Children explore winter wonders close to home

Submitted by KOREENA HAYNES
For The Argus

Several dozen children, ages 4 to 15, braved the cold, Feb. 11, to search for native plants and wildlife just a few blocks from their homes in Mount Vernon.

Starting from North 26th Street and Kulshan Avenue, the 33 kids hiked a mile down the Kulshan Trail, crossing Kulshan Creek and exploring the little tributaries along the Nookachamps Creek to Waugh Road.

Mike Brondi of the National Park Service helped youth find snowberry, cat tail, native rose, reed canary grass and cottonwood. Wildlife biologist Don Gay showed the children a hawk's nest, chickadees and evidence of pileated woodpeckers.

Roberto Garcia, 7, pointed out an eagle's nest, and along with Nelly Torrez, 8, was awarded a gift of binoculars for their participation and preparedness for the outing. The most exciting discovery by far was the coyote scat. She said the children used sticks to point out domestic cat claws embedded in the scat.

Andrea Pantoja and Daniella Becerra find a good use for reed canary grass stems, a non-native species brought to the United States for livestock forage.

Photos by **Koreena Haynes** / USFS

Michael Choto holds a seed pocket from the dormant cat tails growing alongside the Kulshan Creek trail.

The group returned to the Catholic Housing Services community room at Villa Santa Maria to make art out of their findings — cutout paper leaves were glued to sticks, real leaves were glued to crayola-colored landscapes and they made rubbings.

The Mount Vernon Police Department started the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Program in 2007 with the Forest Service, National Park Service and North Cascades Institute to expose urban Hispanic kids to the outdoors and careers in natural sciences.

■ Koreena Haynes is a program director with the Forest Service. For more information about the Kulshan Creek program, call Officer Gerondale at 360-336-0630.