

CIT Interns help out at Middlebury Area Land Trust camp

By JOHN VAALER
MIDDLEBURY — Ella Bennette-Fitzsimmons proudly held a muddy, blinking, red creature in her hands. The 7-year-old grinned, identifying her new-found friend as a salamander.

As a camper at Middlebury Area Land Trust (MALT)’s summer day camp, Bennette-Fitzsimmons has plenty opportunity and encouragement to safely look for reptiles and “weird, creepy mushrooms” — her favorite activities at camp — because of a newly set-up, volunteer counselor-in-training (CIT) program for middle and high-school students.

Created by AmeriCorps members and MALT camp counselors Naomi Cutler and Celeste Venolia at the request of MALT Executive Director Jamie Brookside, the CIT program is meant to give additional support to the 5-to-8-year-old campers as well as be an educational experience for the young counselors-in-training.

“The experience of learning how kids act is a big one I would have enjoyed as a teenager, and we try to build in time for them to take leadership (roles) if they are interested,” Venolia said.

It also makes life easier on Cutler and Venolia.

“It’s fantastic how easy it can feel to be a counselor. I can take a break, read, get myself water — in those transition moments it’s incredibly helpful,” said Cutler, who has been working with MALT since Sept. 2020.

Cutler said she was “expecting the (CIT) program to be amazing,” but she

didn’t predict how successful it would be at attracting counselors.

Cutler and Venolia were hoping to find three or four high schoolers who wanted experience working with children and loved being outdoors to help support the summer camps, which are all about providing kids the opportunity to play in and connect with nature. Surprisingly, through social media posts, they found and hired 17. Each CIT is set to work two to three weeks of camp, which adds up to three CITs working with the kids each week.

“It turned out fantastically,” Cutler said.

In addition to having help, Venolia said one of her favorite parts of working with the CITs is overhearing their “beautiful conversations with the campers, noticing the small details: ‘Oh, your backpack strap is twisted.’”

Middlebury Union Middle School student Juliette Hunsdorfer said volunteering with MALT has been a great way to spend her summer, especially because it’s hard to find a job at her age. The 13-year-old CIT from Weybridge helps sanitize hands and facilitate playtime. “We do some games — we do sharks and minnows,” she said.

Beatrice Porter, 15, said that working at MALT appealed to her because she was once a MALT camper.

“I realize how difficult I may have been as a camper,” Porter said.

She now better appreciates

“just how much work counselors may have had to put in to keep us in line and make sure we were all safe.”

Porter, a Middlebury resident and Middlebury Union High School student, noted that working with the campers is her first summer job.

“It’s been good,” Porter said when asked about how manageable her workload is at the camp. “It’s a little different waking up so early in the summer,” she added.

The work does take some getting used to.

MUMS student and Weybridge resident Margaret Orton, 14, was on her first day on the job last Monday. She found working with the young campers to be fulfilling, but also said that the youngsters could at times get a little rambunctious.

“There’s more crying than I expected,” Orton said. “They’re five-to eight-year-olds so a lot of sobbing,” she said.

Orton figured out earlier in the day how to deal with sobbing children.

“Surprisingly: distract them,” she said. “Say, ‘there’s a fun stick over there!’”



CAMPER GEORGE PRICE bangs a triangular lunch bell as **Beatrice Porter** looks on. Porter has enjoyed working at MALT this summer — her first summer job — although she noted that she’s had to maintain a less relaxed sleep schedule.

Independent photo/Steve James



CAMPER ELLA BENNETTE-FITZSIMMONS, 7, holds a salamander she found. Fitzsimmons said that her favorite activity at MALT camp was looking for reptiles and fungi in the woods.

Independent photo/Steve James



COUNSELOR IN TRAINING Beatrice Porter, 15, keeps a cautious eye on camper **Amaya Morgan**. Porter, a former MALT camper, said that working as a counselor showed her “how difficult I may have been as a camper.”

Independent photo/Steve James

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is when we approach the confluence with the Salmon River. One guide warns us of challenging currents, and suggests we stay on the opposite side of the river and avoid the confluence. However another guide in another raft gives us more confidence. We will simply have to paddle hard out of the eddy into the main flow of the Salmon, she tells us. And we need to be prepared for the current to catch us hard in the side. It’s that part that makes me anxious. But after watching two of the big rafts navigate it, we give it a go. Despite the momentary catch of breath when the current catches us and it feels like we’re going to

get flipped, it proves to be a piece of cake.

And as we enter into the water of the Salmon River, I start thinking again about salmon. The powerful current — usually flow at tens of thousands of cubic feet per second — rushes below us down toward the Pacific, carrying us at a pretty good clip. I think of the amazing annual feat of the salmon swimming up that river, against that current. I consider how the combined runs of salmon and steelhead up this watershed, which totaled 130,000 in the 1950s, has now dropped below 10,000 fish a year. The primary cause of the decline is both well-known and

obvious: the myriad dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers.

