

DISES students welcome spring with birdhouse project

By Elke Dorr

If, as Leo Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*, “Spring is the time of plans and projects,” then DISES fifth and sixth graders have launched wholeheartedly into spring with their own exciting project: building birdhouses. Mickie Flores, DISES science teacher, as well as Island Heritage Trust’s (IHT) Environmental Educator Martha Bell and IHT Development Associate Alex Drenga, helped students construct the birdhouses in small-group sessions. Provided through the generosity of Charlie Cannon, Holbrook Island Sanctuary’s Park Manager, the birdhouses arrived as kits that Cannon created. Each of the 50 kits consisted of pre-cut and drilled white pine as well as nails and screws. Cannon even included twenty hammers for the project, which followed on the heels of an extensive study of bird behavior the students had been conducting in their science class since last year.

Monitoring birds’ use of the three feeders located on the school Nature Trail, the students regularly counted visiting birds for three-minute intervals and recorded the resulting data. Fifth graders counted birds every Tuesday and Thursday with Bell, according to Flores, “from September through December,” while sixth graders visited the station with Flores during those same months, “Monday through Thursday.” Students also noted the weather conditions for each observation and, according to Bell, “asked lots of really good questions” that led to more acute observations. She added that the “students sat so patiently” while observing the birds, noting that some days there “were many birds and some days far fewer,” leading the budding naturalists to speculate why that might be. In addition to collecting data from their outdoor observations, the students were also introduced to the vast array of birds through a “bird of the week,” which they studied more intensively, read about and drew. Many of their drawings can be seen at the kiosk on the Nature Trail.

Slide shows also served as an additional source of information. In fact, students even created their own slide shows.

According to Flores, the project was initially “developed ... as part of WeatherBlur, a citizen science project through Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance (<https://weatherblur.com/>).” While building the birdhouses was the “action” part of their study, Bell commented that in total, “the project had so many tentacles,” one path of exploration and discovery leading to another. As an example, she cited the students’ introduction to the process of echolocation, a system of orientation that relies on sound waves. Used by some birds, notably bats, echolocation was first demonstrated in 1938 by Donald Griffin, an American zoologist.

Alex Drenga praised the kids as well as the set-up of the building project. Some students were familiar with tools before the birdhouse project, he said, while others “learned how to use a hammer during the process.” In addition to the core group of adults who helped and guided students, Drenga noted that other teachers also became involved, which helped make for small groups and made the project run that much more smoothly and successfully. The students were so excited, Drenga said, and worked really well together, noting how pleased he was to see such positive results following his encouragement of team effort. “It was really exciting to be part of all that,” he said.

Bell had initially contacted Cannon about helping with the birdhouse building, aware that he had donated materials and helped teach others how to build the birdhouses. While he generously donated the materials, he was unable to go to the school to teach the students how to build their birdhouses because of pandemic restrictions. Instead, Bell took a lesson from Cannon herself and then taught the students and the adults who helped. Cannon noted that the wood for the houses came from Camden Hills State Park, “where they produce lumber over some winters.” When asked about his other birdhouse building projects, Cannon replied that over the years he has helped “many peninsula or island schools and local libraries” with their own birdhouse projects. In addition, he also has assisted numerous other organizations, including “Maine State Parks’ winter ‘Take It Outside’ events, Feathers Over Freeport, Maine Discovery Museum, and Camp Capella.” He noted that his predecessor, former longtime Park Manager Phil Farr, “started this program years ago and it has continued since its inception.”

Bell remarked that the whole project was yet another illustration of community participation, with everyone “wanting to help make the best naturalist life that [the students] can have.” That sense of community wasn’t lost on the students either. While most of them intended to take their birdhouses home to install in their yards, some suggested donating them to the Island Nursing Home. In Martha Bell’s words, “It was kids giving back to the community. I was so proud of them.” She quickly added that they were “definitely very proud of their birdhouses.”

Although the bird study and attendant building project are over, the students continue to “walk the trail daily and maintain the feeders,” said Flores. She added that the Nature Trail will certainly continue to be the focus of other projects during 2021-2022, and that “Martha and Alex will be a part of that process.” Most recently the students have focused on lichens. Drenga helped them observe and sketch local lichens as well as use their hand-held microscopes. Students were also “treated to a lichen slideshow,” said Flores, “produced by Marnie and Ken Crowell,” scientists and island residents as well as long-time supporters and members of IHT. Flores noted that her classes also have recently participated in a Zoom presentation with an Acadia Park Ranger, all examples of Martha Bell’s observation that student science studies really do involve the participation and generosity of the community.