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YWCA volunteer feels rush of the urban forest

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The christened spider stick, a small branch pressed into service to remove any webs woven across the forest path early Tuesday morning, was momentarily put aside as Carie Hett pulled the garden clippers from her back pocket and knelt down.

"I don't know what this is," she said as she inquisitively examined the vine that looked similar to a nearby muscadine grape vine. "How exciting!"

For nearly two years, Hett has been documenting the rich diversity of trees, ferns, vines and everything else green in the nearly 9-acre patch of forest and wetlands behind Wilmington's YWCA complex on South College Road.

So far, she's found nearly 70 species in the small slice of urban forest, including seven species of oaks and five varieties of ferns.

But Hett said she still gets a rush every time she comes across something new.

"It's educational and fun at the same time," she said after happily determining a patch of climbing vines was wisteria and not kudzu.

But Hett isn't just recording and collecting examples of the flora that calls the small patch of forest uplands, lowlands and wetlands home.

She's building a teaching tool for the YWCA's environmental educators – and educating them in the process too.



Staff photo | Matt Born

Carie Hett, center, prepares to press leaves for an ongoing project to document all of the plant and tree species for the 9 acres of forest behind the YWCA on College Rd. Hett graduated in May from UNCW with a Biology degree. She has been working in the area for a year and has identified approximately 70 plant and tree species.

"I learn something every day I'm out here with her," said Stephanie Avery, the YWCA's director of special programs, as she scooted under a thick canopy of vines that had formed over the forest path. "And what she's doing with these field guides is just wonderful for us in helping pass this information on to the children.

"But most importantly the kids love it because being able to touch and feel something at this age is so important."

Among Hett's creations are laminated flashcards for instructors to take into the field, a field guide full of pictures and information about the preserve's plants, a scrapbook with dozens of pressed plants and a box displaying nuts and fruits from the forest.

Hett, who just received her bachelor's degree in biology from the University of North Carolina Wilmington, said she started inventorying the plants in the YWCA's small forest last summer.

Although now out of school, she said she still volunteers because she draws so much pleasure from seeing the children's faces light up when they recognize something in the forest.

Working among the woods also is a natural fit for a girl who grew up on a Christmas tree farm in Connecticut and used to scoot off to play in the forest every free moment she got.

"And I'm still doing it today!" Hett said smiling as she prepared to take a picture of a white fungus a few feet off the path that had caught her attention.

So, several times a month she traipses through the woods, often with kids from the YWCA's eco-camp in tow.

During Tuesday's two-hour excursion, Hett collected some persimmon, matchweed and Virginia buttonweed, pointed out some invasive species like English ivy and taro, photographed a half-dozen other plants and crunched up a bay leaf for her two young companions to sniff.

"Smelling is such an important part of botany," she said. "It gives you a new sense, an appreciation of what's here."

Hett also explained to Cherokee Motes and Christian Wood how to differentiate between poison ivy and Jack-in-the-Pulpit, and the important role fungus plays in the forest ecosystem.

"Fungi is good food!" she said, a statement that drew incredulous looks from the pair of young explorers who soon grew more interested in a nearby spider.

Ignoring the mosquitoes increasingly buzzing around her head, Hett knelt on the

forest floor just off the path and began pressing some of the specimens she had collected.

Pausing after squeezing some buttonweed between cardboard, she said would like to continue her education in botany one day.

But until then, she doesn't mind staying busy in the urban wilds of Wilmington.

"Part of it is fun, part of it is preserving history, and if one of the kids is a budding botanist, how cool is it to encourage that?" she said.

Back on the forest trail near Hewletts Creek, Hett brought the small troop to a halt.

"Smell it," she said, closing her eyes, the sound of nearby South College Road a faint echo. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Fresh vegetation-full air. That never gets old."

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