

Connecting with nature at petro-canada bird school

Cathy Cochrane and Kym McCulley

In the early morning sun, a group of Grade 3 and 4 students sits quietly looking across the lagoon to the trees beyond the swiftly moving Bow River. A new blanket of snow has fallen overnight. The tracks of a mule deer and a coyote have criss-crossed the pathway through the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary, creating a heightened sense of excitement and anticipation within the group. After several moments, Michael whispers, "There he is!" The group turns in unison as a large male coyote walks silently out of the trees in search of an unsuspecting mouse or vole for his breakfast.

It is day three of a full week at Campus Calgary's Petro-Canada Bird School.

As the children watch in awe, a great

flurry of wings is heard from above. The coyote moves beyond sight, but from above flies a full-grown bald eagle, its white head a crown of brilliance as it pursues the mallards that have been feeding at the river. The children's eyes widen and they quietly gasp in wonder as the eagle drives the flock of mallards downstream. The chorus of quacking and timpani of wings in the frosty air is replaced by the sound of journals opening and pages turning as the students quickly search for a new sheet on which to record their most recent encounter. There will be much to write about and share with classmates when they return to the site classroom later in the day.

Classroom teachers often struggle with ways in which to integrate environmental education into their programs of study. While many of the resources available to educators facilitate the development of basic knowledge, little attention has been paid to providing students and teachers with real experiences that build deep understanding and develop responsible attitudes and changed behaviors. Petro-Canada Bird School is an exciting and unique program that is changing environmental attitudes not only in students, but in parents, teachers and programmers alike.

Because a clear goal of environmental education is to change behavior and attitudes about the natural

world, it would seem advantageous to understand how attitudes and behavior are affected by programming. It is the belief of the Petro-Canada Bird School staff that children must be involved in learning experiences that are real and meaningful in order to develop a sustained sense of stewardship for the natural world. In a study conducted by Scott and Oulton (1999), researchers found a significant difference in knowledge transfer between children who participate in authentic learning experiences in a natural environment compared to students who receive the same information in the classroom. They also argue that a community of educators, including teachers, students, parents, naturalists, docents and community volunteers is needed to share responsibility for program planning within the context of the natural world.

Unlike a traditional one-day field trip, where the teacher often takes a secondary role in planning the program, the Petro-Canada Bird School coordinator, program directors, naturalists and volunteers work as a team with the teacher to custom design a full week of school that connects seamlessly to the classroom curriculum. The week at Petro-Canada Bird School is part of a long-term, interdisciplinary study that begins at school and continues long after the students have returned to the classroom. Frequent opportunities to spend extended periods of time observing and reflecting within this unique setting deepen student learning and play a major role in fostering attitudes of environmental stewardship and responsibility.

A study by Pooley and O'Connor (2000) found that if educators are interested in changing

environmental attitudes, then emotions and beliefs, rather than knowledge, must form the basis of environmental programs. A fundamental belief of the Campus Calgary program is that deep learning is based on the development of meaningful relationships, and that establishing these relationships takes time. When students spend several hours each day observing and reflecting, they begin to develop a real connection to their environment and soon acquire a sense of ownership of their surroundings. It is not unusual during an observation to hear students reminding other visitors to the sanctuary to stay on the pathways or to refrain from picking the wildflowers. Many students and teachers leave their week at Petro-Canada Bird School feeling that they have experienced something spiritual, often commenting on

the dichotomy of finding such tranquility in the heart of a busy city.

Environmental awareness and stewardship continues beyond the Petro-Canada Bird School experience. The following student writing samples and parent letters illustrate the personal connections that are shaped by Petro-Canada Bird School experiences:

- ◆ When I was at Bird School I felt like I was in a whole new world. It was great being there. I loved the way nature looked and the way the animals we saw coped with nature and fit into their busy winter life. I learned so much at Bird School. I learned what different animals' prints looked like. I learned what the pheasant

hawk looked like and what a downy woodpecker was. I also learned what kinds of trees are found all over Alberta. What I liked about Bird School was that everything there was natural and untouched. Like when my friend and I saw a hurt duck and we ran to tell Roland, but he said that we couldn't help it. I was disappointed at first because I didn't see why I couldn't help. But now I understand that was a part of nature. That was why we didn't feed the birds or pick any of the plants - because all these things are a part of nature and everything

there may need it to survive.

- Faaiza, Gr. 5

- ◆ Today I saw many chickadees and I saw two beautiful woodpeckers. They were black and white and speckled. On their foreheads they had a crest of red. The occasional Canada goose flew by. Living here must be wonderful. This is a way to relax and really think about what matters to a person and to realize what nature has to offer. The slow moving breeze and crisp, cool air moving about with a small stream of water creeping toward a larger, more welcoming setting. Sometimes it's good to be alone, not having to worry about anyone or anything. Sure it

is not exactly paradise, with the smell of yeast from the brewery, or the sound of jets flying over and the trains blowing their horns. But to know this is what our home used to look like and that it could be replenished with some care and effort brings a sort of peace to my mind. This is our home - and this is not: we are visitors here and we are owners. We share responsibility.

- Katie, Gr.

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- ◆ This was a really worthwhile adventure for the children. My son enjoyed it so much he was quite disappointed it wasn't going to last forever. He learned a lot about what was going on

around him. When he is at home now he is listening to sounds outside and trying to adapt to his community what he has learned.

Thank you!

- Carole F.,

Parent

- ◆ Thank you for all your hard work and planning that went into the organization of such a fabulous experience for kids. Brendan come home every day full of stories of what he had seen and done. He continues to recite facts about birds and wildlife so you can be sure that some things did sink in. Brendan, Dylan and Sean made a trip back to the Bird Sanctuary last weekend because they missed it so much. Thank you so much again.

-Mandy E.,
Parent

Children today spend excessive amounts of time indoors, engaged in activities



that for the most part require little interaction. They do not have the first-hand experiences with nature that their parents or grandparents had. A high percentage of time both at school and at home is spent receiving information rather than exploring and building new understanding. At the Petro-Canada Bird School, children spend at least two-and-a-half to three hours each day immersed in the outdoor world of the sanctuary. They learn to slow down and deeply sense the sights, sounds and smells around them. They develop skills in reflective writing, sketching and

observing and discover how to view learning as a life-long exploration.

As educators, we are charged with the responsibility of fostering attitudes of responsibility and stewardship for the world in which we live –a daunting task! Through its partnerships with teachers, parents, students and community sponsors, Campus Calgary’s Petro-Canada Bird School makes all of this possible.

For more information on Campus Calgary or Petro-Canada Bird School, visit our web site at:

www.campuscalgary.ca

References

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