

Making learning second nature

E.B. Holman students taking part in Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative projects

By KURT HAUGLIE, DMG Writer

POSTED: May 25, 2010

STANTON TOWNSHIP - Sometimes it's possible to watch nature just by looking out a window, and that's one of the methods used by students at E.B. Holman School in Stanton Township.

E.B. Holman students are taking part in projects funded by the Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative, and are being guided by teachers Deirdre Erbisch, Jean Dunstan and Janet Larson. They have ongoing projects at the Stanton Township forest and the Marsin Preserve and Nature Retreat Center near Oskar.

"We have six one-tenth-of-an-acre plots at each of those locations," said Erbisch, who teaches fifth grade.

Erbisch said students involved with the LSSI projects are identifying trees, and counting and identifying birds and salamanders.

"We started the bird study at school this year," Erbisch said.

The study includes woodpeckers, nut hatches, gold finches and many others, Erbisch said.

To do the identification, a feeder is on a stand outside a classroom window, but Larson said there was a problem.

"The birds wouldn't come," she said. "It was too open."

One solution to that problem was to pile old Christmas trees, which became a habitat attractive to birds, Larson said.

Part of the LSSI project involved placing a deer carcass on a pole outside the classroom to see what birds and animals come to feed on it, Erbisch said, and it provided meals for a wide variety of critters.

"A weasel came for a couple days," she said.

Larson said it was surprising how many species of birds fed on the carcass.

"They all liked it," she said.

Erbisch said one purpose of the project is to show students how different animals behave during the different seasons.

The students created another habitat for studying salamanders by putting small pieces of plywood on the ground, but it's yet to produce any animals, Erbisch said.

"That's one of the favorite things for the kids to do," she said.

Larson said the salamander search is popular despite the fact one hasn't been found so far.

"We haven't found (a salamander) yet, but we will," she said.

Larson said the LSSI project involves members of the community, including from Michigan Technological University, Copper Country Audubon, and authors Laura Smythe and Lesley DuTemple.

Dunstan said the two authors write for Discovery Education books.

"They've been working for years in the writing and publishing business," she said.

This is the third year for the LSSI program at E.B. Holman. Larson said it was expensive getting started, but the costs have gone down.

"It doesn't cost as much now that we have the equipment," she said. "It's something we put in our curriculum."

Erbisch said the work done so far for the LSSI projects has created baseline data, which teachers at the school can use in the future.

"From that comes other ideas," she said.

Dunstan said a requirement of the LSSI projects is that they also have a service learning aspect for the students, and one way that's accomplished is to tie local history into what they do.

"Each year we expect to expand that," she said.

Dunstan said getting future grants from LSSI isn't automatic, because the organization requires the schools they fund to have long-range plans.

"You need to have a vision," she said.

Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative is part of the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative, and Larson said officials from the parent group are examining the E.B. Holman project to see if it's worthy of future funding, but someone who visited the school last year was impressed.

"She really liked what we're doing," she said.

Dunstan said students enjoy the projects they've been doing for the LSSI grant, and the teachers hope it's something which can be continued.

"It's something we'll be doing over time," she said.

Kurt Hauglie can be reached at khauglie@mininggazette.com.