

Resource management with a mission

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps builds skills, confidence and a better outdoors.



Each year WCC offers hundreds of young Wisconsin men and women paying jobs, outdoor experiences and new skills. Here, a crew member learns to safely use a chain saw while carving out the Boyceville Rifle Range in Dunn County. WCC photo

Dawn L. Jones

By 9 a.m., Ben Bedward and Todd Butteris are hip-deep in the Blue River, a Class II trout stream near Boscobel in Grant County. Wearing heavy waders and carrying nets, they

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trudge upstream through the mud, pulling the four-foot mini-boat and gasoline powered generator behind them. They aren't out fishing — this is a job.

Ben, 22, and Todd, 21, work for the Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC), a state agency that puts young men and women to work on conservation projects throughout the

state. Ben, Todd and six other corps members on their crew are helping the Department of Natural Resources evaluate the effects of changing fishing regulations on the size of brown trout populations. Today's stream sampling goes hand in hand with the habitat work to maintain and improve Wisconsin's trout streams. Corps members have spent many hours



Teamwork deepens and rechannels trout waters on Tichigan Creek, a DNR-sponsored WCC project at Bong Recreation Area in southeastern Wisconsin. WCC photo

brushing stream banks, installing half logs and constructing other structures to rebuild trout streams.

"Todd, keep your tip up in the water like so," department Fisheries Manager Roger Kerr reminds him.

"There. . . there's a trout right in front of you!"

Kerr knows how to shock a stream; he's been doing it 20 years and has shocked this stretch of Blue River 12 times.

"I haven't tripped over every rock yet, but almost."

The electrical current held just under the water's surface safely stuns fish. Floating belly-up to the surface, the fish remain motionless for a few seconds to a few minutes, long enough for Ben and Todd to identify the brown trout, scoop them into their nets and then into a storage tub.

Every 500 feet or so, they stop, move to the bank, measure the browns, clip a fin (as a marker) and gently return the trout to the water.



WCC built this eye-catching, meandering trail at Blackhawk Island Natural Area in south central Juneau County. Visitors used to slog through wet soils, dampening their sneakers and trampling rare plants in Spring Gulch. Now, everyone is happy.

Photo by Dave Chesky

A few days later, the same stream section is shocked again. By calculating the percent of clipped fish recovered, Kerr can more accurately estimate the stream's brown trout population.

The Boscobel crew is one of 36 current WCC crews. Each year, nearly 300 young people employed by WCC work on as many as 36 year-round projects throughout the state, from Boscobel to Iron County to Green Bay.

Like the federal Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of the 1930s, the WCC has a dual purpose: to meet conservation and unemployment needs. The CCC gave hundreds of thousands of young men a chance to work when the Depression was at its worst and helped replant the nation's ravaged forests at the same time.

In its first five years, the WCC has employed about 2,000 young people and worked with Wisconsin communities on conservation projects like planting trees to building park

benches, refurbishing low-income houses, building shelters and clearing cross-country ski trails.

WCC depends on cooperation between state and local agencies to get jobs done.

"Projects are proposed by individual sponsors like the Department of Natural Resources," said Dave O'Malley, projects coordinator for WCC.

"We work with several other state agencies, city, county and tribal governments, the federal government, conservation organizations and other not for profit groups," O'Malley continued.

