

# THE CALLS OF NATURE

... children  
leave video  
games behind  
to bird-watch

By LYNISI BURTON  
Staff Writer

**BAY VIEW** — Nearly 30 children from Mount Vernon's Kulshan Creek neighborhood looked in the brush Saturday for rabbit burrows, pointed out where squirrels had chewed through pine cones and discovered mole fur in the grass — all that was left of a coyote's snack.

For the children on a bird-watching hike in the forest near Padilla Bay, it was an up-close look at both the grand elements of nature, such as bald eagles circling above, and the grotesque.

"... poop!" they cried, reacting to trailside discoveries. "Ew, bugs!"

The children were on their monthly field trip with the Kulshan Creek Program, which takes third- through sixth-graders from the city to outdoor settings to learn about nature. The program also coordinates occasional projects, such as tree planting, for older students.

Saturday's Migratory Bird Festival, which kicked off at the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, was coordinated by several groups, including the U.S. Forest Service and North Cascades Institute. The children learned about different bird calls and occasionally paused during their hikes to hear as many different calls as they could.

"For a lot of these kids, it's really the only opportunity they have to get out there," said Jon Geronzi, the Kulshan Creek neighborhood officer for the Mount Vernon Police Department. "If these weren't offered, they'd probably be at home playing video games. Instead, they're doing something positive."



Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

**Elizabeth Penhollow** (second from left), a graduate student at the North Cascades Institute, leads a group of children from the Kulshan Creek neighborhood in a woodland walk Saturday at the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve.



**Mariana Torres-Tovar, 11**, steals a stash of "mice" from blindfolded "owl" Elio Pantoja, 9, during a game the children play while on their walk at the Padilla Bay reserve.

other — to attract a mate or to protect their territory — and proudly showed off the crown of braided dandelions she wore.

Elizabeth Penhollow, who led the Kulshan Creek group's hikes, said she hopes the outdoor experiences will build inquisitive minds.

"When you bring kids outside, it opens up a new world to them and allows them to start asking questions about what they see and what they notice," she said.

Sarahy Cruz, 12, said she prefers being outside on a sunny day, and she enjoys the opportunity to run around and learn about different plants and birds.

"I like playing around with my friends," she said.

Those who coordinate the outings for the Kulshan Creek group hope that the hands-on experiences with nature will inspire an interest in working as U.S. Forest Service rangers, or at least in protecting the environment.

"There's a couple (students) that told me they want to be forest rangers

when they grow up," said Orlando Garcia, an information receptionist with the U.S. Forest Service who grew up in Kulshan Creek himself. "It's that little spark of interest."

Maria Fernanda Solis, 11, has attended the Kulshan Creek field trips for years and said she has fun learn-

ing more about animals and nature.

"The more we care about the environment, the more the environment gets better," she said.

Solis took photos with her cell phone during her trek. After the hike, she said she learned about the different reasons birds call to each