

It Better Mean A Merit Badge

Scouts brave cold for camping

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STAFF WRITERS

What kind of mother would send her young son camping in this arctic weather? A mom brave enough to join him.

Meet Jennifer Patelia, the mother of one of the 400 Boy Scouts who trooped to the Schiff Scout Reservation in Wading River yesterday to build fires, participate in group activities like sled races and cooking and first aid demonstrations. Patelia is a den leader of Kings Park Troop 75 and mother of Steven, 9.

"It may sound crazy, but it is a wonderful character-building experience," Patelia said.

Keith Maeder, 11, of Setauket Troop 70, said his father and mother were split on whether he should go camping.

"My dad said to let me go but she said she didn't want me to go," he said. "I said, 'I'm going.'"

Overnight campers were expecting temperatures of between zero and 5 degrees. But the wind chill factor stood between minus 10 and minus 15 in the Islip area. Temperatures were expected to range between 20 and 25 degrees Sunday morning, dipping to 5 to 10 degrees toward evening.

By mid-afternoon yesterday, green two-person tents were beginning to sprout at Camp Wauwepex, around the partially frozen Deep Pond in Wading River. The stark, beautiful scenery was punctuated by the shouts of a few dozen Scouts pushing sleds on wheels around the 38-acre pond.

One of the sledders, Eagle Scout

Jonathan Plau, 17, a senior at Ward Melville High School in East Setauket, said the hardest part was getting up in the morning.

"I just like being outdoors, away from phones, television and faxes," he said. "It's very peaceful."

The Boy Scouts of America requires camping once a month, year-round, said Doris Brennan, a senior district executive.

The scouts learn to build shelters out of natural materials in 15 minutes.

"The philosophy is that it really teaches them winter survival," Brennan said. "They understand how to build a shelter out of what's on the ground. That's life saving."

Patelia described the scenery at the camping ground as "exotic."

"The smell of the fires, the bare trees framed in the empty fields, the blue sky; it's beautiful," Patelia said. "You forget you're on Long Island."

Temperatures stayed in the teens most of the day yesterday, forcing the Scouts at the Schiff Reservation to huddle by the campfires for most of the day.

Chris McKittrick, 12, a member of Troop 70, said this was the coldest weather he'd camped in.

"It adds to the excitement because you never know what might happen," he said. What might happen? "You may get really, really cold," he said.

"They're having a lot of fun," said camp ranger Wally Jones. "They seem to be enjoying the the cold weather. At least they seem to be."

Patelia drew a line at having her son, a fourth-grader at Fort Salonga Elementary School, stay overnight. That's



Newsday Photo / Daniel Goodrich

Joe Bobrowski of Central Islip and Brian Besmer, 13, of East Islip keep warm by campfire.

for the older ones: fifth graders.

"I'm a little worried about what's going to happen when the sun goes down, to be honest with you," she said.

"And you would have to have parents staying with them and I'm not ready to spend the night," she added with a

laugh.

The cold snap brought by an arctic high-pressure system will loosen its grip by mid-week when temperatures are expected to climb to the 40s, said Michael Wooldridge of the National Weather Service.