

Firebird Birding Project Takes Off

When high school science teacher Claire McLaughlin read *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder*, she knew she had to do something. Richard Louv's assertions in the book—that children who spend time in nature are more calm and focused, more able to study and learn, and ultimately more healthy—seemed to make perfect sense

McLaughlin, who teaches science and advises freshman at the Brunswick County Early College High School (ECHS,) began looking for ways to get her students outdoors. The school, located on the campus of Brunswick Community College, offers students an integrated curriculum and a way to earn college credit while completing high school. Students graduate in four years with a high school diploma, two years of college credit, and, administrators hope, a sense of being a responsible, effective citizen in the world.

The national "Great Backyard Bird Count" sounded like a great way to get started. The annual four-day event is

designed to encourage community participation, with birders around the country logging their checklists to create the country's largest single snapshot of bird populations. Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology tallies and interprets the results. The GBBC web site reminds us that "anyone who can identify even a few species can provide important information that enables scientists to learn more about how the environment is changing and how that affects our conservation priorities."

McLaughlin felt this model of "citizen science" might help her get the students outside while allowing them to see the relevance of their efforts. "I want my students to be aware that science is based on observations made by people, that it can change, and that they can be part of that change." She appealed to the local chapter of the Audubon Society for a volunteer to help prepare her students for the February count. Cape Fear Chapter President Cary Paynter knew just who to send—John Ennis. "Partly because he has taught an introductory birding class at

BCC, but largely because he is one of those rare people with a passion for sharing his knowledge with others," says Paynter. "The project grew because John always thinks outside the box, and Claire knew a great opportunity when she saw it!"

Ennis showed up the second day back from winter break, and with his help, a one-time citizen scientist endeavor turned into the full time Firebird Birding Project at ECHS. He coached the students in bird identification, then came back the next week to help students install and fill a bird feeder donated by the Cape Fear Audubon Society and the Wild Bird and Garden store. Every school day since, students have refilled the feeder and logged their observations. And they began an in-depth study of birds. Not just the generalities of field marks and ranges. The students began to learn how birds think, and act. How they defend their territory, and communicate, and how they persevere.

With approval from the principal and help from other teachers, McLaughlin and the other freshman advisors at ECHS designed a course of bird study that meshed with the school's innovative, rigorous, and research-based approach to learning. And, they decided every student in the freshman class—more than eighty students—should participate. "Claire did a wonderful job of leading students and teachers and providing learning activities," says Ennis. "They divided the list among the four freshman "houses" and made each house responsible for learning about and being able to identify their birds."

Soon, everyone at ECHS was interested. "I think almost all teachers who are currently teaching freshmen have incorporated birds into their lessons," says McLaughlin, pointing to the cross-curricular nature of the project. She ticks off the actions and how they dovetail with the various disciplines. "The students have interpreted bird poetry and written in the log (English), practiced estimating and made graphs



photo by Anna Martin

An ibis walks through the wetlands of Brunswick County.

photos this article taken by students at Brunswick County Early College High School

of bird songs (math), collected data and learned how to identify birds (science), and studied how birds exhibit perseverance and written thank you notes (character development).” Students learned how to estimate large numbers of birds quickly and accurately, and reviewed the note-taking system developed and used at Cornell.

By the time the Great Backyard Bird Count came around, the students were ready. In fact, the whole school was ready. Administrators designated February 12th a “Family Day,” where advisors design activities to help students build relationships with each other and the community. Everyone from the assistant principal to the school receptionist turned out to help count birds. They divided the BCC campus into segments based on their different habitats, and seven expert birders from the CFAS came out to help spot and identify birds.

The highlight of the day? Finding a bald eagle nest on school grounds. “It was mentioned in all the thank you notes the students wrote,” says McLaughlin. “The eagle nest was amazing and something none of us will forget—who knew that baby eagles were white and fluffy!” wrote one

student. As well as the birds that students counted in their own zone, all students got a chance to view the bald eagles sitting on their nest. With the best viewing area just three minutes by foot from her classroom, McLaughlin has since taken several parents for their own look at the eagle’s nest, a feature on the North Carolina Birding Trail that visits the BCC campus. That portion of the trail has been closed due to campus construction, but organizers hope to reopen it completely by July 2010.

Students tallied their bird counts, then submitted the data to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to be included in this year’s national survey. Their results can be seen at the GBBC web site under “North Carolina.”

Will the Firebird Birding Project continue? You bet. Next year, all incoming freshmen will participate again. Teachers are planning a bird identification competition in April. And Ennis plans to bring his



photo by Kristina Brown

Students set up the bird feeder. Luke Dowell and Katherine Borilla pour seeds while Alex Tate holds the feeder and Desiray Russ lends encouragement.

telescope back soon so students can watch the growing eagle chicks.

“These students are the next generation of conservationists,” says McLaughlin. “They won’t want to bother conserving something they don’t care about, and they won’t care about it if they don’t know about it.” Thanks to McLaughlin, the staff at ECHS, and a team of helpful volunteers, all of the students there now have this chance.

The Firebird Birding Project was made possible through the generosity of the Cape Fear Audubon Society and Wild Bird & Garden, Inc.

Where to Learn More

In addition to its on-site bird walks and information sessions, Halyburton Park offers monthly bird-watching field trips, each one to explore a different location on the North Carolina Birding Trail.

The NC Birding Trail is a driving trail linking birders with great birding sites across the state and the local communities in which they are found. North Carolina has an incredible diversity of habitats, which provide food and shelter for more than 440 species throughout the year. Visiting these sites is a fun way to learn to identify more birds, and to get ready for next winter’s bird counts. These hikes are typically approximately 2 miles. The cost of \$10 includes transportation. For more information or to sign up, visit www.halyburtonpark.com or call (910)341-0075.

Recommended Web Sites:

Cape Fear Audubon Society: <http://www.capefearaudubon.org>

North Carolina Birding Trail: <http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/default.asp>

Brunswick County Early College High School:

<http://www.bcswan.net/education/school/school.php?sectionid=6>

Cornell Lab of Ornithology: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/>

Wild Bird & Garden, Inc: <http://www.wildbirdgardeninc.com>

Richard Louv’s web site: <http://richardlouv.com/>

About the GBBC

The Annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is a four-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are across the continent and in Hawaii. The 14th GBBC will be held February 18–21, 2011.

Each checklist submitted by participating “citizen scientists” helps researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society learn more about how the birds are doing—and how to protect them and the environment we share. In 2009, participants turned in more than 93,600 checklists online, creating the continent’s largest instantaneous snapshot of bird populations ever recorded.

For more information about the GBBC, visit www.birdcount.org or www.birdsource.org/gbbc or contact the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at (800) 843-2473.