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## **Summer camp a young naturalist's paradise**

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The first place your gaze settles upon is the spread. It's a gorgeous, 365 acre campus. Spanning forest thickly rims its backdrop. In the fore, verdant fields tumble away over babbling brooks, dribbling themselves into three serene fishing ponds.

Hemlock and bundled hay odor the crisp, clean air, which moves freely, whisking friskily through a vanguard of burly oaks and white pines.

Venturing deeper into the fold, you hear how the livestock dwell. First it's the clopping and bustle of heavy hooves under stretches of listless lowing. Now boisterous, rowdy bleats from billy-goats bang out, skipping over the farming grounds and emerald greenhouses.

The whole campus hums a kind of forgotten hymn about our agrarian roots. Indeed, every inch feels alive and thriving, as if beating to an ancient pulse.

This place, it should be mentioned, is a school, The Norfolk County Agricultural High School (NCAHS) in Walpole, and for a few weeks over the summer, it's also home to one of the most impressive agricultural enrichment summer programs a 7 to 13 year-old who loves animals and the outdoors can scuttle their boots on. The goal: to provide its campers a safe, nurturing, and educational venue with which to invest their precious summer vacation days. It's also tons of fun.

With a schedule of two, one-week sessions in mid July, campers can choose from one of over ten different age-appropriate programs, each offering a unique encounter with the natural world and the animals that inhabit it. The grounds essentially become a communal exploration center for the children based on their selection.

A few programs, Canine Corner for younger kids and Dog Days of Summer for the older ones, are dog handling classes where campers can bring their own dog or get a loaner from the staff. Rich Crespi, graduate of the high school, current junior in college and a lead counselor commented while guiding a group of campers and their dogs through obedience training drills. "Some dogs come in well-trained," he says, "Some aren't at all. Regardless, it's about teaching the kids how to handle the dog well. It's about saying the right commands, holding the leash correctly, spacing, making sure the dog respects you. Most kids get the basics like sitting, laying and sitting up by the end of the program."

The final exhibition comes in the form of a dog show at the school's formal show ring, complete with plush ribbons, splashes of fanfare, and an actual 4-H dog show judge runs the contest. This year, the judge was Judy Yanchuk. "Today's the big show. They do obedience, agility, costumes, tricks; they do a bunch of crafts too. I don't judge them so critically as if it's some formal event, but my approach is to help them out, point out what they're doing right and wrong. We also have different experience levels," she said.

It's also a practical way to expose pet handling to a kid who's always wanted a dog, but never had the wish fulfilled.

Kids between the ages of 7-13 who aren't so hip to the canine action can check out Feathers and Scales. That group had just been hunting for frogs all morning, and were heading over to one of the ponds for an afternoon of fishing. However, these excursions are strictly billed as a catch-teach-release process. "We don't keep anything," says one camp instructor, "We catch them just to show them what they are, let them ask questions and appreciate it."

One of the most popular programs available is the Horse Lovers series, billed as a program designed to give the student a 'total horse experience'. The course is hands-on for the kids to learn all things horse-care related. Beginner classes focus more on safety aspects whereas the advanced students take on a broad range of equine topics. All levels get plenty of time to spend riding in the ring and, like the canine series, these classes get to put on a Friday riding showcase of what they've learned.

Rounding out the list of other choices is the age 7-10 Cowboy Camp, a program emphasizing proper care and management of farm animals; Dr. Doolittle's Friends, a class for youngsters that centers on smaller-sized animals, is another big hit. The Super Farmer class lets 10-13-year-olds experience what it's like to work with large animals each day while they shadow a camp instructor around the grounds. An Animal Health & First Aid class will train that future veterinarian with first-hand experience of basic animal health care, pet first aid, taking vital signs and participating in bandaging labs. People swear they see dogs wandering around their neighborhoods looking like gauze-encased mummy-dogs after this class, so beware. For the survivalist at heart, 7-13 year-olds can try the Aggie Outback program where they'll be taught orienteering, fishing, woodworking and an assortment of outdoor survival adventures.

Staff at the camp include a highly motivated group who know what they're doing. B.J. Caouette, the camp's summer director assures, "The teachers we have here are the same teachers at the high school. So they are all certified animal science instructors. They're very experienced. For me alone, this is my seventh year and most have been here longer than me." The instruction, she says, is completely driven by these licensed instructors."

Then there are the camp counselors. These are generally current and former students of the high school. They are specifically chosen for their expertise in the subject matter they teach and for having that knack for working well with kids. Speaking to Rachel Yanchuk, the dog show judge Judy's daughter, a counselor and 4H member herself, it's safe to say she loves doing the work. "I'm a junior here, and this is my first year counseling, but I've been to a lot of dog shows. I compete a lot and that's why I like doing this," she says, assisting her mother with judging duties. "My favorite thing to do is the agility training with the kids in the dog programs. The smiles are priceless."

It's obvious that children are naturally drawn to critters, and sometimes it's easy to forget how much animals can teach us, no matter how young. Feelings of empathy, gentleness and respect are nourished by learning to recognize pain and discomfort and to avoid hurting animals by way of neglect or mishandling. Spending time with dogs or horses can instill a poignant sense of companionship too. It's about learning to care about something beyond themselves. Simple chores like daily feeding, reinforce what it means to follow through and be depended on.

By the end of the week, the campers have become capable handlers of their pets, and apply most of this understanding into an overall respect for animals and nature in general.

One boy, quietly petting his black lab, Jinny, before joining the other Canine Corner kids for their morning walk reflected on the patience he's acquired while training her, "I was teaching her to sit, but

it doesn't always work. But she's still a puppy, so it's going to take a little time.”

And so these seeds of compassion, patience and responsibility are sown, which will surely spring forth a group of soon-to-be young adults who understand better what it means to care for others-- that's something anyone can benefit from, whether on four legs or two.

The Agricultural Enrichment Program accepts mail-in applications. Stop by the high school or visit the website to find out more: [www.norfolkaggie.org](http://www.norfolkaggie.org)