The Sierra Nevada Field Campus occupies seven acres of Tahoe National Forest land and has been operating for decades. In the middle of all this beauty, about 40 miles northwest of Truckee, sits San Francisco State University's Sierra Nevada Field Campus. Mountains rim the campus on one side, while the North Yuba River defines it on the other. Students come there to take summer courses such as “Beginning Wildlife Photography,” “Birds of the Sierra Nevada,” and “Butterflies of the Sierra Nevada.” The facility “really [has] a wonderful atmosphere,” says John R. Blair, who directs the field campus and also teaches as an SF State lecturer. “Everybody seems so happy to be there.” He encourages people to attend courses at the Sierra Nevada Field Campus because “the instructors are excellent at what they do, the place is extraordinarily beautiful, and the food is terrific!” Earning college credit while exploring the high Sierra is another undeniable plus. The Sierra Nevada Field Campus occupies seven acres of Tahoe National Forest land and has been operating for decades. It was originally built in 1949 as a teacher training facility, but it later became a summer camp for kids when SF State’s Recreation Department took over its management. The directorship changed once more in 1972; that year, the College of Science and Engineering took over the site and turned it into a study campus for ecology and natural history.
Blair first attended the Sierra Nevada Field Campus in 1996 when he was studying for his Master's degree at SF State. Since his degree interest was the study of mushrooms, Blair decided to take a class called "Fungi of the Sierra Nevada." He became a T.A. for the course the following summer and continued to help instruct it for years. In the summer of 2010, when long-time faculty director Jim Steele moved on, Blair accepted the director's "torch."

Blair developed his love of mushrooms and other fungi when he was an undergraduate at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. There, Blair took a 16-unit course in mycology—the study of mushroom life cycles, genetics, taxonomy, and so on. He took the course "just because it was being offered and sounded interesting," he recalls. All that acquired knowledge then "triggered a lifelong interest in mushrooms." Learning that much was no walk in the park, however. Blair took only this one class for the entire quarter. The professor and 20 students met every day for extended periods and spent long hours in the field.

During fall and winter, when the field campus is shuttered, Blair is a full-time lecturer at SF State, where he has taught since completing his Master's degree in 1999. He teaches the course "World of Plants," which he calls "my staple." He also has taught the labs for "Introductory Biology" (210 and 240), as well as "Human Biology," and "Ecology of California." About his two roles in urban and Sierra settings, Blair says, "I feel I have the best of both worlds. I get to spend my summer in the mountains when it's foggy here and spend my winter on the coast when it's snowing up there!"

The classes at the field campus are offered through the College of Extended Learning at SF State, thus they are open to the general public. "Our biggest demographic is retired people but we have had students as young as 9 years old," says Blair. The field campus can accommodate up to 50 students and everyone stays in tent cabins or brings their own tents. Any given summer, 15 to 20 instructors work at the camp. Of those, four are professors from SF State, and the others will be visiting faculty from various American universities or will be teachers of art and natural history from the Bay Area or beyond. Together, the faculty usually offers about 25 courses to over 200 students. Most cover the natural history of high Sierra mushrooms, plants, birds, insects, and mammals. But the list includes the astronomy, geology, and geography of the area and a sizable fraction explore painting, writing, and photography.

At nearly $350 per unit, the cost is modest for a working adult but can be pricey for a full-time college student. Students enrolled for at least 12 units per semester at any college are guaranteed a 30 percent discount on their food and camping prices, which normally run about $50 per day for the public. What's more, the classes tend to be short and the credits can often transfer. "The one-unit courses are five days long and the two-unit courses are seven days long. There are a few not-for-credit classes that are shorter, but most of those are also five days long," says Blair. That is considerably shorter than a semester, but students can still earn credits that are transferable to accredited colleges and universities. This adds to the popularity of attending Sierra campus classes: If someone needs one or two credits to graduate, instead of enrolling in another fall semester or piloting too many classes to handle in the fall or Spring semesters, that individual can earn the needed credits in just five days. And they can do it while camping in the fresh air and learning about mushrooms, flowers, the stars, or an artistic AEAT!

With the large enrollment, the Sierra Nevada Field Campus and its courses have been quite successful. However, not all the credit goes to Blair. During our interview he emphasized that, "a lot of the success has to do with my predecessor, Jim Steele. He really made the field campus what it is today. He really designed the program and made it a success." Blair also gets a lot of practical, financial, and moral support from the College of Science and Engineering. "I am especially grateful to Dean Sheldon Axler," he says. This support is crucial, Blair says, yet no more than that of the students and community members who attend or plan to in the future. Blair adds, smiling, "We'd love to see them there!"

THE SIERRA NEVADA FIELD CAMPUS

offers a range of exciting courses to the general public in Astronomy, Biology, Geology, natural history and art workshops. Some of these courses are for college credit (*), while others are non-credit, Continuing Education courses. The courses include "Flora of Northern Sierra Nevada*", "Ecology & Conservation of California Bats*", "Practical Observational Astronomy*", "Watercolor in the Wild: Sierra Flora", "High Country Writing Retreat", "Geology of the Lakes Basin & Haskell Peak", "Birds of the Sierra Nevada", "Fly Fishing in the north Yuba Watershed*.

The Sierra Nevada Field Campus invites you to enjoy our facilities or to consider a donation to the newly established Scholarship Fund, the Greeining Initiative, or a general donation to the Field Campus. Additional information about courses, accommodations, meals and donations can be viewed at www.sfsu.edu/~sierra.

— Robert Ramirez, Associate Dean

J.R. Blair, Director
The Sierra Nevada Field Campus

Insect Biology and Identification

THE CLASSES AT THE FIELD CAMPUS ARE OFFERED THROUGH THE COLLEGE OF EXTENDED LEARNING AT SF STATE, THUS THEY ARE OPEN TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC.