

Learning to Love iNaturalist By Alec Enchill

This fall, I found myself completing a homework assignment like none I had ever done before. It all started one night, walking around on the Millbrook School campus in rural New York, searching for a new species to add to our Field Biology class list. I am instantly hit by how many species I have no knowledge about. Walking by an open field near a stream, I notice a white-tailed deer standing in the grass with its fawn. I quickly opened my phone to open National Geographic's iNaturalist app, where we keep our species list, to see if any other fellow students from prior months have identified this species on campus. I see that nobody has, so I take a quick snapshot before it darts away into the late-night abyss.

A few days later somebody on the iNaturalist app verified my identification making my contribution "research-grade," meaning that there was community consensus on the precise identification to the species level and that my photograph, location, and date were all accurate." Since my contribution was given a research grade tag other scientists could actually use my data. This drives me to find more species and contribute even more.

I have also come to the realization that my project has connections with scientists around the world, including those at the Biodiversity Research Institute located in Portland, Maine. One of the institution's values "is to assess emerging threats to wildlife and ecosystems through collaborative research, and to use scientific findings to advance environmental awareness and inform decision-makers." By sharing my experience with the iNaturalist community, I am underscoring the same value as BRI. This type of broad collaboration and alignment of values can help us see if the numbers of any species, not just on the Millbrook campus, but as a whole planet are declining due to threats such as global warming, ecosystem degradation, or biodiversity loss. One of Millbrook's core values is stewardship and service. We constantly ask ourselves- how can I help others? Through the iNaturalist app I am helping other scientists gather data, as well as helping identify threats to different wildlife species. Acting on my school's core value and sharing it through iNaturalist is one way I can join BRI's efforts and try out being a field biologist myself.

Through my experiences this fall, I've finally come to the realization that my work can also inspire others to join efforts to help the natural world. Since I can collaborate with a bigger organization whether that's a summer-time internship or actually trying to apply for a job. Making a contribution that has an impact on a larger scale for biodiversity for different ecosystems gives me a good feeling inside. Just playing a role in taking care of biodiversity should make anybody's day. My librarian Mrs. Scherman here at Millbrook once told me that "Small impacts from around the world can change the world for the better". It is everyone's duty to make the world a better place for future generations. The current generations should not have to pay the debts of the previous generations' actions. Thomas Jefferson once said this principle "That the earth belongs to the living." Being around nature inspires me every day to be curious and keep my eyes open for my surroundings because I may never know what I might see or find. All of these realizations stemmed from one homework assignment and one short glimpse of one of our most common species.