

Loblolly Woods a teaching ground for young scientists

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More Gainesville students are walking in the woods this year, thanks in part to a nearly \$14,000 grant from the U.S. Forest Service.

Westwood Middle School sixth-graders are spending this school year collecting data on wildlife and the environment in Loblolly Woods alongside scientists and teachers.

"There are a lot of benefits," said Annie Hermansen-Baez, a scientist with the U.S. Forest Service. Students get out of the classroom and experience the woods that are right in their own backyard.

The entire sixth-grade class at Westwood is working in Loblolly Woods, which adjoins the school.

The project is funded through the U.S. Forest Service's More Kids in the Woods initiative, and was the project funded in Florida this year.

More Kids in the Woods seeks to connect children with the outdoors. This year, the Forest Service selected about 30 projects with that goal for funding.

Also lending a hand to the project are Gainesville Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs; the Alachua County Environmental Protection Department; the University of Florida's School of Forest Resources and Conservation; and Camp Crystal Lake, which will organize a school camp-out and nighttime nature walk in the spring.

Over the course of the year, students will go out with scientists and teachers about once a week to collect data on wildlife behavior and the environment, learning about the scientific process along the way.

On Thursday, science teacher Sara Charbonnet's class had its last day of collecting data about bird behavior.

About a month ago, scientists set up three data collection sites around Westwood Middle. Each site has three stations: a bird feeder with a fake cat, one with a fake snake, and a control feeder with no predators.

Students rotated among the sites and stations over the past three weeks, taking notes on weather conditions and other factors, and keeping a tally of how many birds, and of what species, were feeding at the sites.

On previous observation days, students saw chickadees, blue jays, Carolina wrens and mourning doves.

But on Thursday, temperatures dipped into the 50s, and the woods were quiet.



Erica Brough/The Gainesville Sun

Westwood Middle School students, including Caleb Carter, left, and Noah McClain, right, walk through the Loblolly Woods trail to study an "urban forest", observing bird behavior and collecting data on happenings in the woods as part of a grant received by scientists from the U.S. Forest Service and the University of Florida's School of Forestry and Natural Resources to work with sixth-graders from Westwood Middle School in Gainesville, Fla., Thursday, October 24, 2013.

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Students at the control station — without predators — saw two cardinals and a fat squirrel.

At the cat station, the black-and-white decoy nicknamed "Oreo" always keeps the birds away, Hermansen-Baez said.

"Zero birds is still good scientific data," Merald Clark, of Gainesville Parks and Recreation, told the students as they fidgeted with their binoculars.

Over the next few weeks, the sixth-grade science classes will compile their data and put the information into graphs and tables so they can look for trends.

In January, the students will return to the woods to study frogs, trees or soil erosion with Michael Andreu of UF's School of Forest Resources and Conservation.

Next year, the project will start over with a fresh crop of sixth-graders. Second-year funding through the Forest Service grant will kick in for a different project with the seventh-grade class.

Westwood teachers said they're glad the students are getting the opportunity to do real scientific work.

"The kids get to meet scientists, and it dispels the myth that scientists have to be old men with the big hair in a laboratory with chemicals," Charbonnet said.

But the students seem to be most happy with "just going into the woods," in the words of Caleb Carter, 12.

It's nice to get out of the classroom, he said, although classmate Zoe Dupler, 11, said she was glad the outdoor part was over for the semester.

"It's really cold," she said.

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