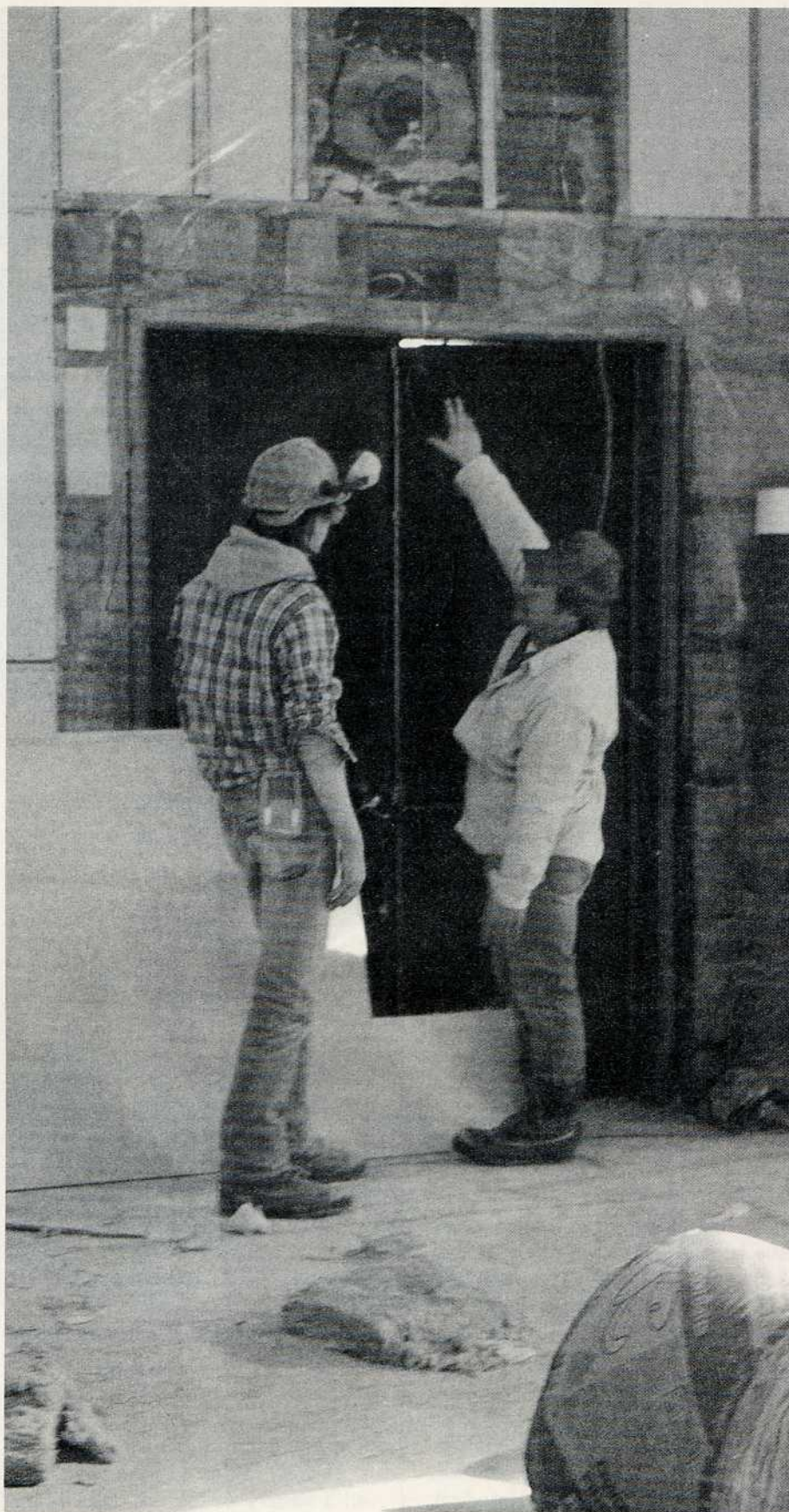
"Sponsors provide work materials, equipment, transportation to and from the work site, safety equipment and training programs such as natural resources management, safety and first aid training," he added. "In return, WCC provides 100 percent of corps member wages along with additional safety equipment (like hardhats) and administrative support."

Who can work for WCC?

Applicants must be between 18 and 25 and unemployed. WCC pays them \$3.35 per hour for 40 hours work each week.

"But Corps members earn a lot more," says WCC Field Support Specialist George Riffin. "At the end of the year, they can successfully compete for jobs because they've learned basic work skills."

Executive Director Bill Brakken explained further. "Corps members tell me the program works for them because they develop basic skills like getting to work on time and working in a situation that demands teamwork, learn technical skills like carpentry and operating power equipment, and get self-confidence from taking pride in their accomplishments. We truly challenge them. They work hard — sometimes harder than they ever have in their lives — and when they're done, there's usually a product they can look at and



Conservation takes many forms. WCC crews insulated and weatherproofed the Ashland Youth Center in a popular community project.

