

The Junior BioBlitz

By Deborah Maier

“I could stay here all day” was a comment heard more than once at the Junior Bio Blitz held at Pace University on September 26. Led by Groundwork Hudson Valley Naturalist Anne Megaro, and by Middle School Science Teacher Greg DuSablou, the afternoon did in fact run to at least 5:00, with some students braving the ever-chillier afternoon temperatures to investigate the Pace pond in depth--literally.



The Junior BioBlitz started with a look at Anne’s marvelous collection: feathers, nests, bones and skulls from various animals, and a wide range of other extraordinary-looking natural objects. As always, some of the most compelling were the plants like the Flycatcher, whose name was proven to the children who watched it trap and devour an insect, and the exquisitely responsive Mimosa, whose fronds move and close when they are stroked.

Some of the kids then went into the research rooms devised for the day in Kessler Hall and used the ‘grown-up’ microscopes to look at feathers, plants and, in the case of Aidan, the odd plastic beetle. But for all involved, the day revolved around the pond that forms a centerpiece between Pace’s Library and Kessler Hall.

Anne and Greg first drew the children’s attention to the ecosystem around the pond. Muskrat holes were pointed out close to the water’s edge, quite deep and of a size to catch an unwary small foot. Thali, age 7, thought the coolest thing was “the tree whose stem became a root in the water.”

Surprises awaited the children when they first scooped some pond water into large clear containers. “It looks like a plain pond,” said 8-year-old Rebecca, “but there’s a lot of life in it!” She pointed out a snail and some insects and water weeds. Her friend Kendall, also 8, had joined Rebecca for the day, not knowing what was in store.



But this turned out to be anything but an ordinary Saturday. By its end both girls, and every other child in attendance, had donned Anne’s and Greg’s adult-sized waders and ventured into the shallows near the pond’s edge. In a procedure that was first carefully rehearsed on dry land, each child stood firm and held one end of a weighted net while Greg, about ten feet away and holding the moving end, fanned out in a circle to catch whatever was on the bottom.



Wearing the waders was a new experience for most of the participants. “It was definitely pretty hard to walk in them because of all the muck on the bottom of the pond”, said Rebecca. For Alexander, “It feels good----a little like

quicksand.” Kendall agreed. “It felt weird. It was hard to pick up your feet, the waders were so heavy.” Asked if the water temperature could be felt, she answered, “Our legs were warm enough, but our hands got really cold!”

When the seining nets were pulled in and spread out on the shore, Greg and Anne hastened the children to weed through the black muck and weeds to look for living creatures and put them in containers of water so they wouldn’t die.

What did they find? Small fish one or two inches long, crayfish, some about 4 inches long, insects of many kinds, many pond weeds and leaves from the surrounding trees. There were also a few of the sadly usual signs of careless humans---a plastic cup here, a discarded pen there, covered in the brownish slime that comes of time spent in a pond teeming with microbial life.



Probably the most interest was generated by several crayfish (or crawfish), a strange mollusk most people probably don’t associate with Westchester County. Some real excitement ensued when tiny Emma, 5, caught a sizable crayfish in her hand net. It escaped when an adult on the bank tried to take it for safe-keeping, but the memory of it will live for a good while.

What was learned? First of all, the excitement of being truly involved with the great outdoors and finding a surprising number of things they had only seen in books or on Animal Planet on TV, right in front of them in a place that seemed very manmade. This excitement about nature is one of the Naturalist Anne Megaro’s goals. “Once they have that”, she says, “learning will happen spontaneously in so many situations.”

Another important takeaway was the children’s sense of responsibility for the natural world around them. Kendall was one who pointed out, “If we don’t take care of ponds, things won’t be able to live in them.”



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