The three dams on the upper Snake that we passed on our drive the first morning are entirely impassable by fish and have completely eliminated any salmon runs beyond that point. The four dams on the lower Snake — below the confluence with the Salmon River — and several on the Columbia River, are in theory passable for migrating salmon via fish ladders. But many fish don’t make it. And even with some successfully migrating back to their natal streams to spawn, the mortality rate for the juvenile salmon returning to the ocean is

brutally high. The dams turn a relative quick downriver trip on fastmoving current into a slow slog across long reservoirs. Even for the salmon that survive the hydroelectric turbines, a trip that should take only a few weeks in cold water now takes a few months in much warmer water. Massive budgets spent on hatcheries and on fish transport have done nothing to salvage the salmon runs. The only hope for the fish is almost certainly the removal of the dams on the lower Snake.

But those dams are used

for irrigation, navigation, and generation of electricity. As necessary as dam removal may be for the future of salmon — and for ocean creatures like orcas as well as terrestrial creatures that depend on salmon for food — it is not an easy sell politically.

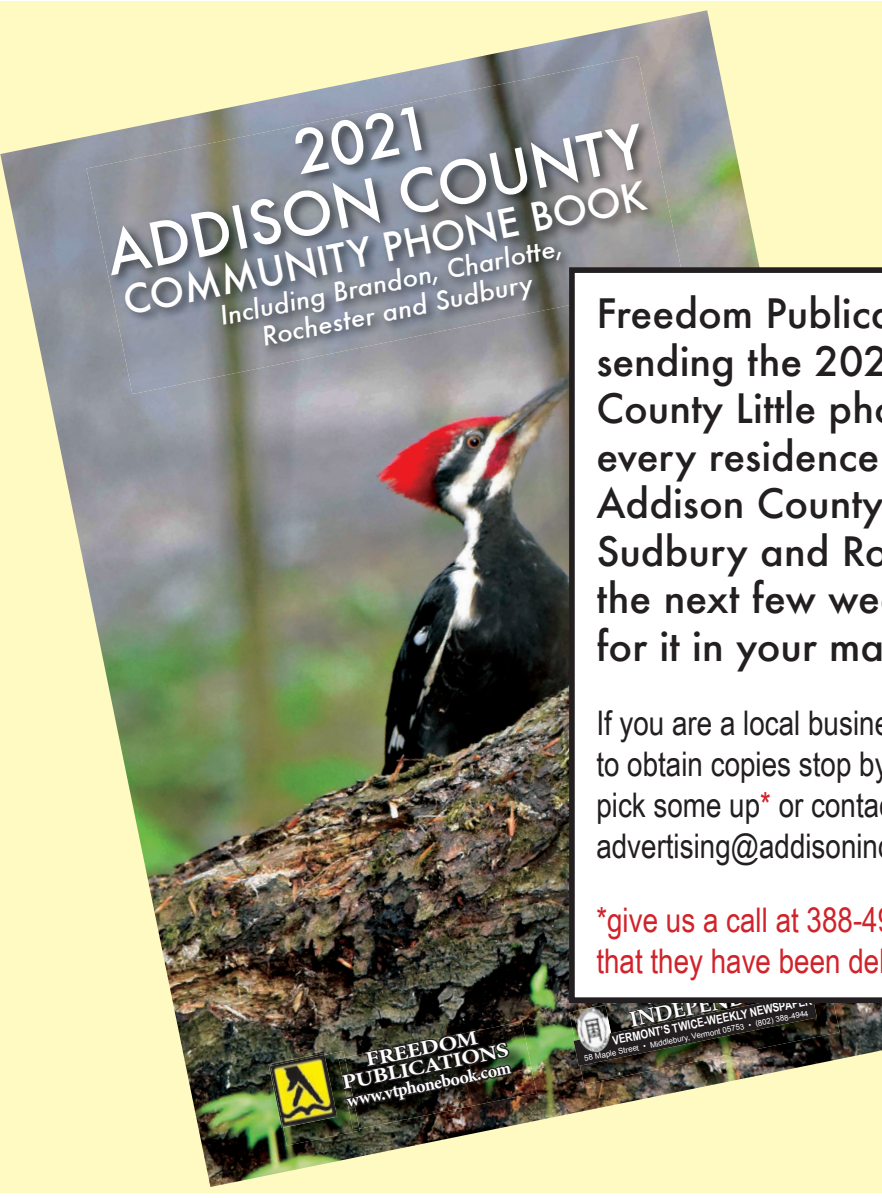
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A wonderful 80-mile float trip ends when we reach our take-out. A bus takes us another 40 miles to the small city of Lewiston. We step out of the bus onto tarmac and air temps in the upper 90s. It’s supposed to be over 100 tomorrow. We no longer

have river water to keep us cool.

I think about how increasingly common heat domes with increasingly hot temperatures will make it even more difficult for salmon to survive in a dammed river. I think the solution should be obvious. But not easy. I think also of the current drought in the West and the increased demands on the water stored behind those dams. I think I will be happy to hop on an early morning flight back to Vermont and get out from under the heat dome before the sun is up in the sky.

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