

## Muddy Sneakers' impact goes beyond fifth grade

**By Jane Dauster**

*NC Forest Service, DuPont State Recreational Forest*

Working with young people in the outdoors at DuPont State Recreational Forest is always a bit of an adventure. But there were certain days last summer where I was in for a sweet surprise, as I saw firsthand the lasting impact Muddy Sneakers has on its students.

I led outdoor learning experiences at DuPont Forest for sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders from the **Cindy Platt Boys & Girls Club of Transylvania County**. As I greeted them, it soon became apparent that I was witnessing a homecoming. Almost all of these children had participated

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in Muddy Sneakers while in fifth grade at schools in Transylvania County and were now returning to a place where they had experienced adventures and

formed connections. It was hard for them to contain their excitement, as many of them had not had the opportunity to return to the forest since their Muddy Sneakers expeditions. As shoes hit the trails, memories of their experiences flooded in. "Where's the tree we used to make the pine needle tea?" asked one student. "Where's the leaf that tastes like green apples?" said another.

Time and time again throughout our learning about the outdoors and natural resources together, I witnessed the children tying in what I was teaching them to what they had already learned in the field with Muddy Sneakers. "Oh I remember pulling apart a dead log like that one. That's how we learned about decomposers," said one student.



Students observe the effect of solar radiation on a container of water placed in a reflective box as a method of learning heat transfer on an expedition in DuPont Forest.



**A fifth-grader from Pisgah Forest Elementary gets a closer look at an arachnid on a Muddy Sneakers trip to DuPont State Recreational Forest in January.**

Concepts we talked about such as invasive species, succession, and erosion were already part of their knowledge. Instead of being uneasy with the wild surroundings, these young people felt at home. During their time with me, they deepened the sense of place that was born out of their opportunity to visit **DuPont State Recreational Forest** with Muddy Sneakers.

What a gift this program is to our local young people, ensuring that they can get out to our public and preserved lands to experience the joy of outdoor learning! Through my work with these Boys & Girls Club students, I was able to witness the re-awakening of a joyful sense of wonder and see the lasting impact of Muddy Sneakers on young people's connectivity to this forest and development of environmental stewardship.

## Programs win Best of the Blue Ridge awards

*Blue Ridge Outdoors* announced in its January issue that Muddy Sneakers took top honors in the categories of **Educational Outdoor Recreation Program** and **Summer Camp/Program** for our school-year and summer day camp offerings! The Best of the Blue Ridge awards, voted on by the magazine's 340,000 readers, recognize the top organizations, businesses, and experiences in the Southeast.



# SITE SPOTLIGHT

## Morrow Mountain State Park



Muddy Sneakers students in the Piedmont get the opportunity to explore the natural beauty of Morrow Mountain, which offers views across the surrounding countryside.

Fifth-graders from Stanly County and surrounding areas always have a blast learning at Morrow Mountain State Park on Muddy Sneakers expeditions. Whether they are peeking under logs to find spotted salamanders or heaving bear bags up into oak trees, their science lessons come alive at this wonderful location on the western edge of the Piedmont's Uwharrie National Forest.

Morrow Mountain, one of the tallest peaks in the Piedmont of North Carolina, rises from the shores of Lake Tillery and provides a thriving, wooded landscape for native wildlife.

The park not only welcomes our school-year expeditions but also serves as a dazzling backdrop to Muddy Sneakers staff trainings. As our partnership with Morrow Mountain continues to broaden, we also enjoy having a presence in its public programs such as Old-Fashioned Day in November and the annual Star Party in April, hosted by park staff as part of the North Carolina Science Festival.

Muddy Sneakers is thankful for the rich partnership with Morrow Mountain State Park, as well as with the other six state parks we currently utilize across the state: Gorges, Chimney Rock, Lake James, South Mountains, Lake Norman, and Lumber River.



## Camp Muddy Sneakers relocates to the REEB Ranch

Muddy Sneakers' day camp is gearing up for the best summer yet! This year, campers will delve into the wonder of Western North Carolina from a new base camp location: the REEB Ranch. Located between Brevard and Hendersonville and just outside DuPont State Recreational Forest, the REEB Ranch provides a stunning landscape for younger campers to explore and a perfect launching pad for older campers to embark on new adventures.

This year, Camp Muddy Sneakers is bringing the joy of being outside to a wider range of age groups. Our new **Curious Critters** camp will let children age 4-6 join in the fun with activities at the kid-friendly base camp. **Nature Explorers**, age 6-8, will explore deeper into the natural world, and **Trail Blazers**, age 9-11, will embark on field expeditions to nearby public lands. Our eldest campers, age 12-14, will experience **Outdoor Science Adventures**, learning about fascinating local ecosystems through activities such as fly-fishing, kayaking, and rock climbing.

## Statewide expansion blooms

Muddy Sneakers continues to benefit more fifth-graders with the midyear addition of a number of new schools and districts. The WNC field office began serving two new schools in **Polk County** (Sunny View and Polk Central) and its first schools in **Madison County** (Hot Springs and Mars Hill). The Piedmont field office added two new schools/counties: Lilesville Elementary in **Anson County** and Florence Elementary in **Guilford County**. This spring, Muddy Sneakers is serving a total of 2,873 students in 43 schools across 18 school districts.

