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Hometowns

The great outdoors - Students learn about preserving nature through after-school program

By CHELSI MOY / Photographed by TOM BAUER of the Missoulian



Eight-year-old Michael Bracha takes some tenuous first steps on new snowshoes with help from Diann Ericson, education coordinator for the Swan Ecosystem Center, last week at Swan Valley School. The center's after-school program aims to help kids develop an appreciation for the outdoors that surrounds the Swan Valley. Photo by TOM BAUER/Missoulian

SWAN VALLEY - Students at Swan Valley School ripped into the cardboard boxes like vultures devouring a carcass. The new snowshoes had arrived and the kids had only a few minutes to test drive them on nearby snowbanks before teachers whisked them onto a bus en route to Helmville for basketball games.

Nefataree Bartell, a sixth-grader, is one of 42 students who attends the K-8 school on Montana Highway 83. She slipped her boots into the

bindings with relative ease. It wasn't the 12-year-old's first time.

"It's impressive because you don't sink in the snow," said Bartell, who's gone snowshoeing with her grandfather. Her stance was wide. She walked slowly at first, picking her knees up.

"It feels cool," she said.

Typically on Tuesdays, these students attend the Swan Ecosystem Center's after-school program, but basketball season trumps everything this time of year. The center's education coordinator, Diann Ericson, knew how excited the kids were for the snowshoes to arrive, though, so she brought them by school at the end of the day last week.

"I love the kids' enthusiasm for being outdoors," she said. "They're young enough they still get excited to be outside."

It's at the Swan Ecosystem Center that children in the after-school program learn land stewardship, outdoor safety, track animals, measure the diameter of trees and, overall, develop an appreciation for the serene undisturbed wilderness surrounding the Swan Valley.

The program is not like Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts or Flagship or any other after-school program found in more urban settings. There are no tutorials on math, but the kids do learn. There are no kickball games, but there are occasional arts and crafts projects. It's not at school; it's outside.

The Swan Ecosystem Center is a nonprofit community group that encourages collaboration between private and public landowners to manage land in a way that preserves the area's natural resources and wildness. Helping achieve that goal into the future begins with kids, and instilling in them a sense of appreciation and a need to preserve their hometown valley.

Many of the older students in the Swan Valley are into motorized sports, Ericson said: water skiing, motorboats, dirt bikes and snowmobiles. Last year, during a field trip to an old gravel site, which has since been restored by the students, several of the

seventh- and eighth-graders had never had cross-country skis on their feet before, she said.

Ericson wants to expose kids to nonmotorized recreation activities at an early age. After all, the opportunities await them just out their backdoor.

“We want to get people at a pace where they can actually see what’s going on,” she said.

So about a dozen students from Swan Valley School, Salmon Prairie School and several homeschool kids, ranging in age from 8 to 13, meet once a week to study native plants, watch birds and learn about restoration. Hiking in the spring and fall is their favorite activity. During the Easter holiday last year, the students found Easter eggs using GPS coordinates.

About a quarter-mile behind the Swan Ecosystem Center, at the U.S. Forest Service compound north of Condon, are several 15-square-foot plots marked with stakes. Using their new snowshoes, the kids will travel to the plots where they monitor changes in the Earth and document wildlife.

Zac Hodgskiss, 10, has been in the after-school program for several years. The fourth-grader loves playing outside in the winter. Nothing tops downhill skiing, he said, but the program has introduced him to things like snowshoeing and birdwatching, which he has taken a liking to as well.

“I like that we go on hikes,” Bartell said. “You exercise, and stuff, and it gets you fit.”

The Swan Ecosystem Center, which operates on grants and private donations, opened its doors in 1996. The after-school program began in 2003 and is unique to the area.

The Swan Valley is a place where most neighbors can’t see one another’s houses, Ericson said. That’s a lot of open space to care for, and something that’s easily taken for granted.

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