

# sketches



## Pontoon classroom



Top: The curious campers board DHEC's fish-stocking boat.

Above: Bill Blackston (center) explains the impact of pollutants on the Saluda watershed.

Above right: The 4-H20 Class of 2008.

The 4-H20 Pontoon Classroom, a unique weeklong annual summer camp for children, effectively combines outdoor adventures in and on the water with classroom activities, homework, sports, and lessons on the history of Lake Murray and on protecting and preserving our environment.

Sponsored by the South Carolina 4-H Youth Development Program and the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service, the camp is offered each summer for 20 area youngsters ages 10-12. Of the campers this past June, eight were repeaters.

Returning camper Kaitie Counts said she had so much fun last year that she couldn't wait to sign up again. This year, she learned some new things, including the importance of wearing life jackets and safety in the water.

Every camper came away with lasting impressions and new knowledge.

"I learned about pollution and water runoff," said first-time camper Colin Anderson. "I never knew how bad it is. Trees help stop the problem."

Colin said he'd like to return next year.

"I know it's learning, but it's really fun. And at school, there are no swim breaks!"

Another camper, Kelsey Busch, said she wanted to attend because "I like nature and needed to do something for the summer. My grandmother went to 4-H camp, and I wanted to try it."

Kelsey enjoyed a variety of activities and picked up some statistics, too.

"I learned how many gallons of water are in the lake - 7.2 billion gallons!" she said.

The primary instructors for the camp were: Paulette Gay, 4-H coordinator for Lexington and Richland counties; Bill Blackston, area watershed agent for Clemson University; and Lynne LaSalle, coordinator of the state Department of Health and Environmental Control's Champions of the Environment program.

The Clemson Extension Service established the 4-H20 Pontoon Classroom in 1999. From the beginning, the Lake Murray Association, DHEC, and SCE&G have been partners in the program. This year's partners also included The Lexington County Sheriff's Department, South Lake Marine, the Coast

Guard Auxiliary, Trout Unlimited, Lexington County Soil and Water Conservation District, Sportsman's Warehouse, Delorme Arant, owner of Striper Delight Lure Company, and 4-H volunteers.

4-H volunteers Rachael Stansfield and Ben Knight pitched in to help with instructional and recreational activities, while White Knoll High School student Tandra Bennet was on hand every day as lifeguard.

"4-H20 is a great program that gives young people the chance to learn about water quality and how clean water preserves aquatic life, safeguards our health, and allows for great recreational activities," LaSalle said. "My hope is that, after they take part in this fun learning experience, they do their part to protect this precious resource."

Gay said the campers call her "The General" because she keeps everybody in line. Every year brings an excellent group of children, she said. But to maintain high quality, the classroom always is limited to no more than 20 campers.

To maximize the campers' exposure to the lake, staging areas were located on both sides of the Lake Murray Dam. Lake Murray Association member Rich Kidder coordinated pontoons and boat captains, also from the LMA, to carry students in their pontoons, launching from the Irmo shore, for activities on the lake.

This year's campers were ferried to Flotilla Island, headquarters of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, and to the Lake Murray Marine Patrol Headquarters on Bundrick Island, where they swam, picnicked, participated in a "critter count," observed DHEC's electric shock boat, and built a wood duck box.

On Bundrick Island, Clemson Extension entomologist Powell Smith helped the students identify creepy crawlies for the "critter count." He had gathered samples from four different ponds the day before for the children to examine up close in dishes of clear water.

"Ooh! What's this?" one camper asked.

"It's a backswimmer," Smith explained. "It swims on its back."

Another exclaimed, "I've got a hair that's moving."

"No," Smith said. "It's a worm. ... You're

in buggy heaven now.”

When another camper said, “That’s cool. I like it,” Smith beamed.

“That’s a budding biologist,” he said. “Now, look in your books and see the diagrams.”

Campers later trekked through the woods to watch DHEC’s Will Dillman and Chad Altman demonstrate the electric shocking boat. The pair go all over the state to shock fish, taking samples back to the lab to dissect and study to measure levels of mercury and other contaminants. The campers climbed onboard to examine the catch of fish, identifying each one before releasing them back to the water.

Back on the pontoons, Blackston told campers they would visit three different sites, testing for E. coli bacteria. Using the Secchi discs they’d just made with instruction from DHEC’s LaSalle, the students would measure the clarity and pH level of the water.

During a bird-identifying exercise, the campers spied ducks, hawks, mallards, herons, and even two bald eagles. They also learned about watersheds, pollution, water runoff, and water quality. After

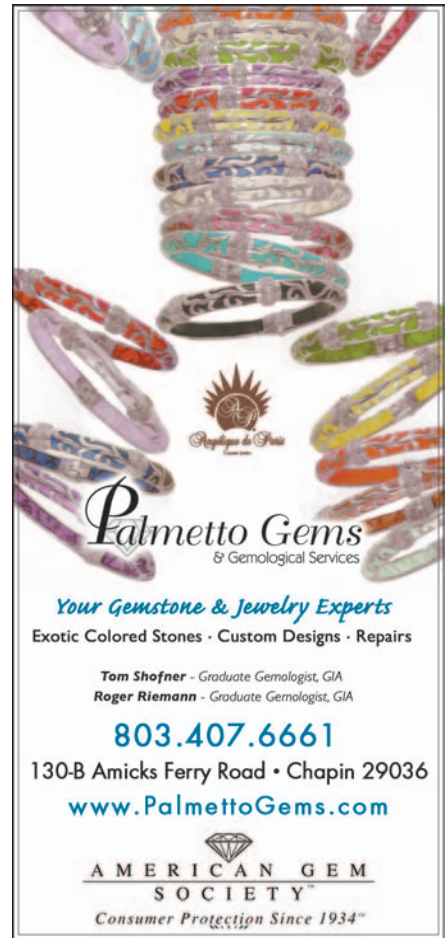
Blackston explained that Lake Murray is in the Saluda watershed, the campers discussed the causes of pollution and ways to prevent it.

Each day began with a review of the previous day’s activities and discussion of homework assignments.

By week’s end, tired but happy campers practiced casting their fishing rods, played softball, and competed in a quiz bowl, answering questions about subjects they had studied all week. They also presented skits or informal presentations on what they had learned during the week.

One team presented a history of the Lake Murray Dam; another performed a skit on mallards and wood ducks, complete with quackings and flapping of arms. Among the favorite activities cited were the daily swims, witnessing the electric fish-shocking boat, conducting the critter counts, and, of course, making new friends.

– TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY KAY GORDON



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**Terry & Janet Padalino**

(office) 803.359.7631  
(Terry mobile) 803.960.6508  
(Janet mobile) 803.960.6509  
(email) padalinoshomes@aol.com  
[www.padalinoshomes.com](http://www.padalinoshomes.com)



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