A new ICF scholarship program recognizes Illinois youth for their involvement with the natural resources.

Outstanding Young Conservationists

Story By Kathy Andrews

Reading the essay, judges Jess Hansen and Jeff Vose had to put down their pens and take a moment to mull over their own contributions to Illinois' natural resources. **Sarah Gillespie**, a junior at *Newton Community High School*, started a wave of personal reflection.

"I feel a bit foolish as I write because all that I have been doing is what I should do," Gillespie wrote in her application for the Illinois Conservation Foundation's (ICF) premier Youth Conservation Scholarship program. "Of course, I stop and pull garlic mustard every time I see a patch. Of course, I recycle. Naturally, I practice hunting and fishing ethics. I put up nest boxes. I helped my brother search for invasive Chinese yam plants. Yes, I've planted trees (lots of trees), seeded waterways (buckets of seeds), planted rootstock (ouch, my back), picked up trash along the river and trails (yucky) and beat out fire during prairie burns (hot and scary). Still, it was natural that I suggest to Dad that we convert our 20 wet acres into a wetland."

"Illinois Conservation Foundation Board Member Barb Ducey, Belleville, came up with the idea to expand on the Outdoor Hall of Fame with a program to help Illinois youth achieve their life goals and provide them an opportunity to meet people who have dedicated their lives to the same causes," said Jess Hansen, ICF executive director and one of six judges for the 2004 awards program. "The result of this dream was creation of the Youth Conservation Scholarship program which awards $1,000 scholarships to 10 high school juniors and seniors who have made significant contributions or exhibited unparalleled dedication in preserving, promoting, enhancing or supporting natural resources."

"Natural resource education is a primary mission of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and working hand-in-hand with ICF we conduct programs to instill in our youth an appreciation for the outdoors and natural resources," commented Jeff Vose, manager of DNR's Educational Services

Newton High School student Sarah Gillespie assisted with the collection and identification of aquatic organisms during stream surveys.

(Photos courtesy of recipients.)

Drew Griffths, a student at Riverdale High School, was involved in the development of habitat areas on school property.

Section and a judge of the 2004 entries. "The energy and enthusiasm conveyed in each application was inspiring. This program definitely provides the opportunity for young people to connect with mentors and to pass the torch, inspiring people of all ages to take an active role in their home, community and state."

Despite her involvement in so many levels, even Gillespie questions whether she has made significant contributions.

"As spring arrives this year, clumps of big bluestem are bright green against the burnt residue," Gillespie concluded in her essay. "Soft, pink oak leaves are visible on seedlings I planted. People passing by my wetland see a pair of nesting mallards. And yet, I've noticed a bunch of locust sprouts on one of my prairies. I have work yet to do."

As do we all.

Drew Griffiths, *Riverdale High School, Port Byron*

"When I was young my father and I planted trees on our property and in 7th and 8th grades I helped my school organize and develop a butterfly garden and a wetland. I take satisfaction in knowing that what I have done brings wildlife, vegetation and nature back to a place where only the trickle of farmland runoff once was heard."

As a volunteer at a local nature center, Hoffman Estates High School student Nicole Evans undertook a variety of hands-on projects.

Nicole Evans, *Hoffman Estates High School, Hoffman Estates*

"Many students have a hard time deciding what they want to do with the rest of their lives but I have known for years what I want to do—help Mother Nature. I am co-president of the environmental club at school, volunteer at a nature center and organized a recycled-clothing fashion show. Preserving the environment will be my avocation because it is something I am truly passionate about."

Marcin Tomkowiak, *Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, Chicago*

"My high school project has been to work on a cancerous agrobacterium in crops and using a static magnetic field I have decreased the cancerous growth by nearly 50 percent. I presented my data at city, regional, state and national fairs and expositions. Promoting conservation practices through state government is a major aspect of my contributions to preserving our natural environment on a grander scale."

At the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, Marcin Tomkowiak conducted studies on plant cancers.

