

Creating Memories with the help of John Sundquist

Most of us older folks have wonderful nature memories from childhood. I remember going with my mother to the marshes of the Mystic River where she showed me flocks of black ducks and told how our colonial forefathers fattened their cattle on the rich salt marsh hay. I remember my father feeding his beloved chickadees, the tiny birds perching on his beret, while he filled the holes in the peanut butter feeder. I remember the flaming colors of the new woods growing in the abandoned fields near my home, where ancient apple trees still bore the tastiest fruit. As a farm child, I was very lucky, and in that safer, less populous world, there were so many more opportunities to experience nature, and no temptations to stay indoors, playing internet games all day.

We are very fortunate here in the Eugene area to have individuals and organizations working hard to provide nature education and to teach the love of nature to a generation of children whose “real world” is enclosed by walls and mostly electronic. Nearby Nature, located in Alton Baker Park, does a wonderful job of teaching about the outdoors and providing a lot of fun for the kids participating in its many programs and events. The same can be said for the Mount Pisgah Arboretum. I would like to tell you about two less well-known projects and the remarkable individuals who are making a big difference in children’s lives.

The Lane County Audubon Society sponsors classroom science education focused on birds, their biology and their place in the ecosystem. Kris Kirkeby, the coordinator for the program, has trained five volunteers who go to classrooms sponsored by Audubon Society members’ donations. They bring materials such as bones, skulls, nests and feathers to teach drawing skills, and to give hands on experience about how the wild creatures look, feel, and function. Teachers must request to have the Audubon program for their classrooms. Each classroom must be sponsored at a cost of forty-five dollars for a year’s commitment. As of October first, there were eleven classrooms that were participating in the program. But there were twenty-nine other teachers who were hoping for sponsorship so they could have “Audubon Adventures” for their students! If you would like to help this remarkable program, either with a donation or with your volunteer expertise, please contact Debra Eichner, aceichner@msn.com or write LCAS, P.O. Box 5086, Eugene OR 97405, indicating your interest in, or contribution to, “Audubon Adventures.”

Now the most remarkable nature educator I know is a Coburg farmer named John Sundquist. For years he has tried to bring his love and understanding of the natural world to the school children of Lane County. The elementary classes that visit his beautiful and richly diverse organic farm find adventures suitable for anyone, from little Head Start kids to the most sophisticated of fifth graders. Let me quote from his description of Junction City Head Start’s visit in May.

“We had a great time, mostly sunny weather, greeted by the dogs-- on to looking at the ducks and chickens, and then looking for the cows, while walking through the dim light of the filbert orchard and watching where we stepped. We walked right up to the resting cows, talking about the four stomachs in the cows that allow microorganisms to help the cows digest the grass they had eaten and now were rechewing. We walked down to the big compost pile that was still warm from all the microbes busy digesting it, similar to the way the microbes in our stomachs help us digest food. We climbed the Hills of Doom (wood chips and rock

dust, now greatly smaller than in the fall), then crossed the slough to the East Field. We walked through the bamboo jungle, looking at the difference between the soft and tender young bamboo and the hard strong canes of the older bamboo. We visited the grove of biggest bamboo, and shook the big canes to bring water down on us from the leaves. Then we had a fun run under the lindens (500 feet in the Spooky Room of Gloomy Zoom), and went to pick and eat some snow peas and our fill of strawberries. Then back through the lindens and down to the Spooky Lagoon, past Inside-out Tree and through the Nature Area with cow parsnips and coral bells under the tall maple trees. We ended up back at the bus, and drank some water from the hose.”

It makes you want to be a child again! For the fifth graders there is more science mixed in with the fun:

“When the 5th grade showed up early, I started talking about Team Food Webs, the collections of organisms that work together to provide each other with food. Plants provide us with food and oxygen. We are a part of teams that provide plants with food and carbon dioxide. Teams of microbes in the soil are essential for plants to grow. Teams of microbes in our guts are essential for us to grow. I said I thought it would be fun to make a game out of Team Food Webs. Simple rules: You are an organism which must eat, excrete, and reproduce. How many teammates can you name? What is your survival strategy? Then a girl suggested we look at the henhouse, which led me to talk about the alluvial soil in the river bottom compared with the heavier soils of the rest of the valley floor. I mentioned that much of the heavy soils come from the ash drifting from the Mt. Mazama explosion 7,500 years ago, combined with soils left from the Missoula Floods of 10 and 11 thousand years ago.”

John also creates organic raised bed gardens for schools. He has made twelve Head Start gardens, and last spring, he and students from six Thurston Middle School science classes built six, four by ten raised bed “science gardens” in a single day! John has different curricula concepts for the gardens depending on the age of the gardening group. For a science garden, students explore “how sunlight, climate, soil and water generate the basic building blocks of life.” By studying the soil food web, students can study photosynthesis and gain an understanding of the proteins, carbohydrates and minerals that bodies need to survive. For Head Starters, there are “fun gardens,” but they are educational too. Learning to grow and enjoy good food in the age of Pop Tarts and Fruit Loops is part of it, but the kids learn about the Native Americans and their beautiful squash, bean and corn gardens, the “three sisters” that provided a balanced and healthy diet. John’s goal is to start young kids on a path of growing biological literacy, on an understanding of life processes and the interconnectedness of all life. This quiet unassuming man is making a huge difference in so many young peoples’ lives. He has boundless energy and enthusiasm for the work he is doing and limitless curiosity about the workings of nature.

In the next months, with the holiday season upon us, I, and perhaps you, will suddenly be surrounded with a bunch of kids to entertain. Let’s take a lesson from John and Kris, and the other good people in our community and take the time to create some wonderful nature memories.

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