



ECO News

DECEMBER

2014

EDUCATING CHILDREN OUTDOORS

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

"I am so thankful that we have all of this great snow to play in!" - 4th grader at Union Elementary School



4th graders cracking acorns in Hubbard Park

Learning Alongside Our Children

by Angie Barger

We circle the fire with sticks that roast bread. It is our Thanksgiving celebration at Calais Elementary School's weekly ECO session and we are joined by 1st and 2nd grade parents and loved ones, even though it is 1:30 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon. As a parent of a second grader myself, I am so grateful for the parents who could take time out of their usually scheduled work day and take advantage of the unique interaction this opportunity affords them with their child.

I listen as one father holds up his roasting stick for his son, and asks, "Now how do we do this, buddy?" I see his son swell with the pride that he has a skill to offer his daddy and his daddy responds with interest and a desire to learn. The learning we experience at ECO happens in the reflection, and the question posed to this child today offers many avenues of expression.

Often at ECO, we ask children to share what they've learned, seen or heard in the woods with a classmate, with their class around a fire, or in their ECO journal. On this particular day, children were surrounded with parents from the Calais community who offered an outlet for their

reflection on learning how to bake bread-on-a-stick for the first time. Many parents tried their hand at roasting bread for the first time alongside the children. We were all beginners at the same task in the same moment. A beginner's mind accompanied us.

The idea of a beginner's mind is that we temporarily set aside all opinions, reason and logic, even our beliefs – and set it down for a while to make room for curiosity, wonder and engagement. This establishes an optimal readiness for learning and absorption. We might remember these states of being from when we were children! As parents we can extend what our children are learning at ECO by offering time for reflection while trying to take on the beginner's mind. In reality, this simply looks like playing outside to reenact a game or skill they learned at ECO. In the wake of our curiosity, the children are given space to reflect and learn.



Rocking Out @ Union Elementary

by Ken Benton

There are some objects that evoke a primal instinct that rises from our core and demands to be acted upon. Children are more susceptible to such primitive urges that adults have spent years suppressing. A kid sees a stick and must pick it up. They see a rock and want to throw it. No, they *need* to throw it. We channeled this primal instinct with our properties of rocks unit this fall with the UES 4th graders.

Students gathered as many different looking rocks as they could within ten minutes and then sorted them into many different piles based upon their properties. There was a pile of round rocks, a pile of jagged rocks, rocks that were semi translucent, rocks that felt like sandpaper, rocks that were smooth...

We then brainstormed ways that we could utilize these properties and tried them out. They took some flat rocks, placed acorns on them and cracked them open with a round rock that fit nicely in their palm. They then placed the nutmeat from inside the acorn onto a rougher flat rock and began grinding and powdering it with their hammer stone like a mortar and pestle. Some students found that they could use rocks with a sharp, 90 degree edge to saw sticks in half. To file down the tips of these sawed sticks, the rocks with a sandpaper like surface were a perfect fit. Given the freedom to explore our primitive side in a safe and guided way, it is amazing how much learning and discovery can take place.

Thanksgiving Celebrations

by Liza Earle-Centers



Bending sticks for a mini wigwam.

As part of our ECO Thanksgiving celebration with the first graders at Twinfield Union School we built miniature models of Wampanoag and pilgrim villages. Students used what they had learned in the classroom and applied it to their building projects. The pilgrim village included a boat, a fort, a

church, and the Wampanoag villages included wigwams, fire circles, gardens, and even corn watch tower near their gardens. The students explained to me that it was both a play structure (like a jungle gym) for kids and where kids could throw small pebbles to keep away animals that might steal

the corn. We talked about how the Wampanoag tribe traditionally held 13 Thanksgiving celebrations each year—one on every new moon. Similarly, ECO outings include Thanksgiving circles all through the year. Have you shared with someone what you're thankful for this month?

Phenology Studies @ Twinfield

By Carrie Riker



Students may find ephemerals such as this red trillium come spring!

The third and fourth graders at Twinfield have just delved into the world of phenology! Phenology is the investigation and study of various aspects of nature over time. Through the lens of weather and climate, students are breaking up into scientist teams and marking off a habitat plot within our ECO woodland site. They'll be taking a "snapshot" of sorts of this plot at various times during the

year. After creating a unique name for their plot (Muddy Bridge, DK Layer, Damfe, Wavy Terr, Nesto, and Dead Tree), they'll take initial measurements and descriptions. What sort of plants are found during certain seasons? How do the plants that are always there change over the course of a school year? What types of animal evidence can be found? Does this change? How does

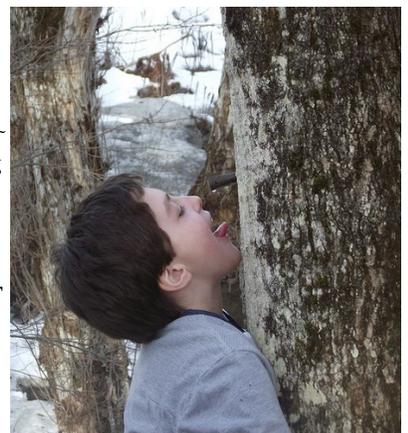
the temperature vary overall in the plot? How does it vary at certain places within the plot? Other observations will focus on details such as wind speed, wind direction, amount of snow, amount of mud, and as the seasons slip back into warmth, we'll explore what it means to be a citizen scientist and participate in a study of spring ephemerals.

North Branch Trekkers Registration Open!

Many adults can look back nostalgically upon their own childhood and how they spent their time rambling about in the great outdoors, after the school day had ended. Perhaps it was catching frogs and crayfish in the neighborhood pond, or playing games with a group of friends at a nearby park. In many cases, this is where the strongest childhood lessons were learned and where lifelong friends were made. Now that children are trading in more and more outdoor time for time spent in front of a screen of some sort, one has to wonder what kind of memories today's children are making.

With this in mind, North Branch Nature Center is pleased to offer the North Branch Trekkers outdoor-based after school program. Students in grades 4 through 7 can join teacher-naturalist Ken Benton every Thursday afternoon as we explore the magnificent green spaces of Montpelier while practicing outdoor living skills, tracking, and wildlife monitoring. We'll make frequent hikes into both Hubbard and North Branch River Parks as we explore the woods to develop a sense of place and play games that will enhance our powers of observation and build camaraderie. Encouraging a pos-

itive relationship with the outdoors is what Trekkers is all about. For more information, please visit our website.



"It's so cool that we are exploring this stuff that we normally would walk right by. I am noticing so much more!" 5th grader at Hyde Park Elementary