Photo by Bob Nelson



Todd Butteris (left) and Ben Bedward sample trout on the Blue River. The Wisconsin Conservation Corps teaches workers how to use the tools of conservation trades. Photo by the author

say, 'Well, I did that,' and that makes them pretty proud."

Our supervisors get additional training, Brakken continued.

"The crew leaders develop strong camaraderie and a strong sense of mission in the agency. When you have that — when crew leaders know they're there to help corps members develop and to provide good service to communities in the process — I think that makes a big difference."

Kinds of work

By law, all WCC projects must have lasting benefit for a large sector of the public. Since WCC receives far more proposals than it can accommodate, the agency only chooses projects that will provide public service and valuable learning experiences for corps members.

WCC projects must conserve natural resources, promote recreational development or preserve historical structures. Many projects combine work in forestry, wildlife, fisheries,

parks, trails, erosion control, restoring historical structures and many other areas of natural resources management.



Some conservation projects rely on WCC crews year after year. Since 1983, 11 WCC crews have worked along the Ice Age Trail — the 1,000-mile trail tracing the southern edge of Wisconsin's last glaciers. Corps members have designed and cleared new portions of trail and built bridges and shelters along existing sections.

A crew in Iron County is working on a variety of fish and wildlife and forestry projects for the Iron County Forestry Department including build-

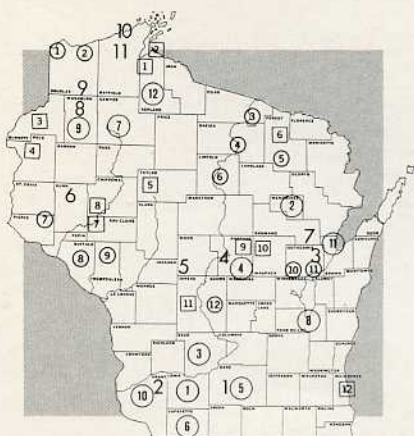
ing fish cribs, trapping bears and improving timber stands by cutting down old and diseased trees.

Many of these projects have been coordinated with the Department of Natural Resources at Mercer, which has provided technical guidance and support. Local ruffed grouse populations will benefit from aspen regeneration work at the county forest and habitat improvements on 100 acres owned by the Chippewa Flambeau Improvement Corporation adjacent to the Turtle-Flambeau flowage.

Corps service is limited to one year to move members into the job market and make room for other unemployed young people.

When corps members finish their year of service, they can choose a service completion bonus — either a \$500 cash voucher or a \$1,500 scholarship voucher.

Encouraging greater use of the scholarship option and increasing the long-term career development training opportunities for corps members are Brakken's next goals for WCC:



Wisconsin Conservation Corps projects provide lasting conservation benefits to communities across the state. If your organization or community is interested in sponsoring a project that helps unemployed young adults learn job skills, contact WCC. Ask for Dave O'Malley, Projects Coordinator, Wisconsin Conservation Corps, 30 W. Mifflin Street, Suite 406, Madison, WI 53703; (608) 266-7730.

"Sure we teach a lot of important things. However, until they learn how to look for jobs effectively, until corps members plan their futures, we can't kid anyone. We have to say: 'Listen, this can serve as only part of your experience.'"

