Mountain Democrat

Camp offers youth wonderful adventure in the wilderness

By Shelly Thorene · August 26, 2026



Deer Crossing Wilderness campers gather around Leaders in Training who wrote the choices for the day's activities on a chalkboard. Activities include archery, wind surfing, learning how to roll a kayak, canoeing, bouldering, pottery and lake swimming. *Mountain Democrat photo by Shelly Thorene*

Around 30 youth campers ages 8-17 from all over the world gathered for an adventure-filled journey at Deer Crossing Wilderness Camp on Loon Lake this summer. Campers participate in guided wilderness survival activities, kayaking, sailing, canoeing, leadership activities and, believe it or not, chicken training!

The off-grid campsite is only accessible by boat or a 2-mile hike through the Eldorado National Forest. The site includes a lodge on the property originally built for Boy Scouts in the 1960s. It houses a dining hall, kitchen, crafts room, first aid room and bathrooms with flush toilets and real showers. Children sleep in tents in divided campsites: one for boys, one for girls and one called "Switzerland." Campers wash their clothing by hand, take part in all of the chores and vote on the daily activities. The camp has a staff of 21 and 30 campers.

Camp Directors John Ellis, Doug Fischer and three teens ferried the Mountain Democrat in a small boat across Loon Lake to the campsite one summer morning. After docking, the group made their way up a trail to the lodge, where they were met by a flock of chickens. "They're pullets," said Ellis. "Guess why they are here? It's not what you think."

Ellis explained that some of the older campers become Leaders In Training and use clickers to teach the chickens tricks using a positive reward system (mealworms). “It is a fun way to show the children the benefits of positive feedback and promote pro-social behavior,” he said.

Challenges build confidence

"The mission of Deer Crossing Wilderness Camp is to strengthen young people’s positive character traits by building their self-confidence and leadership skills. We teach essential outdoor skills such as wilderness safety, canoeing, windsurfing, rock climbing, navigation with map and compass, and advanced expeditions. All our activities are designed around an appropriate level of challenge, and our goal is for campers to see themselves growing when

they try hard things so they identify as “someone who can do hard things,” Ellis explained.

Jim Wiltens, 77, of Redwood City is the camp's founder and emeritus director. His parents bought the property in the 1980s, and the family created the camp in 1983 to teach leadership skills through outdoor activities. Wiltens sold the enterprise to Fischer and Ellis in 2022 but continues to support the program. "It took us 2 ½ years to rebuild the lodge. The floor was burnt by people making camp fires," he said. Wiltens holds a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley and an master's from Simon Fraser University in Canada. He is a world-class explorer whose adventures include high altitude climbing in the Andes, exploring underwater caves in the Yucatan, kayaking the headwaters of the Amazon, paragliding over Africa and crossing the Thar desert of India and the Gobi Desert of Mongolia on camelback.

True leaders lead themselves

At the time of the Democrat's visit, Wiltens was teaching open water rescue to a group of teens in the lake. Wiltens believes the camp is training "future leaders who will go on to change the world. "A characteristic of a true leader is someone who learns to lead themselves," he said, adding the camp isn't just a business. "It can change the world in a powerful way." Wiltens teaches leadership skills to Apple employees and Google staff and works with seven school districts in the Bay Area. He is the author of seven books and a three-time recipient of the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism award for the best column in a parenting publication.

Fischer, 56, of Santa Barbara is the camp's director. He spent summers at Deer Crossing as a camper and Leader In Training in the 1980s and holds a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College as well as a master's degree and Ph.D. from UC Santa Barbara. Fischer’s adventures include sailing a tall ship across the Pacific at age 17, backpacking the ruins of the Great Wall of China, tobogganing with penguins in Antarctica and rappelling into ancient cliff dwellings in the Himalayas, among others. He and the camp's co-owner, Ellis, 60, of Santa Barbara guide the campers and the older teens who become Leaders In Training.

Ellis runs the year-round operations for the camp and is a certified wilderness first responder and a triathlete who has competed in many trail running and bicycling events throughout California, Alaska, Colorado, Italy and Cuba. He holds a bachelor's of science degree from Miami University and a master's of environmental science from UC Santa Barbara. For the last 10 years, he lectured and worked on environmental science research in the U.S., Chile and Norway.

At the start of every day, campers get to choose their own activities which include archery, wind surfing, learning how to roll a kayak, canoeing, bouldering, pottery and lake swimming, to name a few. Campers with varying abilities and skill levels attend the same classes. Each class is two hours long.

Leaders In Training

Eight campers ages 15-17 can apply to be in the Leaders In Training program. Each camper completes an application listing extracurricular activities, their reason for applying to

the LIT program, and how they will contribute to the DCWC community as a LIT. All applicants are interviewed by Ellis and Fischer, who select the campers who will enter the program. There are a maximum of eight spots, but only ready campers get into the programs. At the end of four weeks, with instructor support, selected LITs go on a three-day, two-night wilderness excursion known as “The Ascent." Campers are allowed to take a fish hook, a single match and the clothes they are wearing. Ellis said the real test is whether the campers can keep a positive attitude during the experience.

One of the principal goals of the leadership camp is to teach teamwork. For example, campers learn how to work together to flip an overturned canoe. "They learn how to do something scary. They're cold and wet but even an 8-year-old can flip a canoe while under pressure." Ellis said. "Parents say that campers return being more helpful around the house and say their kids tell them they miss camp and that they want to go back for four weeks next year."

Neve Wheeler, 15, and her twin sister Flora of McClean, Va., both have attended several summer sessions at the camp. Neve said she enjoys climbing Thor’s Hammer and kayaking and the camp is “a great experience,” even when one year she couldn’t participate in physical activity due to being outfitted with a back brace for scoliosis. She said she and her sister Flora “have a friendly competition” together at the camp. Flora is in her second year as a LIT. She loves windsurfing and said, “Doug does a good job teaching and helping campers learn new skills.”

Logan Simmons, 19, of San Francisco has attended the camp for four years and has been a LIT since 2023. He is in his first year of college studying aerospace engineering at Stanford University and said his camp experience “set me up for success with leadership training, goal setting and the proper mindset.” Simmons enjoys canoeing to campsites on Out Trips. “I love sleeping under the stars where there is no light pollution,” he shared, also touting the camp camaraderie, especially “singing while we do the dishes. There’s a lot of musical talent here and at least a dozen guitars.”

According to the Boy Scouts of America, use of the land at Loon Lake was acquired in 1961 and Sacramento architect Grant Caywood designed the lodge. Camp Loon Lake opened to provide a wilderness experience for Senior Scouts in 1962. During the summers of 1964 and 1965, the camp was under construction. In 1965, the lodge was completed. Loon Lake became a fully operational summer camp in 1966 and was open to Scout camping from 1966-1976. It closed due to environmental issues.

The camp, offering one-, two- or four-week sessions, is for-profit but Ellis noted it has a "robust scholarship program," explaining 15% of families receive partial or full scholarships and early bird pricing is also available. Scholarships are available to youth from the Sacramento Boys and Girls Clubs, Native American groups and under-served communities. For more information visit deercrossingcamp.com.