Progress also continues with our 2019-20 coastal expansion. Stay tuned for exciting updates!

Ryan Olson, Executive Director



Polk Central students look for aquatic creatures in a pond at the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site.

# Muddy Sneakers alumni give back to beloved Piedmont site

When National Geographic issued a GeoChallenge for students to develop a creative solution to the problem of plastics pollution, **North Rowan Middle School** teacher Angelia Fleming wanted to get her students involved.

Reflecting back on their aquatic ecosystem lessons in Muddy Sneakers, Ms. Fleming's sixth- and seventh-graders understood that their local creeks and rivers are tied to a bigger aquatic system that eventually connects waters from their region to the Atlantic Ocean. Ms. Fleming reached out to Muddy Sneakers staff to share their knowledge of the region's waterways and facilitate a project to give back to local public lands. In March, the middle-school students coordinated a trash cleanup with fifth-graders from **North Rowan Elementary School** at **Eagle Point Nature Preserve** in Salisbury, a site they'd explored during their own Muddy Sneakers expeditions.



Cynthia Peedin, Muddy Sneakers' Piedmont program director, said it was amazing to see the middle-schoolers so excited to return to Eagle Point and revisit the places where they had conducted field experiments. The students saw how much trash was floating in the preserve's waterways — bleach bottles, flip-flops, styrofoam — and quickly embraced the task of picking up trash. Along the way, they reminisced about what they'd learned in that natural space with Muddy Sneakers. "They were out there to pick up trash, but they were making connections to what they're learning," Peedin said.

**Muddy Sneakers gives students a sense of wonder and discovery that you don't get on your iPad.**

The classes picked up a dozen bags of trash at Eagle Point as part of the project, which also involves students creating presentations about plastics pollution. Ms. Fleming sees a strong tie between students learning outdoors and caring for the environment: "I really love that Muddy Sneakers gives them a sense of wonder and discovery that you don't get on your iPad, but that you get by being outside and having the time to look around you."



**North Rowan Middle and Elementary School students with Muddy Sneakers staff.**

## INSTRUCTOR SPOTLIGHT

Than Axtell  
*WNC Instructor*



**What do you most enjoy about your work with Muddy Sneakers?**

I enjoy helping kids, some of whom have never been in a forest before, discover that there's a fascinating world beyond Fortnite and YouTube. Watching these same children gain a comfort in the woods over the course of our season is particularly rewarding.

**Favorite expedition site?**

I love Gorges State Park, because it's my backyard and because it has so many stunning features and ecological rarities: green salamanders, Oconee bells, dwarf filmy-fern, and butternut.

**Favorite Muddy Sneakers moment?**

My all-time fave is when a very ophio-phobic student (one who fears snakes) petted, then ultimately held, a ring-necked snake we'd found on the trail. She was an instant convert from snake hater to reptile lover.

**What is the best thing a student has ever said to you?**

A young lady told me, "Mr. T, you're a really good teacher." That's nice to hear once in a while.

**What do you do outside of instructing?**

I also work as a fly-fishing guide at Davidson River Outfitters in Pisgah Forest. In what little free time I get, I like to bird, herp, botanize, paddle, and fish for trout — sometimes all at the same time!



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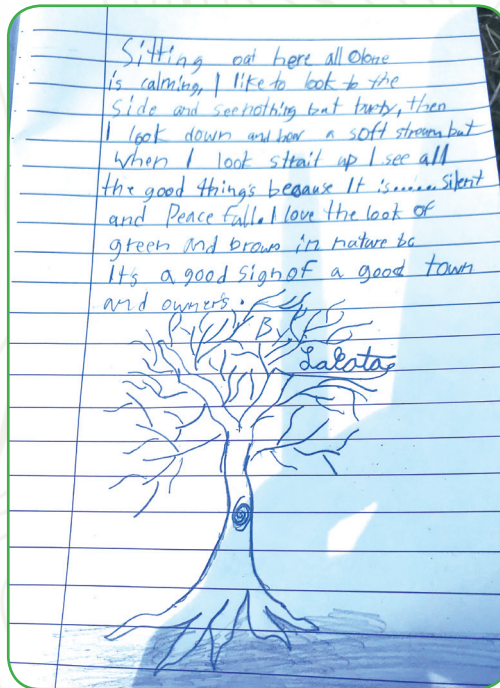
## STUDENT INSPIRATION



Sitting out here all alone is calming. I like to look to the side and see nothing but beauty. Then I look down and hear a soft stream, and when I look straight up I see all the good things because it is silent and peaceful. I love the look of green and brown in nature.



— Student at Polk Central Elementary, Mill Spring, NC. Students are provided the opportunity for reflection as part of every Muddy Sneakers expedition.



## Did you know?



Millions of trees grow each year thanks to squirrels forgetting where they hid nuts during the winter. Gray squirrels, one of the most common squirrels in NC, store and fail to recover up to 74% of the acorns they cache. Researchers have found that tree squirrels are among the most important animals for helping maintain and regenerate second-growth oak forests throughout North America.

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