

Just Another Day at the Office

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Picture this: SEVENTY excited sixth graders. Shouting. Running. In the woods. Is this a place you want to be? This is something I love.

Here's why I love my job. On a clear, crisp October morning, instead of going to an office and sitting behind a desk, I get to go to the woods. I get to share my excitement about nature with the best possible audience; sixth graders! They are enthusiastic about EVERYTHING...("Mrs. Ford! Look at this huge leaf!" "Mrs. Ford! I found a raccoon track!" "Look Mrs. Ford, I brought a thermos of hot chocolate!")

We are spending the day at Owen Sowerwine Natural Area. As a culmination to our ecology unit in science class, we are here to explore a Riparian area, an ecosystem rich with life. We are here to learn while we explore and play along the river. Between games of "Eagle Eye" and observation relay races, students learn about the diverse species that inhabit this gem of a habitat.

Students walk in pairs along the banks of the Stillwater River. Binoculars hang from their necks, and eyes are peeled for birdlife. The students are great observers, and notice signs of birds nesting in the banks of the

river. They learn that the smaller holes are from the Swallows, who have headed south by now, ready to winter in warmer climes. The larger holes may have been made by Kingfishers. Lucky students may hear the chatter of one above the sound of their own chatter. The morning is icy cold; the water birds are slow to wake up today.

Meanwhile, forest birds are everywhere. Flickers are calling loud and clear, Bohemian waxwings are flying in small flocks from berry bush to berry bush, and friendly Black-capped Chickadees approach groups of children that whistle at them.

By the ponds, students complete an ecological survey, locating as many species as they can in a given section of land and water. Snails are abundant, and quite exciting to find. Students squeal with delight over gigantic ant hills; hundreds of red ants are teeming in around the mounds. Students stand in amazement over the series of large holes they find above the ponds. They hypothesize in groups... "I think they're fox dens." "I think they're muskrat holes, with tunnels leading to the ponds." Other students predict that gophers, badgers, or even bears dug the holes. We have fun comparing guesses. That's what science is all about. Wondering about the amazing things that surround us in this world. Delighting in the simple things, like the warm glow of golden leaves on the Cottonwood trees, the mysterious tracks in the mud, or the shining red berries on a bush.

Children are full of wonder, full of vigor and excitement for life and learning. They love to be outside, love to explore and discover. They need this connection to nature. We all do. So spend some time outside with them. Try seeing things again as a child would, and wonder at the beauty that surrounds us all here in the Flathead Watershed.



Source: Sherri Neater, 2010

Ansley Ford with students on field trip



Source: Daniel J. Cox, 2007

Ansley Ford "on the ground" with students