

Sportsman's Club hosts Mercer County Youth Field Day

Roughly 100 boys and girls descended upon the Grove City Sportsmen's Club Saturday to take part in outdoor activities such as archery, canoeing, shotgun shooting and fishing as part of Mercer County Youth Field Day.

The Mercer County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs sponsored Saturday's event – a concept which originated in the northwest part of the state more than a decade ago thanks to the late Bob McWilliams of the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

"We want to give these kids the desire to keep doing this the rest of their life," said Jim Tidd of the Grove City Sportsmen's Club.

Bob Fordyce, president of the Mercer County Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, added to that sentiment.

"This is for kids who might not have ever hunted or fished who want to try it," Fordyce said. "We want to get new kids to experience these activities."

Willy Cupic of Mercer took part in his first Field Day. The 11-year-old said his favorite activity was "shooting the bow" and his favorite target was the cheetah. He also liked shotgun shooting.

"I didn't hit anything but it was fun," Willy said.

Father William Cupic was at his son's side throughout the day.

"It's good for them," Cupic said. "They way things are today they need everything they can get. I'm very impressed with it. We'll be back next year and I'll bring my daughter."

Joe Morris, a Waterways Conservation Officer with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, was on hand to oversee fishing activities at the club's pond.

"I think this is a great idea," Morris said of the Field Day. "I appreciate the clubs volunteering their time and getting kids involved. It's really important to get them involved in these types of activities."

Saturday's Field Day ran from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and started with firearms and water safety instruction. From there, the youths traveled in groups of about 10 to various stations spread across the club's grounds. Each activity was roughly half an hour.

Along with various shooting stations, others included first aid, turkey hunting basics and tree stand safety. The CEASAR rescue dogs were on site as well. Pennsylvania Game Commission officers held a "Seneca Run" – an obstacle course through the woods where the kids stopped at different locations to throw tomahawks, stones and spears to mimic what Seneca Indian youths may have done centuries ago.

Susie Knapp and Danielle Wilson of the High Flyers Club out of Pittsburgh were on hand to discuss dog safety and dog training. Along with their two Chesapeake Bay retrievers, black Labrador, and golden retriever, Wilson went over how to avoid being bitten and what to do if a strange dog approaches.

“Kids can be so afraid of dogs,” Wilson said. “Bite prevention is something all schools should work on because almost everybody has a dog.”

Knapp then demonstrated normal and blind retrieves – what a waterfowl hunter would use to secure downed game – by using hand signals and a whistle. Kids could even throw decoys into the water for the dogs to retrieve.

“This is great because the kids react to it,” said Knapp, who has been coming to the Mercer County’s event for the past five years. “Most are surprised the dogs come when they’re called, just the fact that the dogs are trainable.”

Steve Preston, a certified water safety instructor, detailed the proper fit for a personal flotation device prior to letting kids at the canoeing station hit the water.

“I try to keep it fun for them,” said Preston, who wasn’t beyond lifting kids by their PFDs to demonstrate an ill fit. “It’s a great activity for a day for these kids.”

Once limited to the northwest region, the Youth Field Day idea has spread to virtually every county in the commonwealth. Some have grown so big they don’t allow walk-ins on the day of the event, while others offer major prize giveaways. Each county sets its own date, runs its own programs, does its own recruiting and provides its own financial support. Mercer County’s day has traditionally been the first Saturday in June and allows walk-ins.

Mercer County Field Day averages a comfortable 100 to 150, but can accommodate up to about 250. The highest attendance was about 240 a few years ago, Tidd said. He added that there is no set age requirement, but most were school-aged kids between 6 and 16 years old.

“A majority of kids come back year after year,” Tidd said. “We also get some younger ones coming in. They learn about it through word of mouth, talking to their schoolmates. They talk about it at home. Word begins to spread.”

Other groups on hand to assist Saturday included: Grove City Sportsmen’s Club, Greenville Sportsmen’s Club, Mercer County Coon Hunters, Harthegig Sportsmen’s Club, Jackson Field & Stream Club, Hidden Valley Sportsmen’s Club and Superior Ambulance Service.