

# NATURALLY: A day in the life of a park educator

- By LISA MEADOWS Special to the Gazette
- Sep 27, 2024



Lisa Meadows, DCNR environmental education specialist, takes a break in the native plant garden. Submitted photo

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I often chuckle when a park visitor walks up to me and says, “I would love to do what you do every day.” Sometimes, I ask them what they think I do ... which leads to some pretty funny answers.

You watch birds all day behind a telescope.

You play in the stream all day looking for crayfish and minnows.

You get to kayak or paddleboard on the lake all day enjoying the water and fishing.

You get to go hiking whenever you want.

I work for the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources at Yellow Creek State Park as an environmental education specialist. My job is to develop and lead outdoor recreation and environmental education programs for the public, schools, private groups and other organizations. I’m also the park’s public relations staff, often dealing with questions from the public and on social media. In addition, I oversee the volunteer programming for the park.

A large part of my job is leading and developing outdoor recreation and environmental education programming. For example, I invited the Armstrong High School Envirothon Team to start preparing for the county-wide competition known as the High School Envirothon held every

spring across the state. The Pennsylvania Envirothon is a high school competition where teams of up to five students per group compete against each other on six topics including Wildlife, Aquatic Ecology, Forestry, Soils & Land Use, Current Events, and Oral Competition.

The winning team from each county has the chance to go to the statewide Envirothon. Students get to meet environmental professionals and earn scholarships for college or job training if their team wins or places in the top three.

I met Cynthia Lindahl and her students, grades 7-12, at the pavilion and we quickly headed out to look for migrating birds passing through the park. I gave the students a tutorial using binoculars to enhance their observations. Students watched wide-eyed as they learned to pick out the field markings on waterfowl nearly invisible to the eye at over one-half mile away. They also pointed out the blue kingfisher on a tree branch scolding them. One part of the Envirothon competition is being able to identify up to 10 birds by sight and sound/song.

For the second hour of our visit, we met up with Indiana County's service forester, Chris Fatzinger, from DCNR Gallitzin Forest District to learn how to identify common trees of Pennsylvania for the forestry station of Envirothon. He taught students how to use a dichotomous key as well as a tree booklet to learn how to identify white pine, scotch pine and swamp oak. Students also discussed how we use trees in nearly every part of our lives, whether it's furniture, building materials or writing materials like pencil and paper.

My favorite part of the day was taking the students to the outdoor classroom to learn all about the water quality of a cold-water stream by studying the macroinvertebrates for the aquatics station. Students hunted for macros under rocks, catching a variety of mayflies, stone flies, caddis flies and Dobsonfly larvae, which are all great indicators of a healthy stream. Students also used some of the same sampling equipment that scientists use, such as a kick net, to take macro samples.

After lunch, I invited students to test their knowledge of Pennsylvania mammals as part of the wildlife station. I laid out more than 22 pelts, skulls and animal tracks for student teams to identify. The students had some great guesses on the mammals but also were surprised at how difficult it is to identify skulls and tracks.

After spending nearly 4.5 hours with high school students, I moved nearly 200 pounds of scientific equipment, including binoculars, scopes, pelts, skulls and water-sampling equipment back to my indoor classroom. Every hour of teaching often requires more than 10 hours of logistical and lesson planning for each program. I sometimes spend over 60% of my day on a computer trying to develop the best programming possible for our visitors and groups.

Once I returned to the office, I put away equipment and then spent two hours helping a new park professional, who just graduated from college, with career planning and how to apply for state jobs. It's essential to help mentor new professionals and students to consider park careers so that Pennsylvania State Parks can continue to serve the public and their communities with amazing employees.

If you visit your local and state parks, please thank park employees for their hard work. They work to make our parks clean and beautiful for all to enjoy.

If you would like more information on Yellow Creek State Park programming, please check out the Yellow Creek State Park Events Page at Yellow Creek State Park — DCNR Calendar of Events or request more information on programming by emailing me at [limeadows@pa.gov](mailto:limeadows@pa.gov).

*Lisa Meadows is an environmental education specialist with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.*