Paras Bhayani, *Illinois Math and Science Academy, Aurora*

"I strive to maintain a balance between direct action and legislative campaigns with my conservation work. I have been president of an environmental club and worked with the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club on a variety of projects, including development of a bilingual brochure for a rivers event. I bring energy and innovative ideas to conservation movements and have the organizational competence to get things done."

As president of an environmental club, Illinois Math and Science Academy student Paras Bhayani developed leadership skills and the ability to motivate and lead students working on restoration projects.

J.C. Capel, *Mahomet-Seymour High School, Mahomet*

"One of the best things I have done is work with the "Links to the Future" program at Lake Shelbyville and at youth wingshooting clinics. This volunteer work has helped me form a belief that a big part of the conservation effort is making sure youth value our natural resources. My volunteering has taught me far more than I could have learned in just a classroom."

Volunteering with youth hunting programs was a rewarding experience for J.C. Capel, Mahomet-Seymour High School.

Emily Mahan, *Red Bud High School, Red Bud*

"In my early school years I conducted wildlife studies for my science fair projects, advancing to regional and state levels four times and receiving an outstanding achievement ribbon from the Illinois Chapter of The Wildlife Society. I am active in my school science club and enjoy turkey and deer hunting. I value my own personal awareness and appreciation for without this I would not be able to influence others and take action to help conserve our natural resources."

For four years, Red Bud High School student Emily Mahan examined coyote uterine placental scars to determine population characteristics, resulting in an award-winning science fair project.

Participation in 4-H and Envirothon contests helped Wesley Bryan, Clay City High School, develop a broader understanding of natural resources.

Illinois Conservation Foundation (ICF) Youth Conservation Scholarships are awarded annually to two students in each of five regions, as designated by the Department of Natural Resources. Presentations occur during ICF's annual Illinois Outdoor Hall of Fame Banquet.

Applicants must be nominated by a natural resource constituency group, community leader, school administrator or teacher, or adult mentor, and must be Illinois residents who are high school juniors or seniors at the time of application.

The scholarship program is supported through funds raised at the annual Illinois Outdoor Hall of Fame banquet. The Illinois Outdoor Hall of Fame was initiated in 2002 to honor people who have made significant and lasting contributions in protecting and enhancing Illinois' natural resources for future generations.

For more information about the ICF Youth Conservation Scholarship, or to download a nomination form after September each year, go to www.ilcf.org.

The Illinois Conservation Foundation, an IRS 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit corporation, has raised more than $18.5 million to support DNR programs. Contributions are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. For more information, contact the Illinois Conservation Foundation, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702, phone (217) 785-2003, or visit www.ilcf.org.

Wesley Bryan, *Clay City High School, Clay City*

"Growing up on a farm I was introduced to practices to conserve valuable topsoil. When I entered high school, I learned about the Envirothon and 4-H forestry competitions and have competed at the regional, state and national levels. My involvement in these competitions has broadened my knowledge of natural resource conservation activities."

As a member of the South Central High School agri-science class, Heather Busse learned how to judge soils.

Heather Busse, *South Central High School, Farina*

"Growing up on a small family farm, conservation and the preservation of our natural resources has been prominent in my life. Through my agri-science class I have learned how to judge soil and our team has placed well at county and state competitions. Resources are too valuable to be wasted or used unwisely. After college I want to research new and better ways of conserving resources."

Caitlin Allen, *Heritage High School, Broadlands*

"Agriculture is dependent upon natural resources and my parents have raised me to appreciate, respect and care for the environment. We practice minimum tillage, plant buffer strips, delay mowing roadsides and put up bluebird boxes. At school, we clean up roadsides, recycle and teach elementary students about agriculture. I do not perceive the preservation of our environment to be connected to scheduled events and activities, but a way of life."

Erecting and monitoring bluebird boxes are among the many habitat management practices Heritage High School student Caitlin Allen has undertaken.