

# Tuscaloosa Forestry and Wildlife Judging Teams Maintain National Leadership

By JIM LANGCUSTER, Extension Communications Specialist

Almost a decade ago, while competing in a 4-H horse show in north Tuscaloosa County, Charlaina Greene made a decision that would impact not only on her own life but several other Tuscaloosa youths as well. "One of my friends told me she was going to Auburn to participate in the state 4-H junior wildlife judging competition," Charlaina recalls. "She asked me if I wanted to go too and I said, 'sure!'"

To prepare for the competition, Charlaina faced a daunting three days of intensive study—a tall order for a girl who was only 9 years old at the time. Her efforts paid big dividends: she and her team took second place in the statewide competition—by all accounts, a respectable showing for a rookie.

From then on, Charlaina was hooked on wildlife judging—so hooked that she persuaded other young people to join the wildlife team and, later, the Tuscaloosa County 4-H forestry judging team. One of her recruits was Jacob Ramsey, who had been one of Charlaina's academic rivals in school.

"I thought this would be one way to beat her, but it ended up being fun in addition to being competitive," Jacob recalls with a smile. Charlaina's and Jacob's experiences closely parallel those of other 4-H'ers whose experience with wildlife and forestry judging started at an early age and who loved the competition despite the mind-numbing study and preparation.

Wayne Ford, a Tuscaloosa County Extension agent, is widely considered the "father" of Alabama 4-H forestry judging in Alabama. The judging teams grew out of a natural resources short course Ford holds annually in the small Tuscaloosa County community of Fosters to introduce kids to natural resource and conservation issues. Like any resourceful coach, Ford also uses the event to recruit topflight talent to participate in his wildlife and forestry judging teams.

Under Ford's leadership, Tuscaloosa teams already have garnered nine national championships—six forestry and three wildlife. Since Alabama began competing in the national 4-H forestry judging competitions in 1984, it has dominated all other states by winning 10 national championships. Likewise, since 1989, Alabama 4-H wildlife judging teams also have won four national championships and several reserve championships.

"Alabama is a natural place for building championship teams," Ford says. "It's one of those states where it's still possible to walk out your front door and encounter an environment you can learn from firsthand."

Of all 4-H competitions, wildlife and forestry judging are among the most rigorous. To compete successfully in either category, team members undertake hundreds of hours of intense study covering everything from wildlife habitat to tree identification. "With wildlife judging, you have to learn what (habitat management) practices are best suited to different types of wildlife," says Matt Hallman, a wildlife and forestry judging team member who started college last fall. "This even involves learning how to read aerial photographs."

Aside from that, team members also have to know how to identify many different wildlife species as well as their eating habits. Acquiring this knowledge usually involves a combination of book learning and practical experience. "You're assigned a book that you pretty

much have to learn inside out," Hallman says, "but practical experience accounts for a whole lot too."

Forestry judging preparation involves an entirely different set of challenges. Statewide competition involves learning how to identify more than 60 different trees in Alabama. If the kids are lucky enough to win statewide competition, as the Tuscaloosa team did this year, they must acquire a strong knowledge of more than 25 additional tree species in order to compete at the national level. On top of that, add forestry insect predators and diseases. "We would come and practice on Saturday and Sunday afternoons," says Lindsey Waters, now a college freshman, as she recalls preparing for last summer's national forestry judging competition in Weston, West Virginia. "Then, on the way to West Virginia, we studied 45 straight minutes at a time (at Mr. Ford's urging) and then took what Mr. Ford called 15-minute 'power naps.'"

Their efforts paid off. Winning by 58 points against its nearest competitor, the Tuscaloosa team carried away its sixth national forestry judging trophy.

As an Extension agent working in the town where the late Paul Bear Bryant amassed six national college football championships, Ford always had aspired for his forestry teams to win six national championships. He got his wish last summer in West Virginia. 🏆

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