



FEATURES OUTDOOR ADVENTURES WORD TO THE WISE

Life as an HGTC Wildlife Student

by Kassie Burkett
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The 2019 South Carolina Wildlife Outdoor Writing Contest top five entries have been selected and are featured right here on SouthCarolinaWild.org! The top five student writers include: Kassie Burkett, Madison Greer, Gracie Howard, Caleb Reed and Emily Thigpen.

When you hear the word lab in reference to college, what comes to mind? Gloves, aprons, eye wash stations, that safety test you take before you can participate in lab? For most colleges that's what a typical lab looks like, but not at Horry Georgetown Technical College (HGTC). I would like to give you a glimpse of what a day in lab looks like for the wildlife students. Its 1:20 on a Wednesday afternoon and most of the class is sitting out front on the porch in rocking chairs. We're there early because we all know that when Mr. Westerhold says it's time to get in the vans you want to be one of the first ones there or else, you'll be sitting all the way in the back. I learned this very quickly upon my arrival to HGTC. So, naturally I was one of the first ones in the van and ready to go.



This wasn't just a wetland; it's a special kind called a Carolina Bay.

Mr. Westerhold gets on U.S. Highway 17 headed towards McClellanville and tells us that we were headed to Santee Coastal Reserve, a place you must visit if you haven't yet. Filled with curiosity for what we will be doing in lab today, we pull in and head down a road I've never been on before. When we arrive, there are two DNR trucks waiting. We all pile out of the vans ready to see what we will be doing today. When everyone has made their way from the van, Mr. Westerhold tells us that we need to first get the machetes out of the back. Once we got the machetes out, we walked over and asked what we would be using them for. That's when Mr. Westerhold told us the exciting news, we were going to be doing wetland restoration. This wasn't just a wetland; it's a special kind called a Carolina Bay. There are many theories for how they were formed because they all have the same elliptical shape; some include giant fish beds all the way to a meteor hitting the earth.

After we talked about the Carolina Bay and its importance, the SCDNR employees, Al Mosely (Technician) and Andrew Grosse (Herpetologist), opened the tail gate and inside were three chainsaws and by two brush cutters. I assumed they would be using those, but I found out that we would each be taking turns with them. Andrew proceeds to tell us the objective of the lab was to use chainsaws, brush cutters, and machetes to set back succession in the Carolina Bay and create good habitat for flatwoods salamanders; an endangered species. He told us that his plan was to clean the Carolina Bay out good enough that he could perform a growing season prescribed burn, and this would be done to set back succession and get the habitat the salamanders like.

Mr. Westerhold asked for the first three who wanted to use the chainsaw, and we were off. I started with the machete, and was chopping down small gum trees, pine trees, and anything that I felt needed to go. I did this for about twenty minutes before it was my turn to use to brush cutter. If you're unsure of what this is, imagine a weed eater with a circular sawblade on the end. When I got a turn with the brush cutter, I started cutting down clusters of trees, high grasses, really anything that was in front of me. The brush cutter worked much faster than machetes.



He asked us to try and find our plant of the week — a yellow pitcher plant...

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I had been working with the brush cutter for around twenty minutes when Mr. Westerhold called us all over and told us it was time for a break. We gathered around Al and Andrew so we could ask them questions about what we were doing and why we were doing it. Andrew answered most of our questions about the salamanders and the plants and habitat that they liked. While we were talking with them, Mr. Westerhold gave us an objective. He asked us to try and find our plant of the week – a yellow pitcher plant, and with that we were set to get back to work. It was finally my turn to use the chainsaw. Before I could start, I had to put on chainsaw chaps that would protect from cutting my legs with the saw and eyeglasses to protect from things getting in my eyes. Now that I had all the proper safety equipment on, I was told to crank the saw up. I cranked it up, and Al showed me how to notch the tree and make it fall where I wanted it to. He also reminded me to put the break on after every time I was done using the saw.

I was cutting down big bald cypress trees, and I was about to cut another when I noticed a yellow pitcher plant at the base. I called over Mr. Westerhold, and he showed it to the whole class. So, he called us all over and told us to bring all the equipment back. We put all the equipment up and by that time it was 3:45 which means it was time for us to head back. We thanked Al and Andrew and piled back into the vans and headed back to HGTC. This is just one of the many different labs, we have conducted at HGTC, but as you can see, they are nothing like a "typical college lab."

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