



PHOTOS BY MIKE LYNCH

Campers play after a swim in Augur Lake. Camp Lincoln is among many that employ 60,000 people statewide.

# More than s'mores

■ Summer camps have far-reaching impacts on campers and the Adirondack Park's communities.

By Janet Reynolds

Trying to measure the economic impact of summer camps on the Adirondack economy is a little like snipe hunting. Like the mythical beast in this summer camp ritual, the exact figures are always just another bush away.

That summer camps are big business in New York State is indisputable. The Northeast Region of the American Camp Association places the direct economic impact at \$1.3 billion annually. "It's vital to many of these small towns throughout New York where summer camps bring in a ton of business to local store owners and to local people to give them jobs," says Susan Lippert, executive director of the Northeast Region of the American Camp Association. "Camps have an enormous impact on the local economy."

Statewide, New York camps employ 60,000 seasonal workers and 3,500 full-time workers, who receive more than \$411 million in wages, according to an ACA Northeast Region Economic Impact Study. Besides payroll, New York camps spend more than \$1.2 billion on goods and services including food, supplies, fuel, marketing,



Campers like this one at North Country Camps have fun (and chores).

banking, maintenance and repair. These camps also attract 129,000 out-of-state visitors who spend \$42 million annually.

Pinning down how many of those dollars can

be attributed to the 37 ACA-accredited camps in the Adirondack Park is more elusive, because no specific studies have been conducted in the zone. What is clear in talking to camp directors,



**Campers work construction in July at Camp Whippoorwill.**

### Summer camp in New York State by the numbers

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Combining payroll, operational and capital spending, the total annual direct economic impact of the youth camping industry in New York is \$1.3 billion.

*Source: American Camp Association Northeast Region's Economic Impact Study.*

owners and former campers is that the dollars spent go far beyond one parents weekend visit in any given summer. Campers by the thousands turn into avid former campers, many of whom in turn become Adirondacks fans. As adults, these people in turn spend untold vacation dollars in the Adirondacks, while others buy summer homes or decide to live in the region full-time. Camp may be seven weeks long as a child but the impact—whether economic, psychological, environmental or all three—is often lifelong.

The Lloyd Lowy and Susan Elbe family is just one example. Lowy was 9 and a Cubby at Camp Lincoln when he first met Elbe, who was a Birdie at Camp Whippoorwill, the sister camp at North Country Camps. While it wasn't love at

first sight, they did eventually reconnect in their 20s, with camp as a primary initial connection, and have now been married 31 years.

But their story is illustrative beyond their meeting. Both their sons, Alex and Evan, spent multiple summers at camp, first as campers and then as counselors. Lloyd's brother and two nephews went to the camp. Elbe's family camp circle is multi-generational and includes her siblings and cousins. Her brother, also a North Country Camps alumni, and sister sent their children to Camp Lincoln. Her cousins are sending their children there and her cousin was her brother's counselor.

And it's not just a common story among North Country Camps alumni. Kent Busman has been

executive director at Camp Fowler in Speculator for 33 years. "I have campers who are children of campers and staff," he says. "I look at them and think you're just like your father."

This tie to the camps of their youths plays out beyond simply sending the next generation to Camp Whatever. The Adirondacks often become the preferred vacation spot for families or the place they actually settle as adults. Lowy, a New York City attorney, is a 46er and only a couple of peaks away from becoming a winter 46er. He started his quest while a camper. "I'm up there several times a year. We have looked at property up there. When we think of a place for leisure time, that's what we think of," Lowy says.

Barry Needleman, an attorney in New Hampshire and another Camp Lincoln former camper and staffer, has a similar story. "This is a camp that has a long history of providing a full summer experience," says Needleman. "We really end up building a very strong community, which results in lifelong connections with people and to the Adirondacks." Needleman and his wife, Ruth, who is an associate director at the camps and whose children have attended, have bought land and built a house in the Adirondacks as a result of their summer camp experience decades earlier. "We intend to retire there part-time," he says.

The potential economic force of an alumni group can be seen in camps like Camp Eagle Island on Upper Saranac Lake. The former Girl Scout camp reopened this summer, thanks to the efforts of alumni who did not want to see it become a historical footnote.

Camp Eagle Island closed in 2008 as part of  
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**Campers etch their names on boards inside the Camp Lincoln mess hall each summer.**

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a national Girl Scout council merger program. Its New Jersey council merged into another one with an existing camp.

Paula Michelsen, executive director and an Eagle Island former camper, helped lead the charge to save the camp. "When you fall in love with a place, it has such amazing memories," she says, noting that she, her sister, her daughter and cousin all attended Eagle Island. She and other members of her family have also rented houses in the Adirondacks for family vacations.

The Eagle Island alumni group, over 1,000 strong, first tried fighting the sale of the camp. When that failed, they formed a nonprofit, Friends of Eagle Island, that purchased the island, thanks to a \$2.4 million donation. By the end of 2015, Michelsen says, they had raised an additional \$300,000. "I think a lot of alumni grew up at Eagle Island," she says of continued alumni support and interest. "They had a lot of memorable experiences there."

The camp reopened this summer as a day camp for boys and girls, offering two one-week sessions. The intent is to add an overnight component in 2020.

Alumni have stepped up to help North Country Camps on Augur Lake in Keeseville transition from a family-owned camp for nearly 100 years to a nonprofit. Nancy Gucker Birdsall, who was executive director of both camps, realized a few years ago that the fourth generation of the family was not likely to take over. "There are camp groups that purchase camps and keep them running," she says. "I didn't want us to become that, although I got annual calls from people like that."



PHOTOS BY NIMCE LYNCH

**Campers pose after a horse ride at Camp Lincoln.**

"The temptation to get bigger didn't fit into the philosophy we were using, which is we are a family organization rather than an institution of some kind," says Pete Gucker, whose parents started the camp in 1920 and who you can still see whizzing around camp in his electric golf cart at age 94. "Our camp is a marvelous opportunity for kids to learn what it's like to live in a small community where everybody has a word in what's going on and where kids get to make their own choices."

So Birdsall turned to the loyal alumni body of

about 1,000. She reached out to Needleman and others like Lowy. "It became a real committee effort," she says of the move to create a nonprofit, which officially transitioned two years ago. "It's all been so positive," she says. "They're well on their way."

"Our primary goal is to do the same great job the family did," says Needleman, who is chairman of the board, "to make the experience the same as it has been for generations."

The economic need for strong alumni who help market the camps will likely only grow as the summer camp scene continues to evolve. The seven- or eight-week camp is increasingly a thing of the past at many camps as sports training and schools encroach on traditional summer camp time. Additionally family needs have changed, say camp directors and owners.

While about 75 percent of those who attend North Country Camps come for the full seven and a half weeks, Birdsall says, they now also offer three- and five-week options.

"The culture has definitely changed," says Will Bettman, director at Camp Regis-Applejack in Paul Smiths. "A lot of families are more protective maybe, more cautious. It's not the assumption that it was in the '50s and '60s that kids are just going for that long a time." As a result, Camp Regis-Applejack now offers two three-week sessions.

The focus on summers as a time to get additional training, to get an edge somehow, is something generalized camps have to contend with as well. "We can't promise that your child will make the soccer team if they come to camp. I say you're going to have a better human being but I can't tell you how they're going to be better," Busman says. "Sports teach you how to be on a team. Camp teaches you how to be in a community." ■



**North Country Camps offer varied pursuits, including biking.**