

# Built for Boys

## Blue Ridge School's Outdoorsmen

Story by Joe Shields  
Photos by Andrew Shurtleff



*“The great charm of fly-fishing is that we are always learning.”*

—Theodore Gordon

**T**heodore Gordon (1854-1915) is regarded as the father of American dry-fly fishing. He wrote articles on the subject and altered British flies for the more expansive, wild rivers of North America. Gordon worked in finance but retired early, leaving Manhattan for New York's Catskills Mountains. There, he embraced an outdoor education on the region's revered trout waters – the Neversink, Beaverkill and Willowemoc Rivers.

Gordon's example is one of life-long learning and appreciation for nature. His legacy is alive and well at the Blue

Ridge School (BRS) in St. George, Virginia. And his passions for fly fishing, fly tying and the outdoors are not lost on the unique college preparatory school.

Founded in 1909, BRS is one of only two (non-military) all-boys, all-boarding schools left in the country. The school recognizes that the world needs capable young men of character and integrity. Its carefully constructed programs are designed to take boys in grades nine through 12 and produce gentlemen. BRS also understands that learning about the natural environment and our place in nature

is critical to developing gentlemanly traits in its students.

While the school's areas of study are traditional – English, history, mathematics, foreign language, science and electives – the approach to teaching is not. The school tailors curriculum and teaching methods to the unique ways boys learn best. Each boy is also required to take at least one nature-based course designed to cultivate a respect for the natural world.

Gordon, and others today, embraced pursuits such as fly fishing and hunting later in life. BRS gives boys the





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opportunity to learn these skills in their formative years, building a foundation to advance these skills during manhood. They learn on campus trails and lakes with access to nearby mountains and streams.

BRS is located 20 miles from Charlottesville and approximately two hours from Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia. The campus, which comprises nearly 750 acres, lies at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, just outside Shenandoah National Park.

“The location of the school in the middle of the Blue Ridge Mountains provides so many opportunities to be out in nature – to just unwind, as part of a sports team or in a formal outdoor program,” said Sharon Rymer, parent of Robert Rymer, ”17. “Today’s children grow up so wired to their electronics and miss out on the physical and mental benefits of connecting with nature.”

The school’s Outdoor Program



definitely sets BRS apart from other schools. Outdoor experiences are designed to enhance self-esteem, promote teamwork and encourage the development of leadership skills beyond the classroom. The Outdoor Program encourages engagement with nature every day with academic electives, afternoon activities such as mountain biking, the Outdoorsmen program and destination trips.

“The first goal is to develop a love for a lifetime sport. Mountain biking and canoeing, in particular, build such an appreciation,” said BRS Outdoor Program Assistant Director Cory Woods. “Second is to learn about our environment, interact with it and develop a sense of stewardship. The third goal is to develop character education.”

Character education is paramount and the school recruits educators who exemplify this quality. The school defines character as the way a person conducts himself when no one is there to judge. Ten years ago, Vinton Bruton joined the faculty after distinguishing himself in academic and military life. Bruton graduated magna cum laude from Wake Forest University in 1997. A year later, he joined the United States Marine Corps and served as a Marine infantry officer. As a captain, he commanded a weapon company. He was responsible for the training, welfare and tactical employment of 170 U.S. Marines and oversaw training exercises in Kenya, Qatar, Kuwait and Jordan.

“Naming Mr. Bruton assistant headmaster of co-curricular programs was one of the best decisions I’ve made as headmaster at Blue Ridge School,” said headmaster Trip Darrin.

“Among his many accomplishments in and out of the classroom, most notable is his creation and leadership of the school’s Character Education and Outdoorsmen Programs, which give us a competitive edge over other independent schools.”

Outdoorsmen provides an opportunity for boys to learn the skills it



**Outdoorsmen helps boys learn the skills it takes to survive in the outdoors—from navigating the woods and building a fire to hunting with arrows and rifles safely and correctly.**

**The school offers more than 15 miles of sustainably built and publicly accessible trails for hiking, running and mountain biking.**







Zach Neumann '19 and Wai Kwan Ng '19 work on archery skills.

Vinton Bruton instructs Outdoorsman Jack Cline '18 on marksmanship.



takes to survive in the outdoors—from navigating the woods and building a fire to hunting with arrows and rifles safely and correctly. Ultimately, they learn about the natural environment and their place in nature.

