

# Junior Wildlife Clubs

## *Now and For the Future*

By Patricia Stockdill

*In Barnes County, the Junior Naturalist Club meets once a month to learn about wildlife, habitat, and many forms of outdoor recreation.*

### Club Activities

Examples of junior wildlife or junior naturalist club activities conducted in Barnes County and through the Red River Area Sportsmen's Club, Wahpeton:

- BB gun shoot.
- Fishing derby.
- Archery and bowhunting basics.
- Trap shooting.
- Waterfowl identification and duck calling.
- Rifle shooting and deer hunting basics.
- Winter weather preparedness.
- Wildlife identification.
- Ice fishing derby.
- Backyard bird identification and bird watching.
- Nature hike.
- Pheasant hunting basics.
- Gun cleaning.
- Darkhouse spearfishing.
- Dog care.
- Boat and water safety.
- Plant identification.
- Boat fishing.
- Making pinecone bird feeders.
- Bluebird box construction.
- Wildlife videos.
- Outdoors cooking.
- Wetland discoveries.
- Trapping and wildlife management.
- Predator hunting.
- Calling wild turkeys.
- Lewis and Clark.
- Making fishing lures.

Ice fishing and open water fishing derbies and a youth waterfowl hunt held during the September youth waterfowl season are popular among children in both clubs. They are held in addition to regular monthly activities.



CRAIG BIRKLE



## ***Tips for organizing a junior wildlife or naturalist club:***

- Have as many hands-on activities as possible.
- Keep activities interesting and fresh.
- Let the children dictate the programs. The Wahpeton-based Red River Area Sportsmen's Club has a basic suggestion list of ideas they present during their annual spring picnic. But the children select topics and offer suggestions of their own, club member Wayne Beyer said. Some suggestions are not practical, however, such as learning to scuba dive, Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club spokeswoman Lynda Knutsen said.
- Providing snacks or food can make it easier for children to attend. With busy schedules for parents and children alike, serving things such as burgers, pizza, chicken or hot dogs helps everyone squeeze more things into a busy day.
- Be proactive and have good plans and good materials.
- Encourage parents and/or guardians to attend. Involve parents and guardians as much as possible.
- Do not limit participation to just one community or to children of adult club members. Remember, one goal should be to involve children who may not otherwise have an opportunity to participate in such activities. Beyer said their club philosophy is if children can get to the meeting, they're welcome.
- With busy schedules, it is difficult to select a night everyone can attend. Pick a standard time and date each month and stick with it unless special activities, such as a youth waterfowl hunt, are planned. Those could be in addition to regular monthly club activities.
- While it's difficult to limit the number of children, especially if the interest is there, remember that if groups are too large it may be difficult to provide as many hands-on opportunities.
- Involve club members, but don't expect one or two club members to do all the work.
- Seek outside funding and resources, tapping into the expertise of local wildlife managing agencies and non-club members with a special expertise in outdoor-related activities.
- Keep activities at 1 1/2 hours or less because many children have homework.
- Do not charge a club membership fee. Raise money to fund the junior club, if necessary, but make it as easy and accessible for children.
- The Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club is for students in grades three through six and older students can also attend. The Red River Junior Wildlife Club is for children ages 8 through 15.
- Use local media to promote the club, but the best promotion is word of mouth. "The kids who have fun . . . are telling their friends about it," Beyer said.
- Provide a variety of activities ranging from environmental education, fishing, hunting, birding, hiking and so on.
- Involve as many outside resources as possible. The Red River Area Sportsmen's Club has partnered with a variety of organizations, including Scout troops, trap clubs, businesses, schools, hunters, anglers, their local zoo, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, rifle clubs, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and others. The junior club provides an opportunity for a variety of organizations and entities to work together in areas where they may not otherwise, Beyer said.
- There is no need to re-invent the wheel. The Barnes County Wildlife Federation and Red River Valley Area Sportsmen's Club have found the secret to what works for them. If necessary, tweak their suggestions to find what works best for a particular area.

