

**From:** Mark Banker  
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**Forest Action Network**  
Southern Appalachians

**Last Day**

Today is my last day working for RGS. I am not big on long goodbyes. I prefer to slip out of the party unnoticed. I was lucky to have traveled and seen the most interesting and beautiful places in the southern and central Appalachians (and some in the Midwest) as a biologist for RGS. It's been a great 12 years. I greatly appreciate the incredible support that RGS enjoys from many volunteers and donors. I've been blown away by your generosity and dedication. Thanks so much. Now I become a dedicated volunteer and continue my life-long fascination with grouse and woodcock, hopefully passing that along to my son and daughter.

I leave you with this essay written by a young man who attended the PA Drummers field school run by the PA Institute for Conservation Education last June. I had the great fortune of being an instructor at the camp. We had a bright, fun, mature group of kids that made me feel better about the future of natural resources and shattered most of the stereotypes we have about teenagers these days.

**My Summer Experience**

By Spencer Rhoad

Last summer, I was selected to attend the Wildlife Leadership Academy, Pennsylvania Drummers field school. This opportunity was a very influential event in my life and has helped me to decide my career path. The field school also helped me grow as a leader and feel more comfortable standing in front of my peers.

The theme of my week long adventure in Ligonier, Pennsylvania was the Ruffed Grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*. Bonasa refers to the sound of the drumming that is similar to the hoof beats of stampeding bison, and umbellus notes the bird's umbrella like neck "ruff" of dark iridescent feathers. Many Pennsylvanians may not be aware of our state bird's long history and unique characteristics. This bird is so elusive that even an experienced hunter can barely pick it out of the fallen trees and dense underbrush. When you are walking through the thick briars and aspen groves hunting these birds it's virtually impossible to harvest this magnificent being. The first thing you hear is the cannon like thud right next to you, then with fighter jet speed the grouse thunders away. Why would I still hunt it if it were so magnificent and hard to attain? The

reason is because I love it. I love and respect the sport of hunting. My passion led me to learn about managing and creating better habitat for our state bird. The information that I learned has influenced me to want to help these awesome birds. The Wildlife Leadership Academy has made me more aware of the environment and what needs to be done to save it and its inhabitants.

This field school helped me grow as a leader in so many ways. Everyone who coordinated the Academy showed excellent examples of how to be a leader through their actions, efforts and courage. I look up to these adults and enjoyed being in their presence. All the guest speakers followed these characteristics as well. These people definitely had leadership qualities. They gave great lessons allowing the student to grasp the information that they were trying to convey. I was a sponge for their wealth of knowledge.

There were various activities that my fellow peers and I did to practice and strengthen our abilities of leadership, not only in the classroom but in the field as well. We each had to lead someone blindfolded through the woods without touching them, only talking to them. This was quite hard to do. Next, to practice our speaking skills, we each had thirty minutes to create a speech to give to the whole audience. We were assessed on how calm we were when giving the speech and how we conducted ourselves in front of everyone. This was fun but also challenging. I really learned a lot about being able to be a leader, to speak for myself, and stand out to be individualistic.

This Academy has prepared me ready for college in so many ways. It has taught me how to stand up for myself and be a leader. The information I learned about how to manage and preserve the Ruffed Grouse has helped me to choose a career in the wildlife field. I feel that without people like me to research and help the environment, that someday there will not be an opportunity like the Academy to teach kids about the Ruffed Grouse. There will be no environment. I need to do all I can to help save this wonderful place I call home.

My experience at the Wildlife Leadership Academy has been a very influential time in my life. This field school taught me so much about our magnificent state bird and gave me a place to relax and be surrounded by people that share a common interest. I learned to lead others to save and preserve the environment. I will use these skills and knowledge to be successful in everything that I do. This academy will always be remembered as a great chapter in my book of my life.