

Published: Monday, January 28, 2008

Students get opportunity to take to trails

By JOSEPH G. COTE, Telegraph Staff

Growing up in Nashua doesn't always provide many opportunities to spend afternoons exploring in the woods.

At least it hasn't for Fairgrounds Elementary School fifth-grader Parker Delude. That's why her class field trip to SnowSchool this week at the Beaver Brook Association in Hollis was so much fun.

"It was just a great experience," the 11-year-old said of her wintry activities, including a snowshoe hike. "We were just having a great time out there."

SnowSchool is a program developed by the Winter Wildlands Alliance, a group formed in 2000 to promote outdoor activity in winter. The alliance touts SnowSchool as the county's largest "on-snow winter ecology education program," according to its Web site.

That can be a challenge, particularly in the winter. Beaver Brook recently became only the second SnowSchool site in the state, to the delight of Celeste Philbrick-Barr, the association's co-director of education.

"It's another way to promote outdoor activity and outdoor education in winter," Philbrick-Barr said.

Part of Philbrick-Barr's job is to encourage people to step away from the television and learn how to enjoy the outdoors.

Through the SnowSchool program, Philbrick-Barr purchased new Atlas snowshoes at half-price. Now she's working with middle school teachers in the region to organize field trips at the association's 2,000-acre property to learn about a wide variety of winter ecology lessons – and all of it's done on snowshoes.

Teachers can also take advantage of curriculum ideas from past participants that are posted on the SnowSchool Web site in the days leading up to the field trip, Philbrick-Barr said.

This week, four fifth-grade classes from Nashua's Fairgrounds Elementary School visited Beaver Brook. For many of the students, it was their first time on snowshoes or even in the countryside, according to teacher Louane Genest.

"Even driving there, they couldn't believe how much land there is in Hollis. Just seeing horses, they were amazed," she said. "This is an experience they really wouldn't have. The kids loved it."

The experience will hopefully improve the class unit on the Iditarod dog race in March, Genest said, by giving them a tiny taste of what the racers endure. That's when Genest teaches a lot of snow-related science topics, she said.

During the trip, students learned a little about winter ecology, like how to recognize deer tracks in the snow. The students also learned a lot about snowshoeing, including how to put them on and to avoid going up stairs with them.

"It was very fun," said fifth-grader Aly McElhinney. "It was very quiet. You can listen to the birds. It's actually kind of fun because you learn, but you learn about animals."

"I like that it was a new experience because I never went snowshoeing before," said classmate Delude. "I thought I was going to fall like 100 times. It was a really fun experience for me."

There was more to learn than some students expected.

"We also learned that a couple of miles from Nashua they have this beautiful place," Delude said.

The White Mountain's National Forest's Woods in Winter is the only other SnowSchool site in New Hampshire. More than 30,000 students have participated in the program at its 32 sites in the United States and Canada, according to the Web site.

Philbrick-Barr and Genest said aside from teaching kids about winter ecology, the trip is a good way to begin instilling a respect and appreciation for being in the outdoors. The goal, Philbrick-Barr said, is to pull kids away from the videogames and into the fresh air.

"If no one's spending time outside, what's to protect?" she said. "Where is the next generation of conservationists going to come from?"

When she took her class, Genest said the students learned about Beaver Brook's mission, how to follow trail markings and to leave no trace behind.

The lessons they began that day will be tied into classroom activities in the coming weeks, she said.

"This is an experience they really wouldn't (usually) have," Genest said. "We're trying to encourage an appreciation of nature and a stewardship of the earth. Basically we're trying to instill . . . what there is around us that doesn't cost any money."

Joseph G. Cote can be reached at 594-6415 or jcote@nashuatelegraph.com.