

Sharing My Experience of Rice Creek...

I recently visited Rice Creek Field Station for the first time in over 25 years. I brought my kids, Ava (10) and Luke (6), to hike the trails and view some of the collections on display. I was especially excited to show them the butterfly collections. For years they've been travelling to Nana and Papa's house in Oswego and are used to seeing my butterfly collection in the case my dad made still hanging on the wall in the guest wing.

Though I re-located to the New York City area over 15 years ago, I loved growing up in Oswego. I have fond memories of summers there, including taking nature classes at RCFS. My favorites were the butterfly collecting classes with Mike Holy. In chatting with Diann Jackson during our recent visit, she advised me that the classes now have a focus on conservation and not collection.



My childhood butterfly and moth collection

That said, I still have fond memories of chasing the elusive Great Spangled Fritillary with my butterfly net through the fields and pastures of Southwest Oswego. My brother and I spent hours outside, searching for rare butterflies. We raced past many common Cabbage Whites and Yellow Sulphurs pursuing Black Swallowtails and Mourning Cloaks. We rood our bikes all over to find fields full of flowers before the hay in them had been cut. We stayed up all night spreading a mixture of beer and rotten fruit on trees in the woods hoping to attract some Underwing or Sphinx moths.

The excitement created by these programs at Rice Creek wasn't contained to Southwest Oswego. We took our butterfly nets on family vacations to Wisconsin and North Carolina hoping to find new species that our friends in upstate New York hadn't had a chance to catch. We proudly showed off our trophies when we returned home.

Years later, Rice Creek's nature classes still have a lasting effect. This past summer I read Mr. Holy's column on the plight of the Monarch. It's definitely the first time I really identified with a species that both was once abundant and had become scarce during my lifetime. It was one that I had a lot of contact with. Growing up, they were everywhere. Now Monarch populations are declining at an alarming rate. Golfing in New Jersey this past summer, I spotted two Monarch butterflies. I couldn't get close enough to tell if they were male and female (fingers crossed) but I could tell they weren't Viceroy's, a more common Monarch mimic. My friends teased me about chasing butterflies on the course, while I thought to myself they definitely spent the time I spent outside, chasing butterflies, in front of a video game.

If you haven't visited Rice Creek in a while, make some time to do so. There have been lots of changes. There are lots of places to peacefully engage nature. The classroom and laboratory facilities are state-of-the-art. A garage that was once a classroom for one of my bug collecting classes 30 years ago houses a tractor for trail maintenance.

If you have a chance to get your children into the Exploring Nature programs at RCFS, I highly recommend it. At best, the lessons learned about nature and our world are invaluable and most likely won't be covered in a typical classroom. The conservationist groundwork laid lasts a lifetime at best. At worst, it gave my parents a well-deserved break from us during the summer. I'll be bringing my kids again this summer.

Nathan Morey
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Nate attended Exploring Nature here at SUNY Oswego's Rice Creek Field Station during the program's early years. We are proud of the difference we have made in young people's lives and pleased to continue providing hands-on environmental education programming for the community. ~Diann C. Jackson