

Refuge environmental education field trip

by Candace Ward and Stephanie Smith



“Wow! I didn’t know anything lived under the water!” “This is really cool, I’ve never hiked on snowshoes before...” “So, bears aren’t really bad; they just get into trouble if we’re careless and leave food out.” If you were a red squirrel in a spruce tree, these are just a few of the comments you’d hear from kids on our Refuge Environmental Education adventures.

Let’s take a walk through one of the Refuge field trips first hand. You might be, for example, a 6th grader at K-Beach Elementary School learning “Wetlands & Wildlife.”

The program starts when Refuge Environmental Ed staffers Stephanie Smith and Carlie Henneman visit your classroom. Carlie begins with a slide show on the different types of wetlands in Alaska. Then Stephanie leads the whole class in an activity called “Wetland Metaphors,” where you have to compare everyday objects with wetland functions.

“How is a sponge like a wetland?” That’s an easy one, you think. You remember in the slide show that a bog acted like a sponge when a river overflowed its banks, protecting people’s houses from dangerous flooding. Stephanie calls on you and your answer is right! You are “psyched!”

After a few more activities, Carlie and Stephanie explain how to prepare for the upcoming field trip at Headquarters Lake. You learn what you need to wear and what you should expect. You’ll be outside rain or shine, so you’d better ask Dad if you can borrow his

rain gear since yours has some big holes in it.

The next day you arrive at the Refuge Visitor Center; Carlie and Stephanie welcome your class and go over Wetlands Etiquette. You learn that you’re supposed to stay on the trail and boardwalk, and that you need to respect all plants, insects, and animals that you encounter and leave them unharmed. You know this etiquette stuff is important, but you can’t wait to get outside and begin the “real” field trip.

Once outside your first stop is on the grassy lawn next to the Visitor Center for a game of “Migration Madness.” You pretend you are an arctic tern; you experience lots of hazards on your migration from Antarctica to Alaska. You are one of the lucky terns in your group because you manage to survive the game. You are able to find critical wetlands on your long flight to rest and refuel, so you have enough energy to make it to Alaska for breeding and nesting.

For your second stop Stephanie and Carlie take you to Headquarters Lake. Here you learn how the lake was formed, how pH and temperature affect what lives in the lake, and how specially adapted plants in wetlands help prevent soil erosion. You especially like the pH test, because as you add drops of pH solution, the water color changes like magic from clear to green to purple to give the pH reading.

Your third stop is a boardwalk by the lake where you carefully dip aquatic insects from the lake into a small observation tray filled with lake water. Here you watch how the insects move, learn to identify them, find out if they are in their larval or adult stage, and learn how certain insects indicate that water is clean and healthy for wildlife. You especially like the dragonfly larva with its wicked-looking jaws.

On your fourth and final stop, you work with other kids as a team. You do an activity called “Decision Dilemmas.” You are given real life problems involving human activities that affect wildlife and come up with solutions to solve them. For example, you are out on a walk to a local lake with your dog. Your dog is running free. Far ahead down the trail next to the lake, you see a mother moose and her calf. Your dog has not spotted or smelled the moose yet. What do you do?

Summing up, what did you learn on this field trip?

You experienced a variety of fun and educational activities that opened up the world of wetlands. Suddenly you see the world in a different way. Before the field trip you didn't even realize what a wetland was. Now you know why wetlands are important, how wildlife and people benefit from them, and that you have a part in protecting them.

These are the goals of environmental education - to help people understand how the natural world works, how we affect it, and the positive things we can do to protect it. Begun in 1983, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Programs have enjoyed the participation of 43,000 students, 1,400 teachers, and countless dedicated parents.



Our program has grown to include six themes: Animals & Their Senses, The Role of Predators in Nature, Wildlife & Wetlands, The Role of Fire in the Ecosystem, Leave No Trace, and Wildlife in Winter.

The programs are primarily designed to help elementary students (grades K-6) appreciate and understand Alaskan wildlife and ecosystems, as well as to help them develop safe outdoor skills. All units are done outdoors on Refuge sites, and are cross-referenced to Kenai Peninsula Borough science and social studies curriculum requirements.

If you are an elementary teacher interested in our Environmental Ed programs, we invite you to book a field trip for your students. If you are a parent who would like your child to participate in a Refuge environmental education program, contact your child's teacher and encourage the teacher to make a field trip reservation. Volunteers are always needed to help chaperone field trips and you will have as much fun as the kids have. If you are a student who wants to go on a field trip, let your teacher and parents know. For more information on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Program, call us at 262-7021.

Candace Ward has been a park ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for more than 15 years. She coordinates Refuge visitor service and education programs. Stephanie Smith is a conservation associate, who has been actively working with students in Refuge environmental education programs since March 2000.