

Learning outside

Program teaches the 3 Rs on the trails

BY LARA BRADLEY
The Sudbury Star

It's so cold that the adults, even those wearing long underwear, are whining. But the kids, impervious to the weather, peel off their mittens to better grip their pencils.

Starr Trudeau, 8, has just watched a swan, well a whole whiteness of swans, swim in the cold water of Kelly Lake. This is the first time she's ever seen one up close.

"They're very white," she notes in her pad full of other carefully printed observations observations.

Are you cold?

"No. I'm good."

Other Grade 3 kids from Kari Gerhard's class at Landsdowne Public School, race ahead on the Fielding Park trail after Peter Beckett. These students are considerably younger than the ones he usually teaches in his biology classes at Laurentian University.

The children converge over a fallen tree whose trunk is full of squiggly marks. Did a bear scratch it up? No tiny insects are to blame.

"Insects have eaten the tree," writes Jon Sanderson, 8.

Earlier, he and Emily Ranta, 7, discover a tree gnawed on by a beaver.

"Look, beaver slobber," Sanderson said, pointing to an orangish liquid on the stump.

Later, they learn this slobber may actually be tree sap.

The students are among the first groups to take part in Rainbow Routes Association's new program, Learning Through Trails. This program includes not only guided hikes through the area's many trails by professionals like Beckett, but also in-class visits by staff to shape the students' experiences around certain themes.

These kids, although only in Grade 3, are taking in the hike as junior reporters with the plan of writing articles based on what they find on the hike for a class newsletter, as well as for publication in next Saturday's Sudbury Star. It's an ambitious plan for the seven- and eight-year-olds.

But, as their teacher points out, enthusiasm is running high.

Melissa McCullough, coordinator of Learning Through Trails program, prepared them for the walk with two classroom visits. During one of these visits, she invited me to talk to the class of 16 about how to write a news article. Fictional stories they get. Non-fiction is a new concept for them.

Gerhard explained this age group struggles with sorting out facts from opinion. We talked about the difference between writing stories based on rumours from ones based on interviews with sources. We also talked about the importance of spelling people's names correctly. Right Airen and Aaron?

"Now, when they ask a

question, they ask the person how to spell their names," Gerhard said.

In addition to their walk Wednesday, the kids also got to take in the media launch for the program.

"Our children are not getting enough exercise. We read about it in the newspaper every day," said Deb McIntosh, Rainbow Routes' executive director while standing at a podium in Fielding Park's chalet.

"Rainbow Routes' mission statement is to promote non-motorized trails in Greater Sudbury. But ultimately, what's implied in that statement is that we want feet on those trails."

Basically, the premise for the program is that children learn best by doing, she said.

"It proposes to put the feet that would normally be sitting under a desk learning the three Rs out on the trails while learning those same three Rs plus more," McIntosh said.

"On the trail walk, the student will meet the Ministry of Education's curriculum expectations while engaging in physical activity. The truly neat thing about the outdoor classroom is that it's constantly changing."

The idea for the program — which is being supported by the city, the province, Xstrata Nickel as well as the Rainbow District School Board — came about last year while the association was developing its self-guided tour booklet. To test out the booklets, Rainbow Routes brought several high school classes out to take in the trails and facts about the environment.

"It was a germ of an idea that kept growing," said

McIntosh. "It was so successful. You learn so much when you're seeing and doing."

This new program is geared to elementary students at the Rainbow board, although the association hopes to expand to other boards, as well.

It hopes to have several classes take in the program on a weekly basis, three seasons of the year, thanks to donors such as Xstrata, which has purchased snowshoes for Learning Through Trails, and another has provided mittens, hats and socks for students who forget to dress for the weather.

Why is Beckett taking the time to teach elementary kids about red pine trees and trail markers?

"I guess I've been involved in all kinds of environmental things in Sudbury for a long time," he said. "I was president of Rainbow Routes last year, so I've been involved in building the trails. In one sense this is the next generation of environmental stewards."

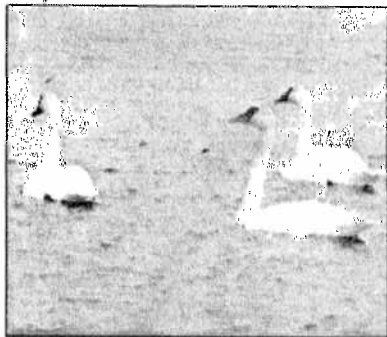
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Emily Ranta, 7, and Jon Sanderson, 8, examine a tree gnawed by a beaver.



Peter Beckett talks about trees on the trail.



About 15 Trumpeter swans call the Kelly Lake home. They were introduced in 1996.



Teacher Kari Gerhard takes pictures of her class in action.

NEXT SATURDAY

► Read the stories the Grade 3 children wrote based on their experiences on the trails.



Junior reporters Dane Potvin, 8, and Josh Trudeau, 8, write in their notebooks.

PHOTOS BY JOHN E. LIGHTFOOT JR./THE SUDBURY STAR

HOW IT WORKS

Learning Through Trails:

- Staff from Rainbow Routes visit classrooms before the hike to prepare students and teachers for the trail walk and provide a foundation for the program;
- During the walk, a lesson will be modelled by experienced professionals who have a passion for their area of speciality;
- Post trip classroom visits will offer a debriefing opportunity for staff, students and trail guides;
- **Goals:** Increase physical activity; engage students with hands on activities; model for teachers' on-trail lessons; encourage students and teachers to develop a sense of environmental stewardship; increase the use of trails and teach people how to use them properly and safely;
- Subsidized bussing is also available, as well as the loan of mitts, hats, socks and scarves for kids who forget to bring them;
- For more information contact Melissa McCulloch at 674-4455, ext. 4535 or go to www.rainbowroutes.com