

At Black Rock, kids discover science is cool

Nicky Safe, 14, of Marshfield, Mass., tells you straight why he's come to Black Rock Forest's 2013 summer science classes:



Wayne Hall
WAYNE'S WORLD

"My parents didn't want me watching TV all day and playing computer games all summer," says Safe. He won't. And he's not going to have much time to miss surfing the Web.

There are just too many very cool things to do in the science classes at Black Rock, a 4,000-acre preserve in Cornwall.

Like studying carnivorous plants, wild-looking insects, and then doing a biodiversity blitz, counting as much of nature as possible.

"Yeah, this is really neat," says Kai Victor, 14, a tousle-haired New York City kid who's got Central Park across the street from his house but came to

Black Rock because it's a forest that's crawling with 296 species of spiders (found so far), boasts 60 kinds of trees, and hosts loads of turtles, bats, coyotes, and birds.

And boasts some heavy-hitter natural history instructors.

"We're unique," says Jeffrey Kidder, Black Rock's director of education, "because we have scientists that are actually doing the teaching – for the most part,

professional biologists."

From big-league institutions like the American Museum of Natural History's Richard Gilder Graduate School.

Such as turtle expert Antonia Florio, who shows kids how to catch and census turtles (easy to do if you use sardines, she says). She's eager. She knows the value of a forest. She grew up in Astoria, Queens, on "almost no grass" but wound up studying "lots of lizards" in the Galapagos islands.

You get the idea.

This isn't a summer school that gives kids three squares and points them at the nearest ant pile. Nope. They're being taught to think. They have to write journals about what they

see, and how they feel about what they saw. And make drawings.

"I'm doing a lot of writing; that's part of it," says Rachel Freidman, 14, of Cornwall.

Years from now, these kids may pull out a weathered journal and read about these

Black Rock moments. Small ones like the red salamander that kept running around at the feet of best friends from Monroe, pre-teens Alyssa Kamara and Annabelle Alpar.

Or the really colossal experience of two incoming Newburgh Free Academy seniors, Tabitha Cruz and Jessica Ramos. They spent a week studying manatees, dolphins and pelicans at the famed

"It was fantastic. My school friend Jessica and I got to see baby pelicans being fed by their mom."

TABITHA CRUZ, 16,
Newburgh Free
Academy senior



DAVID DOONAN/Photos for the Times Herald-Record

Kai Victor, above left, and Chaya James look for birds and other wildlife during a summer science program at Black Rock Forest in Cornwall. At right, A student displays a tiny toad found along a Black Rock trail.



Seahorse Key Marine Laboratory in Cedar Key, Fla., which partners with Black Rock.

"It was fantastic," says Cruz, 16. "My school friend Jessica and I got to see baby pelicans being fed by their mom."

"Maybe someday I'll be able to help a dolphin," says Cruz, who plans to be a veterinarian. "This trip was marvelous."

Kidder knows the feeling. He says his aim is making nature useful and exciting.

After all, as a boy, Kidder hunted, fished and explored in

Pennsylvania with his mentor, his grandfather.

"I loved it all, and I always had aquariums and terrariums full of things – snakes and turtles and insects. Nothing's changed," he says.

"That's why I became a biology teacher. I never lost that, it stuck. I still have that interest."

For more information, visit blackrockforest.org.

scribewayne@aol.com