“Tony Brown, the school’s Outdoor Program director and head

mountain-biking coach, pioneered this important program,” Bruton explained. “At first, the Outdoor Program centered on traditional activities such as biking and climbing. Now the program offers academic electives such as Wilderness First Aid; boys exit the class certified in that and CPR. One day a student asked me if we could

start a rod and gun club. I thought: ‘Sure, why not?’”

Bruton uses a challenge philosophy in Outdoorsmen. Students are pushed out of their comfort zones and face serious physical challenges that will be applicable in the real world.

“Boys have to try out for Outdoorsmen and are awarded spots on the team based on a points system,” Bruton added. “We only take 13 to 15 boys each season, and they earn participation by passing big tests. Boys have to memorize five safety rules on firearms handling that I learned in the Marines. They have to learn how to tie knots. They have to do push-ups and pull-ups. They have to climb the climbing tower and run up the mountain.”

Boys begin in the fall learning basic orienteering and map reading, along with deer behavior and tracking skills. They also build up strength and fitness. Then they master archery, followed by weekly training and practice on the rifle range. Boys learn to focus on their stance, their breathing and how to hold either their rifle or bow.

“When your school’s daily activities include fly fishing, hunting, animal tracking and marksmanship, you find yourself in a sportsman’s paradise,” said senior Jack Cline '18, who grew up on a horse farm in Harrisburg, Kentucky. “I started shooting when I was six years old and won my first shotgun competition when I was 13 years old. Blue Ridge School and the Outdoorsman Program have been a great fit for me.”

Cline is an athlete who used to play lacrosse. He acted in the school play. But Outdoorsmen has been his favorite part of BRS and he has participated in the program for three years.

“Aside from competitive shooting, learning to fly fish here has been special,” he added. “I am hooked and so are the coaches and boys in the program.”

Cline plans to study petroleum engineering in college. So far, he has been



accepted into several schools, including Louisiana State University. This comes as no surprise because BRS maintains a 100-percent college acceptance rate. BRS has approximately 175 students from 22 U.S. states and 20 countries worldwide.

Wai Kwan Ng '19, from Xianem, People's Republic of China, attended an international school there and played soccer and basketball. When his parents decided to send him to the United States for an education, they were intrigued by BRS. Ng's father introduced outdoor programs – known as “weeks without walls” in their province – that gave students a brief but important outdoor experience. This created a lasting impression on his son.

“My dream is to expand outdoor education in China and start teaching the skills I've learned in Outdoorsmen – fly fishing, hunting and survival skills – to people in my country,” said Ng, who is considering Prescott College's outdoor



Outdoor Education Program assistant director Cory Woods teaches BRS students in an outdoor classroom.

Blue Ridge School's Outdoor Program encourages engagement with nature every day.  
(Photo by Michael Hallstrom)







After the graduation ceremony, Blue Ridge School seniors jump in the school lake to demonstrate brotherhood.

experiential education program. “I want outdoor education to help people in China understand the importance of the environment and preserving it for the future. I believe there is a movement from city to country because people want to enjoy life and nature. I think I have a good plan and the Blue Ridge School helped me with my path.”

BRS offers baseball, basketball, cross country, football, lacrosse, mixed martial arts, mountain biking, soccer, tennis and Outdoorsmen. Clubs and organizations vary on a yearly basis depending on student interest but Outdoorsman remains a highly coveted option.

“What sets Outdoorsmen apart is that we use live guns and ammunition, so the boys can get good at shooting and be

safe,” Bruton added. “Hans Hermanson ’97, assistant dean to students and residence life coordinator, coaches Outdoorsmen. He served in the U.S. Army as a Middle Eastern intelligence specialist with Special Forces. BRS boys learn from well-trained men and we all love the challenge of fly fishing.”

Outdoorsmen learn to fly fish on the lake that is the main focal point of the campus. They are always learning whether fly fishing on streams in Virginia and elsewhere or back at the school lake. After the graduation ceremony, seniors jump in the same lake to demonstrate brotherhood. It is a ceremony of a different kind, one that reminds them of their place in nature, their past and future as gentlemen.

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