

Staff from the Mississippi Ecological Services Field Office has helped with “Bug Camp” for several years. In June 2011, Malika was invited to spend two days at the Bug and Plant Interactions Summer Camp at Mississippi State University in Starkville, MS.

MSU Summer Camp

By Malika Shettar, Youth Ambassador, Mississippi Field Office, Jackson, MS

Teaser: Maggot art, nighttime bug hunts and night sounds identification were just a few of the interesting activities 4-H enthusiasts participated in during 2011 summer camp at Mississippi State University.

So the perfect start to every long trip begins with a good, old-fashioned *bonding experience*, right? Right, except trying to *unbond* a fresh tire from the bottom of a Chevy Tahoe – to replace the one which had just *unbonded* from the rim and *bonded* to the pavement a few hundred feet back – wasn’t EXACTLY what I had in mind ... But, it was the very first experience I had as the youth ambassador for the Mississippi Field Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).



I waited for three hours in the heat, rain and humidity of good ol’ Louisville, Mississippi, along with botanist Scott Wiggers, to get that tire fixed. If there’s one problem with working for the government, it’s all the extra paperwork – I felt bad for poor Mr. Scott. After getting a new tire and a new personal perspective on the specific difficulties of drug abuse rehabilitation in the country – the topic Mr. Scott, the tow truck man, and I discussed during the tire episode – we finally waltzed into the science building at Mississippi State University (MSU).

Battling rain and mud weren’t enough; Mother Nature still had a surprise for us upon our arrival at “bug camp” with our opening venture in MAGGOT ART! The principle was simple: gently grab subject with tweezers, dunk into water color of choice, drop onto paper, and watch the little worm wiggle and create a colorful trail (I say this figuratively—a maggot is not TRULY a worm). Fascinating stuff – sure to be a great money-maker. How? “It’s really quite simple,” said one bug enthusiast’s mom, “kill the artist – it’d instantly make it worth SO much more.”

But the greatest artist of all – Mother Nature – can never be killed. A fascinating presentation on micromoths by MSU entomologist Richard Brown included several beautiful microscopic photos of the creatures’ wings. Turns out, Mother Nature is a fan of geometry, just like Picasso with cubism.

Next on our list was “getting buzzed.” That is, learning about how Wendy Varnado, of the Mississippi Department of Health, singlehandedly checks those buzzin’ bloodsucking mosquitoes in our state for West Nile Virus. We were worn out after that and hit the sack, only to awake bright and early for another buggin’ day of fun at the Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge.

We began that morning with a hearty helping of eggs and then went looking for water beetles. After chasing several dragonflies with a camera, amidst a forest of water lilies, I was happy to go back to Noxubee’s educational center for a nice, sedentary session of watching a film about the history of Teddy Roosevelt’s contribution to the refuge, followed by a “Private Eye” activity of making detailed drawings of insects using small magnifying glasses, led by wildlife biologist Terri Jacobson with the FWS’s Mississippi Field Office. We went out again into the field with nets to catch butterflies and other insects. I accidentally caught a golden rod crab spider!



Dinner was followed by a very cacophonous, interactive presentation entitled “Night Sounds” led again by Ms. Terri. All of the children were guessing which sound was made by which animal. My personal favorite was the THUD THUD THUD of the drum fish!

After watching a beautiful sunset, we headed back to the dorms. That night everyone slept solidly after many, many hours of activity. The morning brought despair, as everyone realized that they would have to part with their “lubbers” (insects) and their 4-H friends. I myself had enjoyed playing with caterpillars as a child, but never did reach the level of enthusiasm and camaraderie that I experienced at bug camp!

Here are some photographs that I took at Bug Camp:

