passion for our state's bountiful wildlife and natural resources.

Dr. Dale Rollins, professor and Texas AgriLife Extension wildlife specialist, describes it as a "white line epiphany." The idea was (and still is) to educate a group of energetic youths about Bobwhite quail and empower them to educate others in their home communities. The Bobwhite Brigade was born in 1993 at Krooked River Lodge in Shackelford County. The Buckskin and Bass Brigade programs were started in 2000 and 2004, respectively.





LEARNING TO IDENTIFY plants is tough. Learning to identify stomach contents is tougher. But it is important for a wildlife manager to know what wildlife eat.

Almost 20 years later, 1,800 young Texans and several from out-of-state have graduated from the program.

Those Brigade graduates have provided educational programs to thousands of people across the state. They have written articles for many small town papers, as well as the Dallas Morning News, Austin American-Statesman, Texas Fish & Game, Texas Sporting Journal, and more.

Opportunities abound for the participants of the Brigades program. Their education involves everything from wildlife biology to habitat management to life skills development. Public speaking, team building and critical thinking are interwoven into the curriculum.

Their reasons for attending are as varied as their personalities.

For those interested in a career in the natural resources, meeting the professionals currently working in the industry may lead to internships and employment after college. Even those who pursue careers in other fields walk away more confident, well-spoken, and informed.



MANY YOUTHS have never shot a shotgun. All Brigade participants receive safety instruction prior to taking their first shot.



Most graduates of the Brigades end up in a career not related to natural resources. But they are equipped to serve as conservation ambassadors and empowered to be active members of their communities. Some end up working in Austin and Washington, D.C. Others are doctors, lawyers and teachers.

My desire to see good stewardship of the land and wildlife conservation drives me to seek knowledge and make a difference for the next generation.

– Ginny Cowan, (cadet) 2010

I came into this camp being an avid hunter the day I was dropped off, motivated to learn about hunting and its different tips and tricks. It was during this camp that I realized hunting was about so much more than the size of the buck you brought home. It was about the bonds formed between your family in the field, the health of the deer and their space, and ultimately the experience in the outdoors. The instructors, some of the top biologists and conservationists in the state of Texas, were so willing to nurture and help us all along that I became more dedicated to the hunting world that I had previously thought was possible. Within the next intense five days of my stay at this camp, I became educated about the ways of whitetail deer and their habitat, as well as how to manage and maintain it, and how to approach the society we live in with the same proposition. Finally on day five, I graduated the Texas Brigades having become a better hunter, leader, friend, speaker and overall person. By having motivated, dedicated, educated, and graduated youths, I think we can change the future of hunting, conservation and possibly the world.

– McKenzie Mull, (cadet) 2009



EXCELLENCE IS REWARDED at the Brigades. Those graduates who go home and spread the word about conservation receive college scholarship monies and the opportunity to serve as Assistant Leaders.



INSTRUCTION ON CASTING with various rods and reels is provided. The Brigades challenge each cadet to do more than they believe they are capable.



Parents of participants are grateful for the opportunities presented to their children.

For two summers, now, I have seen how these kids become very passionate about wildlife and conservation. And, I have seen firsthand how my own son has grown as a person as well, thanks to y'all... You and the Brigades don't just help provide these kids traction; y'all put snow chains on their tires! – Pat Canty, (parent) 2010

We continually attempt to instill the same values in each of our girls, but it multiplies our attempts tenfold when they are re-enforced from someone else... especially gentlemen such as each of you. She has learned a lot more about self confidence, respect, leadership, and of course... quail. For that, please accept my humble thank you!
– Russell Stevens, (parent) 2009

Once the model was established, others saw the opportunity to expand to additional species. The program has grown to five camps, focusing on bobwhite quail, white-tailed deer and large-mouth bass. Several others states (Pennsylvania, Missouri and Oklahoma) have developed similar programs. Each is adapted to its area, but the

model of partnership, intensity, and excellence are the same throughout.

The Brigades model works because of the extraordinary collaboration between stakeholders. Instructors and volunteers represent Texas AgriLife Extension, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Texas A&M University (College Station and Kingsville), Tarleton State University, and the private sector. These agencies and organizations have seized upon the opportunity to educate the future stewards of our natural resources.

Non-governmental groups such as the Texas Wildlife Association and the Quail Coalition align to support the Brigades efforts. Private industry helps secure needed funding, equipment and supplies. Individuals, community organizations and businesses support cadets via scholarships for tuition and travel.

Texas Brigades is a 99.9 percent all-volunteer army. It employs only two part-time staff members during the year, and hires four to six student workers in the summer. This army of 100 volunteers is responsible for planning and putting on the camps.

Why do individuals become involved? Because they see an opportunity to give back and to be a part of the natural resource literacy movement. If the Brigades do not offer this educational opportunity, who will? Each camp has an organizing committee, which ranges from 10-20 people. They meet several times throughout the year to put the schedule together, solicit speakers, plan the menu, arrange for equipment and supplies, and raise the funds to make it all happen. These committee members serve as instructors and cooks. Adult volunteers are recruited to serve as group leaders. It is an excellent opportunity for them, as well, as they learn right alongside the young participants.

There is a fee to attend the camp (\$400 for 2011), but this is not allowed to be a barrier to a youth who has been accepted into the program. Many Soil and Water Conservation Districts provide full or partial scholarships. Applicants are encouraged to solicit donations from businesses and organizations in their communities. This is considered one of the lessons the cadets learn as they go through the process. Many individuals provide donations to support scholarships for cadets.

After graduating from the Brigades program, the opportunities continue for the cadets. They are asked to present educational programs and projects in their home communities. Hunting and fishing trips and college scholarships are offered as incentives. These rewards open doors that otherwise may not be open to those who strive for achievement. The Brigades have awarded over \$100,000 in scholarships.

The leaders of the Brigades program developed a secondary phase of leadership development in order to expose graduates to how natural resource policy is developed in Texas. The W.I.L.D. (Wildlife Intensive Leadership Development) program focuses on honing the participants' life skills and studying the political process. This year-long program is currently working with its third class.

The Texas Brigades offers opportunities at many levels and welcomes anyone interested with a passion for educating future land stewards.

Opportunity knocks. Will you answer? 🌱

*Tell me, and I forget.
Show me, and I remember.
Involve me, and I understand.*
– Texas Brigade Motto



LEARNING HOW to score using the Boone & Crockett system is part of deer management learned at the Buckskin Brigade.