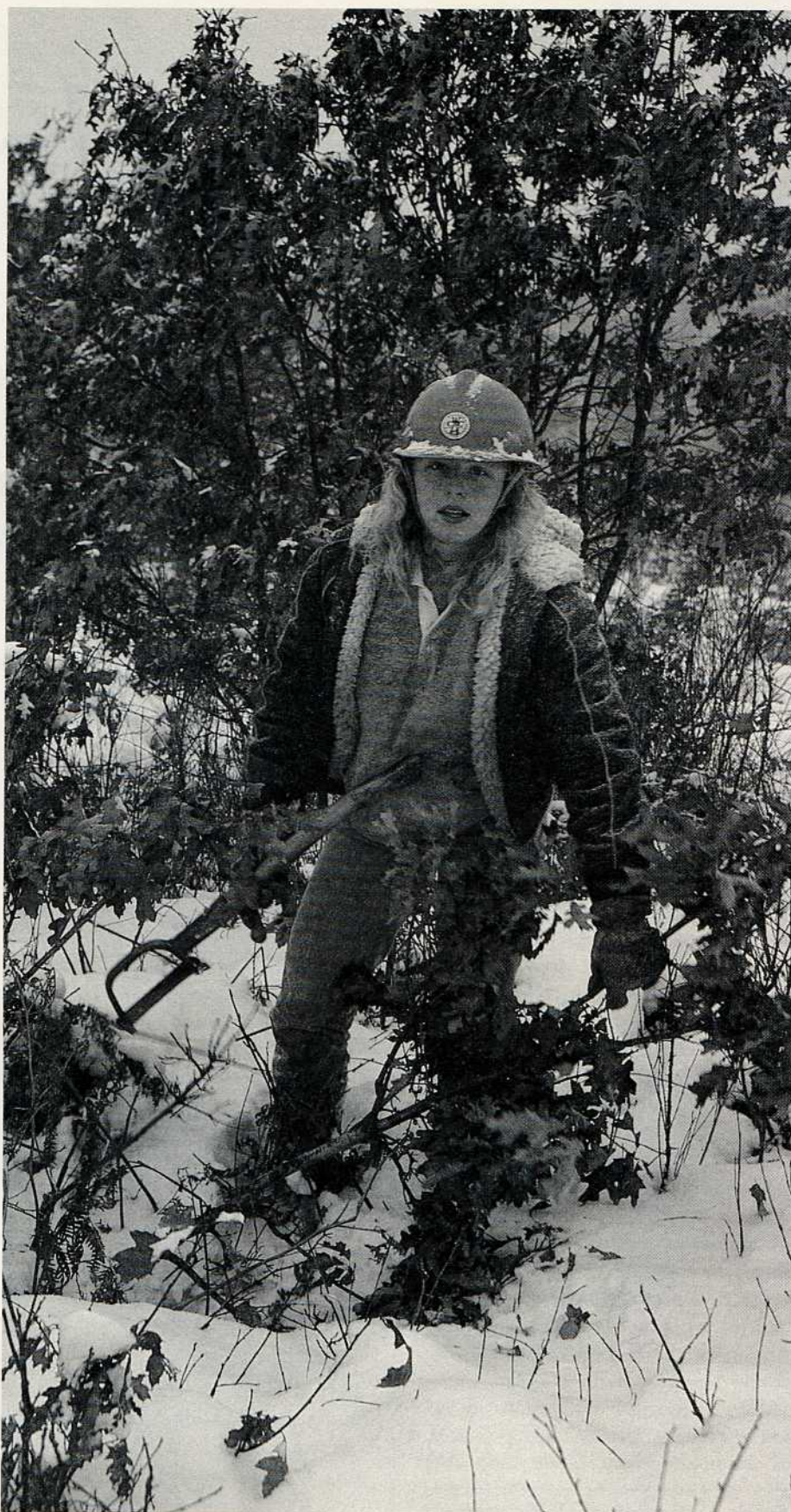
Ben has been a corps member since last October and has worked with the Department of Natural Resources in Boscobel trapping wild turkeys and cutting down diseased trees at the Boscobel State Nursery. His one-year corps stint ends soon, and he's started to plan for his future.

"I'd like to learn about engineering — diesel mechanics — and then go to school after that."

Todd has been with the corps for four days, and the stream shocking project is his first. Like his crew members, Todd joined WCC because he needed a job. After a year and a half in the Navy, he came home to Grant County to find that jobs were scarce.

"At first, I just needed a job, but now I like it too," Todd says. "I always wondered how they counted fish in rivers and stuff, and now I know."

After WCC service, Todd wants to go back to school and learn more about conservation. "[WCC has] helped me get my headstart by helping me get one foot in the door." ■



Tough projects aren't reserved for the men. Female corps members cut brush in a snowy Douglas County tract.
Photo by Bob Nelson