

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



*Students are taught how to use a telescope they view bald eagles on their perches. Photo: J. Morton Galetto*

## **Wild About Cumberland**

*The annual program is a field trip to introduce fourth graders to the many adventures that await them in the outdoors.*

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

In mid-March, 500 school children, all fourth graders, descended on the New Jersey Delaware Bayshore a brief parade of school buses. They came to walk in the woods and to learn about habitat types that include farm fields, grasslands, successional forest, upland forest, hardwood swamp, and vast tidal marshes. They learned to tell man-

made paths and ditches from natural ones. They were oriented to the spot where they live, beginning with the planet Earth, to continents and oceans, to the Great Divide, to their state, to their own watershed, to their county and, finally, to Berrytown Rd. and PSEG's wetland restoration site where the field trip was held.

Most importantly they came to have fun.

For those of you who don't remember fourth grade curriculum, this is when students are introduced to geography. And although it may seem strange to you, most fourth graders do not yet know the county they live in, unless they are simply too shy to respond "Cumberland County" when asked. Some confuse the word county and country. But by the end of the day they are all shouting with confidence that they are "Wild About Cumberland!"

Our volunteers are primarily retired teachers, wildlife professionals, and biologists who lead students on a full-day fieldtrip experience through a rugged stretch of Commercial Township. Our goal is to build an enthusiasm for outdoor exploration and a pride in our county's natural and cultural resources.

Some of the retired teachers who now lead *Wild About Cumberland* once took their own classes on the field trip. Over the years students have come from Vineland, Millville, Bridgeton, Maurice River, Downe, Hopewell, Lawrence, and Commercial Townships schools. We have even had home-schooled children join us.

CU Maurice River (Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and Its Tributaries, Inc.) has hosted *Wild About Cumberland* during the winter each year since 2006 (missing only twice during COVID). We estimate that approximately 8,000 students have had the *Wild About Cumberland* experience. The first to have participated are now 28 years old, so in coming years we are likely to have their children joining us. We are building a tradition.

CU Maurice River's staff has been long been instrumental in facilitating this program. It began as *Raptor Discovery Days*; at that time, we coordinated the out-of-door activities in association with the county Eagle Fest. In 2011 and 2012 we took over the entire program and it was renamed *Eagle Fest Education Days*, and since 2013 we have used the name *Wild About Cumberland*.

We bring together a host of partners to make the event possible, including Woodford Cedar

Run Wildlife Refuge, Bayshore Center at Bivalve, and PSEG. Approximately 25-30 volunteers help each year. Teachers, students, and chaperones are treated to sessions that emphasize "sense of place," and the environmental education component focuses on our local habitats and the species that attendees might encounter. This year 500 students were given indoor lessons for half a day at the Bayshore Center in Bivalve and outdoor field studies the other half of the day led by CU staff and volunteers. Mid-day the indoor students and outdoor students traded places. Annually 350-600 students have participated.



*Teacher and CU volunteer Peter Manzelmann discusses flagged animal tracks along the nature trail. Photo: Sue Godfrey.*



With 20-25 enthusiastic students on a trail we are unlikely to see wildlife during our explorations, aside from the birds that soar or perch above us. But we learn to be detectives looking for signs of wildlife: footprints, bones, turtle shells, eggs, owl pellets, feathers, remains of fruits, and the highlight for the children is animal scat. We regularly see fox, otter, bird, and coyote droppings. For good measure we bring two stuffed coyotes prepared by taxidermists and place them in the bushes. This causes quite a commotion, and it gives us a chance to explain that no self-respecting coyote would not allow itself to be spotted by 20 screaming school children!



*Karla Rossini, executive director of CU Maurice River, talks about local coyotes with the fourth graders. Photo: Sue Godfrey.*



*Fourth graders found a box turtle carapace along the trail during Wild About Cumberland. CU Staff member Julia Wilberg discusses the bone structure of the turtle's shell. Photo: Sue Godfrey.*

At the Bayshore Center the indoor lessons commonly involve an *Enviroscape* model that allows students to understand what a watershed is, and how what we do on our properties affects the environment. The

focus of this is usually stormwater runoff, the products we use on the land, and how they make it into our waterways.

Lessons about animal adaptations are usually taught as well. Students also learn about birds of prey from Woodford Cedar Run Refuge docents/staff.

We had a number of days of rain in advance of the program, which necessitated actually pumping out some huge puddles to allow students to skirt them. We have also had years where we needed to scramble to adapt all our learning to the indoors because of weather-related constraints.

Unfortunately local schools have limited-to-no-funds for field trips and busing. CU Maurice River raises money for busing to make the program possible. Other expenses include rental of the Bayshore Center in Bivalve, volunteer lunches, portable toilets, mailings to schools, Woodford Cedar Run Wildlife Refuge's live bird experience, and additional particulars.

Furthermore, our communities really come together to make it possible. Inspira provides EMTs should a health issue arises. Our CU membership provides necessary funding, and the National Park Services Wild and Scenic Rivers Program supports our



staff's coordination. Various local corporations help out. This year Chem Glass was a major donor. Often the County of Cumberland has assisted with busing funds. PSEG provides public access to their restoration site, and their Estuary Enhancement Program personnel are able to assist in educational interpretation of their property. These are staff who manage the biological restoration of the former salt hay farm to its original state – tidal wetlands.



*Unprompted, students decided to lie down while waiting their turn to look through telescopes. They were simply enjoying the outdoors and the sunny day. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.*

The thing we stress most to our group leaders is that we want the children to have fun experiencing the out of doors. We want them to look forward to being outside. To older folks like me that may seem odd. Thirty years ago most children played out of



doors, often in the woods or a nearby park. Incredibly, today many children have never been in a wooded area. It is not unusual for a student to ask about animals that don't exist in our locale because the wild areas they commonly see are viewed through the lens of television, so yes, we sometimes get asked if we will see lions or giraffes or other exotic wildlife!

There has been recent focus on *nature-deficit disorder* in today's world. Children lack interaction with nature for a number of reasons. The organization Children in Nature offers this explanation: "The proliferation of electronic communications; poor urban planning and disappearing open space; increased street traffic; diminished importance of the natural world in public and private education; and parental fear magnified by news and entertainment media" results in a culture in which many parents are afraid to let their children explore the natural world around them.

Studies have concluded that children who lack time outside are more likely to have physical health problems, like childhood obesity and vitamin D deficiency. They are also more likely to be plagued by emotional illnesses like anxiety and depression. Studies show that, regardless of your age, being in green spaces has a positive improvement in

overall mental health. This is primarily attributed to boosts in serotonin levels.



*Departing Bishop Shad students show their appreciation for the CU field trip.*

Most of our teachers, before retiring from a traditional classroom, used nature as a vehicle for learning. Now they bring those same skills to *Wild About Cumberland* to energize children's interest in the out of doors.

This year was stellar and Mother Nature cooperated. It is our hope that the kids are now "*Wild About Cumberland*," and will seek the wonders of nature on their own more often.