



ECO News

MARCH

2014

EDUCATING CHILDREN OUTDOORS

- Union Elementary
- Waitsfield Elementary
- Moretown Elementary
- Hyde Park Elementary
- Twinfield Union School
- East Montpelier Elementary

"This is going to be the best ECO day this year!" When asked why, as we were finding an alternative route to our base camp, he said, "Because we're doing things we've never done before." - UES Student



Who knew you could write a story without words!

Kindergartners Track Mammals into their Classroom

by Angie Barger

Tomorrow is Spring Equinox. The lengthening daylight hours tell a different story than the two feet of snow on the ground. It is often this way in Central Vermont - and this year I reflect on how the temperature outdoors this March is welcoming to a 6-year old tracker, unlike many of the past weeks of winter. How does ECO happen when the ambient temperature is zero degrees or lower? This winter, we faced 6 weeks in a row of this temperature reality with the kindergartners at Waitsfield Elementary. We spent snippets of our day together outdoors, but mostly, it allowed us to sink into the art of tracking comfortably right in the middle of the kindergarten classrooms! It was as though we were sitting on a sandy lakefront beach during a perfect 68 degree day.

Students learned to move their bodies in the four common tracking gait patterns. They into four groups and practiced either walking, waddling, hopping or bounding. We set out four yoga mats, with a template of the gait pattern drawn on it in marker. Afterwards, they created journal entries of the gait pattern different local mammals most often used to move comfortably through the forest. I was amazed to see how accurate their drawings of the four gaits were as they illustrated their understanding of the tracking lesson they had just embodied in class.

A few frigid January weeks later, we learned about tracking animal sign in the woods from the front lines of the circle rug. Students used plaster casts they had made of mammal tracks (from rubber molds) to create a story in a long sandbox including two animal signs. The signs we were introduced to included: bed, den, midden, scat, and browse. In these sandboxes, I saw stories that included snowshoe hare tracks hopping to a pile of scat and a browsed upon raspberry patch. I saw red fox tracks walking to his den to bring

food for his young, and marking his territory just outside of the den. Students embodied the movement of the animals with the plaster casts and recognized that many different signs are left along the way by each animal. It is all a part of the science and art of tracking.



Making plaster tracks

In retrospect, I am so thankful for these indoor days of "tracking". Six year-olds learn best with play based and kinesthetic experiences. In order to have fun, their basic needs must be met. Our best bet is that if they are having fun, they are also committing what they are learning to the long term memory bank. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of need reminds us that our basic needs must be met before we can expand beyond them to higher needs on the hierarchy. Lower on the hierarchy are security of the body and of resources. These lower needs were met indoors on frigid Vermont days. When these and other basic physiological and safety needs are met, children are able to advance up the scale to problem-solving, creativity, self-esteem and confidence, all factors in play-based learning. I'm hoping that this "Spring's" weather welcomes our students' big curiosity, now that they have had all of that time to play with the tracks inside!



Writing stories in the sand

Scouting New Territory at Hyde Park

by Ken Benton



Mink tracks from Moss Woods in Hyde Park.

This winter, 5th graders at Hyde Park Elementary got a little taste of what it may have been like to go along for the ride with the Lewis and Clark expedition or head a scouting party leading a wagon train bound for the western plains, as we built off of the westward expansion unit that they had been covering in the classroom. To do this, we learned many of the skills that early settlers would have practiced in order to survive.

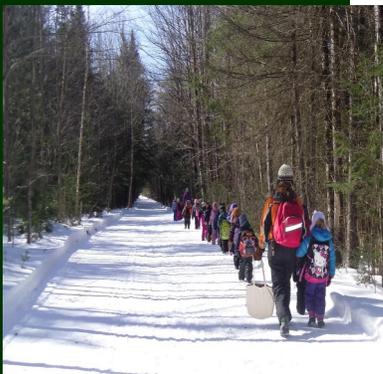
We learned basic mapmaking skills, how to lay out the safest

route through new territory, and even how to cook foods that were common on the trail such as pemmican and hard-tack. Once we had some of the basic skills down, we decided it was time to actually do some real scouting in a place that few students had been to before... Moss Woods.

Moss Woods is a small town forest that is only a short 5 minute walk from the school, but it was new territory to explore. We went in with the objective of exploring the un-

known terrain and searching for signs of local wildlife. Splitting into three groups, we spread out so that we could cover the entire forest. Our results were quite impressive.

Not only were the students able to accurately describe the terrain and how water would flow through the landscape, they also found tracks of 9 species of birds and mammals, including mink, red fox, and snowshoe hare. With such great skills of observation, there is no doubt that these students would have been excellent frontier scouts!



“ Working in the forest with my students is like another classroom. We observe, discuss, write, read, draw, sing, work cooperative, problem solve, and learn history together. We perform these skills everyday in the class and we perform these same skills, and more, outside on ECO Days” - Teacher at Moretown Elementary School

Thanks for Supporting ECO

by Liza Earle-Centers

Thanks to a generous donor, the children at Twinfield Union School have had plenty of extra warm layers to combat this past winter's record cold. The gift of \$5000 is intended to continue building a strong ECO program at the school. Some of the money has already gone towards buying extra rain gear, hats, mittens, and warm socks, which make all the difference in a winter like this past one! The donor, who wishes to remain anonymous, believes outdoor education is vital for our children.

It is the continued outpouring of community support such as this that is making ECO accessible to more and more classrooms throughout central Vermont. Whether through charitable donations, volunteering time to chaperone on ECO days, or the simple act of making sure your child comes to school with proper outdoor gear for ECO, you help make this program possible. Thank you for your support.

Springtime Happenings at NBNC

Believe it or not, spring is officially here and at North Branch Nature Center that means it is time to start gearing up for camp season! Students in grades K-3 can join us for 1 to 3 days of spring nature adventures and activities during our April Vacation Camp. Daily topics include:

- Mon. 4/21 - “A ‘Jump’ Start on Spring” (Amphibians)
- Tues. 4/22 - “Earth Day in Action”
- Wed. 4/23 - “Wandering Wildlife” (Birds & mammals)

Spring also brings the return of migratory birds and already the first feathered harbingers of

warmer skies are flapping through our frozen snowscape. NBNC is celebrating the return of these migrants with our 2nd Annual Bird Drawing Contest. Students in grades K-8 can choose to draw an American Kestrel, Barn Swallow, or Chestnut-sided Warbler. Submissions are due no later than May 9th. Visit our website for more details.

