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Manteo Middle School Science Club Documents Wildlife on Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge

Evan Murray and Jaime Santibanez, members of the Manteo Middle School Science Club, examine plant life on Sandy Ridge Wildlife Trail.

photo credit: USFWS

On Monday, as part of a digital nature photography workshop, the Manteo Middle School Science Club participated in a digital scavenger hunt on Creef Cut Wildlife Trail, one of two half-mile walking trails on Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. Visitor Services Specialist Cindy Heffley was their guide, teacher, and fellow explorer for the day.

Since the beginning of the school year, Refuge staff have been visiting Manteo Middle School each month to share educational programs on a variety of topics with the Science Club. Designed as a "Junior Refuge Friends" focus and co-sponsored by the Coastal Wildlife Refuge Society, this partnership involving the school, the refuges, and the Society is one among four similar partnerships- the others in place at Columbia Middle School, First Flight Middle School, and Cape Hatteras Secondary School. Each school developed a way to make the partnership work- a club, a grade, or even the entire school is involved, depending on what worked best for the school.

In the MMS Science Club, many students were familiar with digital cameras and the process of taking photos of their friends and families. However, some hadn't been to a refuge to take photos and didn't know the best methods for getting the best shots. A handout with many tips for better wildlife watching and photography was given to the students prior to their trip. They learned how important it is to know about the wildlife on the refuge and how to tell if certain animals are in the area. They were reminded that the refuge is home to many critters and care must be taken to avoid disturbing them. They learned how to view and photograph wildlife

SAFELY. Finally, the handout provided information for proper etiquette when being around other people while on the refuge.

Armed with all of this information and nine new Nikon Digital cameras, the students were ready to head out to the field to practice their newfound skills. Although they would receive a welcome break from the usual school day, the main objective of the trip was to help them understand the importance of documenting plants and animals. Decisions on managing wildlife must be based on good science. Good science must have thorough documentation. These students were wildlife biologists-in-training for the day.

They also learned about biological communications careers, which include nature photography. The students seemed surprised to learn that before photography was invented, the documentation of plants and animals was accomplished through drawings and paintings.

An overview of the 35mm digital camera was given to ensure that the students could easily capture the various items on the scavenger hunt. After a guided hike to the end of the trail, each team was directed to go out and take pictures- one picture to represent each item required on the scavenger hunt. The students were successful at finding answers to all the questions on the scavenger hunt and even came up with some very creative answers. As a bonus, the group moved on to Sandy Ridge Wildlife Trail, off Buffalo City Road, where they continued taking photos and exploring the refuge.

When it was time to return to school, they quickly shared glimpses of all the photos they had taken. Each student will receive a CD with their team's photos. Although not all the photos they took would be considered biological evidence by professionals, none would argue that all the pictures taken would be considered evidence of a great field trip to Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge! The students were encouraged to bring their families and explore the refuge on their own.

For information about how you may become involved with Alligator River and Pea Island National Wildlife Refuges, call 252-987-1118 or email Cindy Heffley (cindy_heffley@fws.gov). The refuge offers a number of education programs for organized groups and a regular schedule of weekly programs for the public during the warmer months. Several Saturday, family-oriented educational programs are planned for the spring.

Or, commit to becoming a refuge volunteer! You can volunteer to lead activities like this one! For more information about volunteering on the refuge, call the number above or email Refuge Volunteer Coordinator Abbey Reibel (abbey_reibel@fws.gov)

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