

# **FWC programs teach youth about conservation, hunting and other outdoor skills**

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**FWC Outdoor Programs**

There are a several programs in Florida that teach youth about conservation, hunting and other outdoor skills. Some of them are the Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp, Youth Hunting Program, and the Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network.

## **Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp**

Kristi Johnson treasures the memories of her first summers as a preteen attending the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp. The pleasure of paddling a canoe. The connection to the outdoors during educational hikes in the Ocala National Forest. And the excitement of mentored learning

experiences at the camp's shooting range. However, nobody could have predicted those experiences would help chart the course for an amazing future! Kristi's love of those early camp experiences coupled with camp staff recognizing her leadership skills led her to the Ocala camp's counselor-in-training program and eventually an assistant camp director position. There she formed lifelong friendships with other like-minded young people and developed leadership and communications skills that serve her well today as the assistant director at the *University of Florida Dean of Students Office*. She's also an avid hunter, target shooter and conservationist.

The Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp gives youth aged 8 to 17 an opportunity to experience the outdoors through a variety of safe, fun and age appropriate weeklong camps. It has been inspiring young people from all walks of life for almost 70 years. Many campers are from outdoorsy families and attend camp to earn their hunter safety certification, improve their target shooting skills and have fun. The Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp can be particularly important for those youth who haven't been exposed to fishing, paddling, hiking, hunting and target shooting. With many hunters looking for ways to make sure hunting is something future generations can enjoy; the Ocala camp can play an important role in supporting that goal. Certainly, we welcome youth from hunting families. We also hope hunters encourage their friends, neighbors and co-workers who aren't connected to the outdoors to send their kids to this camp. By making that simple suggestion, you can help pass the torch to a new generation of hunters and open doors for kids who never dreamed they'd fall in love with wilderness camping, sporting clays and exploring wildlife habitats.

"The Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp provides a learning environment that's safe and fun and allows kids to gain outdoors skills they wouldn't learn at school," Kristi said. "The opportunity to learn about conservation, develop life skills, such as team building, and engage with others who share those outdoor interests and values is an experience every kid should have."

This summer, camp programs offer kids the opportunity to become junior scientists, explore northeast Florida's unique ecosystems, participate in a wilderness camping adventure, and experience canoeing, orienteering, and wildlife watching. Campers who have passed a hunter safety course can improve their shooting sports skills, and high schoolers can build their leadership skills through a special camp offering. Camp operations comply with CDC guidelines for COVID-19, including reduced participant capacity to help ensure camper and staff safety. Spots are expected to fill up fast. Learn more and register for the [Ocala Outdoor Adventure Camp](#) by visiting [FYCCN.org](#) and clicking on "Summer Camps."

## **Youth Hunting Program**

Youth who have successfully completed a hunter safety course have another opportunity to help them along the pathway of becoming a hunter. The FWC's Youth Hunting Program of Florida offers kids who have never hunted the possibility to experience hunting with an adult mentor. Youth must be between 12 and 17 years of

age, have completed a hunter safety course and be accompanied by a parent or guardian to participate in one of these organized hunts. The FWC and its partners provide hunts for deer, turkey, hogs, waterfowl, dove, small game and more. This program is possible thanks to volunteers who provide places to hunt, meals and mentors at these family-oriented hunts. In addition, these hunts adhere to CDC guidelines related to social distancing.

This summer, the Youth Hunting Program is hosting two python hunts – June 25-27 and July 23-25 – to educate the next generation about conservation. Before both hunts, youth participants will receive training about why and how to safely remove these invasive constrictors from the wild. Then they'll get an opportunity to use their new skills with oversight by mentors from the FWC's Python Action Team and the South Florida Water Management District's Python Elimination Program.

If you know a youth who would be interested in hunting but doesn't have the opportunity, encourage them to learn more about FWC mentored youth hunting opportunities by visiting [MyFWC.com/YHPF](https://www.myfwc.com/YHPF).

## **Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network**

Another FWC effort, the Florida Youth Conservation Center Network, uses its statewide network of more than 340 partners to introduce youth and families to outdoor activities and conservation. The FYCCN provides equipment, training and other resources to partner facilities, such as camps, aquariums, zoos, community centers, parks and schools, so they can share the skills and knowledge needed to safely enjoy the outdoors.

In addition to connecting partners and resources, the FYCCN also coordinates multiple summer camps throughout the state, including the Everglades Youth Conservation Camp, Joe Budd Youth Conservation Camp, and the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center. Camp programs vary in the activities they offer, but the theme of conservation-centered recreation is consistent throughout. Learn more by visiting [FYCCN.org](https://www.fyccn.org).