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Virginia Master Naturalists Discover Refuge Treasures With Local Students

By Dorie Stolley

What does a deer track, wolf spider, periwinkle on the marsh grass and a bald eagle standing in a shallow pond have in common? Students from Northampton County schools discovered these natural curiosities at the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge with the help of knowledgeable certified Virginia Master Naturalists - trained and certified volunteers with in-depth knowledge of the natural history of Virginia ecosystems.

Fifty 7th grade Life Sciences students studied and experienced the upland forest, scrub-shrub habitat and salt marsh by going on Discovery Hikes in small groups, each led by a Master Naturalist or by a Refuge employee. The Master Naturalists who participated are from the Tidewater Chapter. They were Jody Ullmann, who runs her own business, Mudpuddle Science, specializing in leading science activities for young children and Jim Harrison who has led nature walks and biology lessons for high school students at First Landing State Park.

They made sure all the kids smelled the fragrant European sweet fennel and discussed the harm that nonnative invasive plants can cause. From the top of the bunker they overlooked the marsh and the barrier islands, then strolled to the viewing platform to see marsh mud, Great Blue Herons, and periwinkles. Each student got a small prop such as a box of cereal, an eggbeater, a container of antacid, or a menu and was invited to create a "marsh metaphor" to describe the functions or products of a wetland. Our favorite metaphor was: "A marsh is a road-side restaurant because it provides food of many types to weary travelers."

As the students traversed the trails with their leader, they took time to check off items on their "Habitat Hunt" lists (e.g., mole trail, animal track, sign of human history), or to ask leading questions to find out answers necessary to finish the list. All sorts of listed and unlisted items were discovered. One observant young man found a wolf spider and sequestered it briefly in a bug box so that all groups could get a magnified look at its furry splendor. A sharp-eyed girl managed to spot the camouflaged body of a lifeless Myrtle Warbler on a high branch - a meal caught and then abandoned by a Sharp-shinned Hawk?

At the end of a busy day, tired students (and guides!) gathered in the auditorium to share the highlights of their experience. Thanks to enthusiastic and expert Master Naturalists, the students were able to enjoy Refuge programming in small groups, with more individualized attention.

And that's not all! Another Master Naturalist, Peggy Emslie, joined a Refuge employee and a group of 21 high school Biology students a week later on an excursion to Fisherman Island to see relics of military history and to experience beach and barrier island ecology first-hand. A Red-tailed Hawk delighted the students all of whom had been outfitted with binoculars for the trip, and the circling Turkey and Black Vultures ensured that the groups would remain lively. Peggy, an employee of the Department of Environmental Quality, waxed eloquent on the details of horseshoe crab taxonomy, describing their closer relation to spiders than to crabs. The students enjoyed a fun, exciting and educational field trip, and left with a greater knowledge of the unique ecosystem of Fisherman Island.

We are fortunate to have a close relationship with both of the local chapters of the Virginia Master Naturalists: Eastern Shore and Tidewater (including the cities of Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Suffolk, Portsmouth and Chesapeake). Besides ably assisting with school programs, Master Naturalists run

Fisherman Island tours on Saturdays in the winter, lead butterfly and birding walks in the summer, help at the Refuge's booth at the Eastern Shore of Virginia Birding and Wildlife Festival, and do special programs such as the recent Family Photo Safari and the upcoming (date to be announced) talk on using native plants to create backyard habitat.