

Know Your Camp Know Your Camp

Ben Kruser, The Leader, March 1984

The next 20 years will be critical to energy development, waterfowl nesting, success, food production and other land uses with conflicting interests. As an organization which actively uses the outdoors perhaps more than any other Canadian youth or conservation group, Scouting should be in the forefront of promoting wildlife management. Scout camps should be working models of how man can exist with nature. --Ben Kruser

The sights, sounds and smells of an overnight hike kindle a boy's curiosity about nature's secrets and the Scouting world. By fostering this awareness, district campgrounds promote a quality outdoor experience but, as multiple-use pressures build on shrinking primitive areas, leaders may have to re-evaluate the environmental role and management of future Scout camps.

Wildlife lands are rapidly vanishing under development projects. Southern Saskatchewan alone loses 44.4 acres per hour. Unspoiled Scout properties bank viable habitat for disappearing native plants and animals. As these areas take on refuge status, Scouting's recreational impact on resident camp wildlife populations could be a critical factor to their survival.

Camps, unfortunately, must take a lot of abuse. Although you may visit your camp only a few times a year, outdoor Scout areas which serve large districts are often used three or four days a week all year through. Park rangers know natural areas can quickly lose their "wildness" from heavy use.

How, then, can a boy have maximum use of the campground without violating Scouting's principles of wildlife conservation? One way to ensure it is to have the district conduct a preliminary natural resource inventory. In other words, know your camp.

An inventory serves several purposes. It tells you exactly what flora and fauna are out there and, by so doing, transforms a simple tent site into a living laboratory. It also sets a base line you can use to measure the impact of camp improvements while they are still in the planning stage.

An updated camp map is the most essential item for conducting an inventory. The Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, Surveys and Mapping Branch, carries topographical maps and aerial photos of most land tracts. You can use these to scale up a larger map to work from.

If you have the financial resources, you can hire a professional aerial photographer to take pictures in autumn or spring, when neither snow nor leaves obscure features, and transfer the image to blueprint paper. Such a project will enable Scouts to locate boundaries, trails, campsites and habitat zones like coniferous forests and wetlands.

Natural Resource Inventory

A natural resource inventory is comprised of eight basic categories. These descriptions and activity suggestions will help you and your boys get acquainted with your camp.

Land Use History

How did man use the camp in the past? Here we discover the "roots" of the area and how it became a Scout camp, lore which is often lost in time. Knowing the land's background gives insight into past development and future potential. Locate and record such places as old Indian or pioneer settlements and historic trails. Research the people who once lived on camp lands or frequented them in earlier days.

Geology

The site's geology tells us what the land was like millions of years ago and describes the changes which occurred to form present day habitat. Rocks indicate dynamic action in the earth's crust: volcanoes (basalt); sea floor formation (limestone, shale); rivers (conglomerate); and glaciers (slickensides and glacial erratics). Invite a local rock collector to identify samples you collect from camp. A professional geologist is an invaluable resource person not only for locating formations, but also for explaining geological features like moraines, fossils and eskers.

Soils

Soil is affected by many factors, among them climate, topography, plant breakdown and parent material (rocks). The quality of soil determines habitat. Well-drained sandy soils support drought-resistant plants, while clay-based soils hold moisture and make good forest land. A soils map will help you locate soil-type boundaries and Scouts can dig pits to explore the differences.

Vegetation

By checking aerial photos and walking the property, you will begin to notice distinct habitat differences. Map the boundaries of such features as wetlands (marshes and swamps), hardwood and coniferous forests, grasslands, farmlands and shrublands. Over the next spring, summer and fall, make periodic visits to these areas and record new plant species. A biologist or forester can take measurement samples of tree diameters to give you an indication of the growth and age structure of the woods.

Locate rare and endangered plants and limit use of the areas in which they occur. You can press common plant species as botanical evidence, but have a knowledgeable person do the collecting.

Amphibians and Reptiles

Look in ponds and marshes and under rotten logs for amphibians. Do not collect salamanders because many of them have very limited habitat. If you remove them and replace them as little as five feet away from the original spot, they may die.

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Salamanders are also affected by acid rain, and you should take care when exposing them. Record where you observed the animal: date, time and area.

Birds

As with reptiles and amphibians, record any signs or sightings of bird life. After a year, compare notes with other leaders. You will be surprised at your camp's avian richness.

Here's a guide for listing bird occurrences.

- PR -- Permanent Resident; present year round; breeds and winters in the camp area.
- SR -- Summer Resident: breeds in camp.
- SV -- Summer Visitor; present regularly, but does not breed there.
- WR -- Winter Resident; present throughout the winter.
- WV -- Winter Visitor; present regularly but not continuously in the winter.
- T -- Transient; passes through camp during migration, but does not breed or winter in camp.
- V -- Vagrant; seen only rarely in the area.

If you continue this record over several years, you will be able to plan into your program the best times to see certain birds migrating or nesting in camp. That way you add to the Scouts' knowledge of natural history.

Mammals

Search for signs of camp mammals. Take plaster casts of foot prints and record where you find animal dens. Some burrows will have different residents every year. To see if a den is active, place two sticks crisscross over the entrance. Return a little later to see if they have been moved. Bury mouse traps or large tins with open lids in the ground to catch small rodents.

Droppings and hair tufts are other evidence of mammals. Examine owl pellets for rodent skulls and use field guides to identify them.

Insects

Open-lidded cans buried in the ground will also catch beetles, ants and other ground insects. Paint sugar syrup on a tree to attract moths. An insect collection makes an attractive display and demonstrates the abundance of protein available to larger animals.

Before you start to compile your data, talk over these procedures with a qualified wildlife biologist. He or she will be able to guide you in taking samples and identifying habitat. After you've made your survey, consult this person again and establish a management plan which incorporates Scout camping and wildlife

protection. Involve the boys in every phase of exploring seldom-visited parts of camp, and in recording finds. Give credit to people who make new discoveries.

If we understand our role in the camp environment, we can continue to enjoy the outdoors and, at the same time, save it for future generations of Scouts. --