The junior club also provides the opportunity to get to know the local Game and Fish Department game warden. Children get to know law enforcement personnel, Gary said, so they learn to respect them and realize they are people to whom they can turn when in need, rather than fear or be intimidated.

Expansion of the program to other clubs and communities is something Gary would like to see. "It's a great deal," he said. "It's an excellent, excellent program."

While junior wildlife or naturalist clubs focus on fun, hands-on activities, they serve a much broader purpose. The concept, Knutsen said, is to get children interested in a variety of outdoor-related activities, as studies show that people involved in activities at a young age carry those interests over into adulthood.

Participants also learn to appreciate wildlife and habitat. They gain a conservation ethic.

And perhaps most of all, they learn that there is more to being involved in the outdoors than simply being out there, Knutsen said. It takes work by the public and professionals to have the outdoor recreational opportunities and resources that we enjoy in this country today, she said.

Hopefully, that understanding will be passed on, as well.

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*Members of the Red River Area Sportsmen's Club at Wahpeton mentored these smiling young duck hunters during the youth waterfowl season in 2002.*



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Ed Janzen, Fargo, joined the Junior Wildlife Club in Wahpeton to talk about the proper way to dress for spending time outdoors in winter. Janzen stressed a positive attitude toward winter cold, and among other things, offered this piece of advice about relying on blue jeans as protective, cold weather clothing: "They're not only not good, they're terrible. They get wet, they freeze, and they stay wet."



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## Reaching Youngsters

The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has long touted the value of wildlife or conservation organizations.

The Department advocated grassroots wildlife and conservation clubs as far back as the early 1930s, during a time when money and wildlife were both prized and scarce.

A February 1932 *North Dakota OUTDOORS* article announced a drive to increase local conservation organization membership was about to be undertaken and that it had the full support of the Game and Fish Commissioner. A similar effort to form wildlife associations or "leagues" was advanced in 1935, and the Department offered to send out bylaw copies to assist fledgling organizations.

A May 1942 *North Dakota OUTDOORS* article praised the role of organized groups in the conservation movement. But all of the efforts focused on adults.

The Barnes County Junior Naturalist Club and the Red River Junior Wildlife Club reach far beyond the immediacy of adult clubs and look to the future by involving children, said Doug Leier, Game and Fish Department outreach biologist, Fargo.

The clubs have the capability to do something that agencies cannot accomplish alone, he said. Just as the Department is unable to reach hunter education students without the valued assistance of volunteers, Game and Fish cannot organize youth clubs without grassroots-level efforts. "Sometimes those of us in natural resources, with all of our good intentions, may be too focused on details," Leier said. "This is really hitting a home run."

What the Department can do, though, is provide resources to assist adult organizations in sponsoring youth clubs. "I think we owe that to the clubs," Leier said. Resources could include props, teaching aids, expertise and equipment.

Organizations interested in establishing youth clubs are invited to contact the Barnes County and Red River clubs. Wayne Beyer, Wahpeton Parks and Recreation Department, welcomes any questions by calling 701-642-2811. "There's definitely a template of success, they've done it," Leier said.

It takes a special group of dedicated adults, such as those involved with the Barnes County and Red River clubs, with a willingness to put time, effort and money into a youth program to make it successful.

Success is measured in many ways, Leier said. What works and is successful for one club may not be deemed successful for another. Nor is success going to be measured overnight.

The short-term benefits may be something as simple as a fun way for a child to spend an evening. Or it may mean introducing an activity to a kid who may not otherwise have the opportunity.

And if a junior wildlife or naturalist club can teach respect for wildlife and conservation, spark an interest in the outdoors – be it in hunting, fishing or birding or hiking – or perhaps a career in natural resources, then all of the time, money and effort are worth it, Leier said.

Short- or long-term, the rewards will last for generations to come.



Randy Bostrum, an active member of the Barnes County Wildlife Federation, also extends his involvement by helping out at Junior Naturalist Club meetings.

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