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Thoughts of a veteran volunteer

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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Archbold volunteer Linda Gette has worked for all Archbold's programs during her seven winters at the Station.
DUSTIN ANGELL PHOTO

Archbold volunteer Linda Gette has traveled south from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to Archbold for the past seven winters. She spends several months each year providing aid to all the Station's research programs and more. She recently offered her reflections on the world of Archbold through the eyes of a volunteer.

Gette had thought about becoming a scientist early on, mentioning that, “On entering high school, my plan was to study science. Sadly, our only science teacher was so inept he could have made Einstein himself seek another field, and I moved on...until many years later, when an African safari reminded me of that connection to nature that I had lost. I began birding, then got interested in botany, more as a hobbyist than as a scientist, and eventually seven years ago my interest led me to volunteer at Archbold Biological Station. What a thrill to be able to work at such a world-renowned institution! And what an education to see the rigorous scientific discipline here!”

She continued “Many non-scientists picture scientific discoveries, as somewhat casual observations that lead to brief experiments, that lead to ‘aha moments’ of discovery.” According to Linda, “Nothing could be further from the truth. During my seven winters volunteering at Archbold I have learned that these discoveries are the results of years and years of careful measurements, meticulous note-taking, and thorough analysis, and what a treat for a non-scientist to be able to participate in this work!”

As volunteer for the Herpetology Program, Gette has waded through Saw Palmettos tracking Gopher Tortoises for the longest-running tortoise study ever undertaken, taking notes as marked tortoises were observed and keeping careful records of activities, locations, and measurements of the animals’ growth. With Avian Ecology, she helped with the 76-year study of Florida Scrub-Jays, where records have been maintained for generations of each jay family: the parents, the offspring who remain to help care for their younger siblings, their territories, and their nesting and foraging activities. She even recently got to report the weather data—adding to records that have been kept every day for 89 years!

Assisting the Plant Ecology and Restoration Ecology Programs, Gette assisted with measuring and recording the growth of Florida Rosemary plants and clumps of Wiregrass. With Restoration Ecology, she hauled equipment to measure pond depths as part of a 22-year study and monitored groundwater levels for a 14-year study. She remembered, “Once, while helping on the groundwater study, I noticed that I had spatters of mud all over the legs of my pants...and then noticed that the spatters were moving. Fire ants! I was glad the scientist I was working with was female, because I ripped off my field pants fast!” Most recently, Gette joined the Archbold Land Management team in the ongoing battle against the non-native Natal Grass, a pretty but highly invasive plant which has been overpowering the native species on one part of Red Hill at Archbold.

Perhaps one of Gette's favorite volunteer activities is with the Archbold Education Program, leading walks for the hundreds of school children who usually visit Archbold each year. "So many of the children have never been for a walk in the special, endangered scrub ecosystem in which they live. Many fear they will be attacked by some wild animal (no doubt, as seen on TV!) when they step outside. What a pleasure to see them unfold like a flower as they take in the interesting, exciting reality around them!" Gette exclaimed. "For the past year, Archbold has been closed to public tours and field trips, but we will be throwing open the gates as soon as this virus is under control and will be welcoming the return of our veteran volunteers as well as new ones!" Anyone interested in volunteering at Archbold may contact vol_coordinator@archbold-station.org to sign up in advance of reopening.

A Moody