

MOUNTAINS

Biological science technician loves her ‘muddy, sweaty’ work



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Alix Pfennigwerth works as a biological science technician with the Inventory and Monitoring program at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. She has always loved being in the outdoors and exploring the natural world, and both her parents encouraged her interest in science.

“My dad was an engineer,” she said, “so he would buy me little science experiment kits and help me to really dive deep into my science and math homework.”

Reflecting on her career choices in honor of Feb. 11, the annual International Day of Women and Girls in Science, Pfennigwerth traces the gateway to her current career back to one particular high school ecology class.

“Other kids took the class because they’d heard it was an ‘easy’ alternative to chemistry or physics, but I was fascinated by it all and craved that knowledge,” she said. “My teacher, Mrs. Horton, noticed I had a genuine interest in the topic and gave me a copy of Rachel Carson’s ‘Silent Spring.’ It really opened my eyes to the broader world of ecology and the environment.”

Pfennigwerth brought her interest in ecology and the environment with her to college at the University of Tennessee but wasn’t exactly sure how to translate that into a career. After exploring her options as an environmental studies

major, some of her ecology professors encouraged her to focus more on the biology side of things, so she switched to a biology/ecology major.

“One of my first jobs out of college was managing invasive plants and forest pests at Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area managed by the National Park Service,” she said. “I couldn’t believe I was working with people who’d made a career out of studying and conserving national parks. I realized that summer that this was what I wanted to do.”

Pfennigwerth soon recognized that her strengths lay in understanding, conducting, and communicating science, and that those were all extremely important skillsets that could help solve our world’s environmental issues. Today, her core responsibilities at work include managing the park’s wetland inventory program, a photography project documenting post-wildfire forest recovery and a study of how the park’s elk reintroduction affects forest communities. She also supports long-term forest monitoring and rare plant monitoring programs.

During the warmer months, Pfennigwerth spends most of her time outside mapping and surveying wetlands and collecting data from long-term forest monitoring plots.

“It’s muddy, sweaty, exhausting work, and certainly not always glamorous, but I love it,” she said.

In winter, she organizes and analyzes the data she collects and communicates that data through reports, scientific papers, resource briefs, webpages, and presentations. This helps park manage-

ment make science-driven decisions and assists interpretation staff in educating park visitors.

“I’ve had several female mentors over the years who are amazing scientists and conservationists doing amazing work,” she said. “They have shown me firsthand how women can be successful and lead in our field. Because of their mentorship, it always felt natural to me to pursue a career in science.”

Since graduate school, in various positions, Pfennigwerth has in turn been in charge of hiring, managing, and mentoring dozens of interns, technicians, and students. “I love helping young scientists (of any gender) figure out exactly what they’re interested in, build confidence in their strengths and abilities, and gain the skills and experiences that will help them advance in their career.”

Diversity is important in science as in every other field, Pfennigwerth said. “It’s a powerful experience to see someone that looks, sounds, and behaves like you, doing the job you’re interested in, and doing it well. It’s inspiring, comforting, and motivating.”

She adds that there is still much work to be done to ensure that women – and people representing all genders, backgrounds and experiences – have equitable opportunities, support, and representation in science.

“A basic tenet in ecology is that diversity is valuable and worth conserving, because it makes ecosystems more productive, healthy, and resilient to change,” she said.

“I think this tenet applies to humans as well. Diversity – whether we’re talking about gender, cultural background,



Alix Pfennigwerth maps and surveys wetlands and collects data from forest monitoring plots as a biological science technician with the Inventory and Monitoring program at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

COURTESY OF MATT JERNIGAN

race, religion, age, sexual orientation, or ability – brings more perspectives to the table, and it helps us view a problem from all angles. It ultimately helps us be more creative and innovative, and it helps us make better decisions.”

Frances Figart is the editor of *Smokies Life* magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsassoc.org.

Planet Fitness to open in Asheville; masks required

Mackensy Lunsford Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – Planet Fitness will open its first Asheville location Feb. 17 in a 22,000 square-foot facility at 141 Smokey Park Highway.

One of the nation’s largest chain gyms, Planet Fitness also became one of

the first of the bigger clubs to offer free online workouts as gyms shuttered in the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

While all PF gyms require masks except while clients are actively working out, North Carolina executive order 189 requires people exercising indoors to wear masks at all times.

The Centers for Disease Control acknowledges the importance of exercise for physical and mental health.

Still, the CDC upholds that the primary way COVID-19 spreads is through respiratory droplets, and the virus has been shown to spread at gyms, fitness classes and studios, as with other indoor places where people congregate.

There are ways to mitigate risk, including not sharing equipment, using hand sanitizer and staying 6 feet away from other people. Planet Fitness says it has added a feature to its app allowing clients to see how crowded the gym is.

Asheville’s Planet Fitness will be open daily from 5 a.m.-10 p.m. More information: 828-785-5499.


















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