TRAVIS HOFFMANN

Drew Jaspers, Mike Rentz, Jon Mikulicz, Jim Adelman, and Collin Alfers measure coarse woody debris in the Lolo National Forest.

THE (BIG) SKY'S THE LIMIT AT FRENCH CONSERVATION CAMP

BY STEVE SULLIVAN

After hiking a richly forested Montana mountain range, a team from Iowa State gathered around a campfire to make s'mores.

That's when the moose made its dramatic entrance. The great beast bounded down a path, stopping briefly to glance at the stunned s'more-makers before plunging into a nearby pond.

Wild moments like this make the new Rod and Connie French Conservation Education Camp a dream classroom for ecology-minded Iowa State students.

The camp was established in 2016 through a $4.1 million gift of a ranch owned by Connie French, of Des Moines, and her late husband, Rod, longtime supporters of and donors to Iowa State. The 50-acre former resort is now a learning facility that is preparing students for environmental careers.

At the camp, students "learn about ecology hands-on, in a natural setting. There's no better way to learn this material," said Jennifer Schieltz, camp director and lecturer with Iowa State's Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management (NREM).

"This is definitely the most hands-on experience I've ever had in any of my classes. We're using methods that professionals use," said Drew Jaspers, an animal ecology major who was part of the camp's first class last summer. "The experience has been way beyond all my expectations."

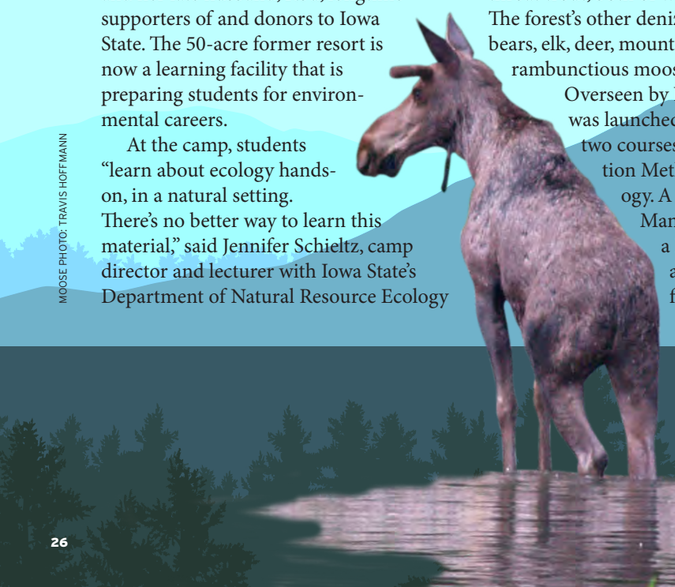
The camp is about 50 miles west of Missoula and nestled at the foot of the Bitterroot Mountains, part of the Lolo National Forest in western Montana. The forest is blanketed with a variety of tree and plant species. The region has nearly 1,000 named streams, including Fish Creek, which runs through the camp. Fish Creek is home to several fish species, including bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, both of which are endangered. The forest's other denizens include wolves, bears, elk, deer, mountain lions and, yes, rambunctious moose.

Overseen by NREM, the camp was launched last summer with two courses: Wildlife Population Methods and Field Ecology. A Forest Fire Fuels Management course and a Fall Forestry Camp are planned for the future. All these courses have been specifically designed for the location and are open to students in any major at Iowa State.

"Most of our students come from the Midwest and are used to flat landscapes and managed environments, and the animals and plants that live around the region," said Mike Rentz, an NREM lecturer who co-teaches the Wildlife Population Methods class. "The camp requires them to learn concepts and processes and apply them in an entirely different ecosystem with different landscapes, and animals and plants they've never seen before."

A typical day involves brief lectures before the students go into the field. They might set up camera traps to monitor wildlife populations, survey ground cover and fallen trees to determine available wildlife habitat, or examine trees to compare a burned population to one that's unburned. Some of their work will provide valuable information for Montana state officials.

"You're surrounded by whatever you're working on that day," said Collin Alfers, an animal ecology major who was among camp's first students. "It's total immersion – as if you have a job in the field you hope to go into."



MOOSE PHOTO: TRAVIS HOFFMANN

JENNIFER SCHIELTZ

Travis Hoffmann, Mike Rentz, Jon Mikulicz, Collin Alfers, Jim Adelman, and Drew Jaspers stand beneath the French Conservation Education Camp sign at the entrance to the camp.

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>
> – MIKE RENTZ, NREM LECTURER

Collin Alfers, Jon Mikulicz, and Mike Rentz help each other cross a fast-moving mountain stream while hiking the Heart Lake Trail (in the Proposed Great Burn Wilderness).

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: TRAVIS HOFFMANN

Drew Jaspers, Collin Alfers, Jon Mikulicz, Jennifer Schieltz, and Jim Adelman take a lunch break at Heart Lake during a day of hiking.

Jennifer Schieltz, camp director and faculty in NREM, examines a Ponderosa pine tree while sampling vegetation near the camp.