

National Elk Refuge News – February 21, 2014

Kids, Kids, Everywhere!



A group of preschoolers use their sense of touch to enjoy props brought to them by a Refuge naturalist.



While visitation at the Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center this month continues to climb, the average age of visitors may be lower than normal. Several large elementary school groups have filtered through the building during the past two weeks, using the Refuge as a field trip destination to learn more about wildlife and conservation. Numbers of youngsters in the Center were also bolstered by family visits over the Presidents' Day weekend, and off-site classroom presentations provided additional outreach to children.

Last week, 206 second grade students from Jackson Elementary School made their annual trek to the Refuge as part of their "Animals of Jackson Hole" unit of study. The previous week, Refuge

naturalists visited each of the ten classrooms to discuss the purpose of the Refuge and the adaptations necessary for animals to survive winter conditions. The subsequent field trip to the Refuge gave the students an opportunity to see firsthand the concepts presented by the naturalists. "We had pretty sporty winter conditions last week," explained seasonal naturalist Justin St. Onge, now in his second winter with the Refuge. "It helped the students see for themselves the difficult conditions animals endure during the winter."

While other naturalists accommodated the second graders at the Visitor Center, Jessie Stirling slipped away to entertain two groups of preschoolers at the Jackson Hole Children's Museum later that same week. The two- and three-year-olds

from the Children's Learning Center incorporated the Refuge's lesson into a classroom project called "Our Town." The students had selected three locations in Jackson to study and replicate in their preschool, including Jackson's renowned Town Square antler arches. The children built a paper version of an arch over their classroom door and used the Refuge presentation as an opportunity to learn more about antlers. Stirling brought many props and photos to share with the children, using the tangible items to appeal to the students' learning style.

Over the weekend, visitation at the Visitor Center flowed at a constant pace while steady rain and wind affected outdoor activities. Anticipating the holiday weekend, naturalists had planned

a series of programs for Monday, focusing on early Jackson Hole history and the influence that trappers and mountain men had in the valley. Though several of the activities were geared toward adult audiences, naturalists included a crafts station in the program line-up, giving children a chance to make paper canoes, hats, and “mountain man mustaches.” A living history program featuring Grand Teton National Park interpreter Andrew Langford was popular with visitors of all ages. A total of 2,944 people came to the Visitor Center that day, with many guests participating in the day’s special events.

This week, second graders again filled every nook and cranny in the visitor center as 85 students and 64 adults from Afton, Wyoming visited the Refuge. The students rotated through several learning stations to find out more about the Endangered Species Act.



Justin St. Onge makes a classroom visit with one of ten groups of Jackson second graders prior to their Refuge visit the following week.

The National Elk Refuge has only one permanent staff member assigned to the Visitor Center,

tasked with overseeing operations, maintenance, and budget. That leaves little time for the extensive scheduling and planning it takes to accommodate requests for school and group presentations. In order to offer educational programming, the Refuge uses non-government funds to hire three seasonal naturalists from December through early April when the demand for programs is high. “We try not to turn anyone away,” explains Visitor Center Manager Natalie Fath, “but some days we have every winter naturalist and visitor services volunteer booked. Our interagency partners take care of the drop-in visitors while we accommodate the school children.” Fath also serves as the Refuge’s volunteer coordinator.

The Refuge public use staff uses the proceeds from the contracted sleigh rides to fund the naturalist



An Afton elementary student offers his undivided attention during a naturalist presentation on Endangered Species at the Visitor Center.

positions. Planning the length of the naturalists' seasons is challenging because the amount of income that will be generated over the winter is unknown, with many factors potentially affecting proceeds. Consequently, the Refuge uses proceeds from sales in the bookstore to cover for any deficit in funds needed to pay the naturalists if sleigh ride revenue doesn't meet salary spending. The Grand Teton Association, the Refuge's nonprofit organization, manages both the non-government accounts used to hire the educational staff. "We're indebted to the Association for their funding," Fath explained. "Without it, we'd be severely limited in providing educational programming."

In addition to school and group requests for programs, the naturalist staff offers a daily program as well as guided wildlife tours five days per week.



Chamber of Commerce employee Mary Walker joins in the fun by donning a mountain man mustache during a Visitor Center event. Walker and other interagency staff covered the information desk while Refuge naturalists held educational programs on Presidents' Day.

Last year, February visitation at the Visitor Center totaled 21,972 for the month, averaging 785 people per day, or 98 people per hour. So far, 2014 seems to be on track. Both December and January saw record numbers of

sleigh riders, with 5,959 and 6,262 passengers, respectively. "Winter is very busy at the Visitor Center," Fath described. "We might see in one day what other Refuge visitor centers see in a month or more."



Refuge volunteer Terry Curry staffs a crafts station during a Visitor Center special event.