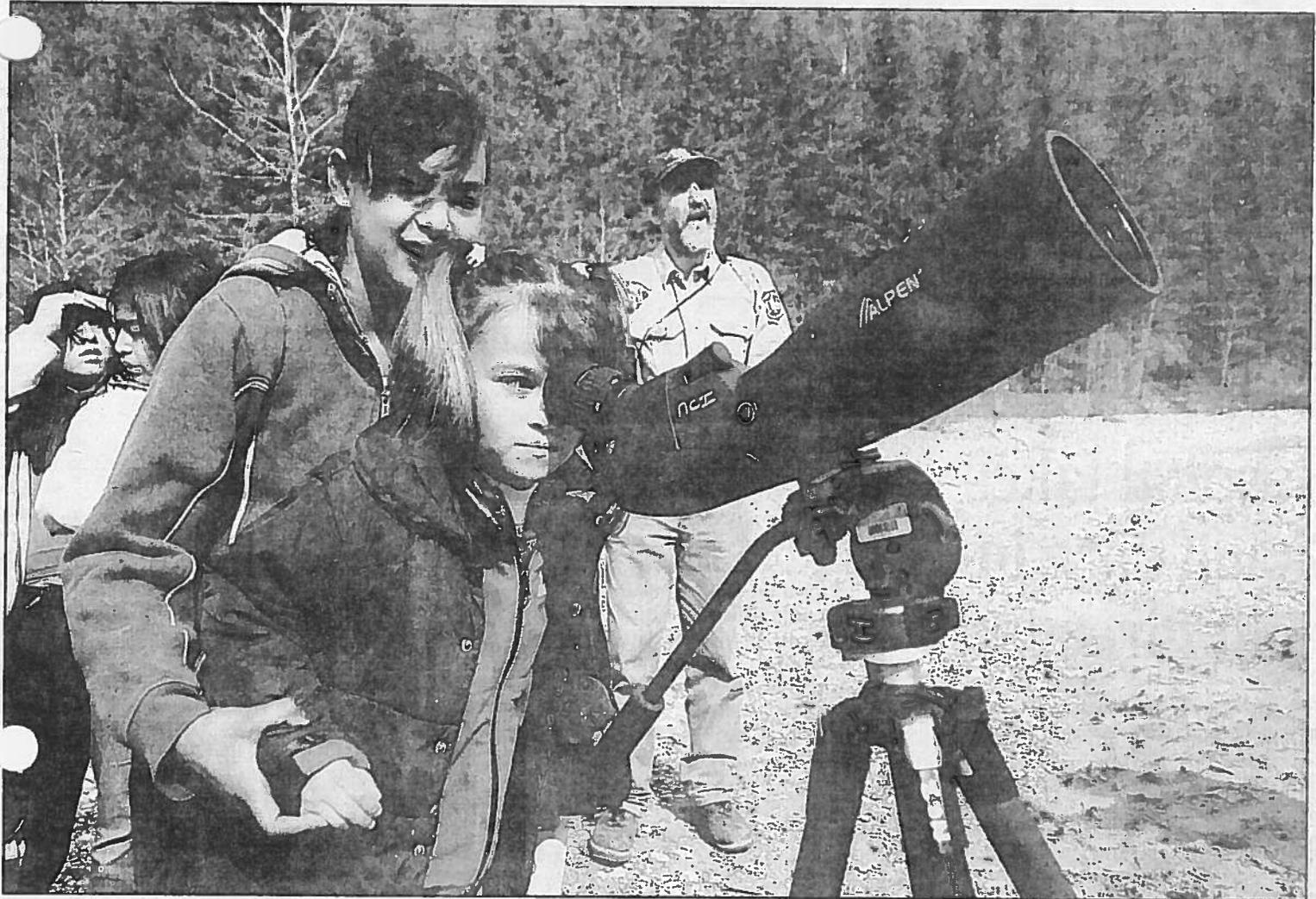


Children get regular doses of great outdoors



Photos by Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald

Griselda Mendoza, 13, helps her cousin Darihana Cuevas, 6, view mountain goats through a spotting scope Saturday near the Baker River. The girls were among 37 children from Mount Vernon's Kulshan Creek neighborhood on a field trip to the river. The Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Kids Program helps expose city children to the wilderness.

Kulshan Creek program is part of community effort to reduce crime

By **MARTA MURVOSH**
Staff Writer

BAKER LAKE — Griselda Mendoza helped steady her 6-year-old cousin Darihana Cuevas as she looked through a spotting scope at a mountain goat standing on a slope above the Baker River.

"There was a tree," said 13-year-old Griselda after she took a peek at the nimble-footed goats. "You couldn't see his head, but you could see his body."

The girls were among 37 children and teens, 6 to 19 years old, who traveled Saturday to the Baker Lake area in Whatcom County to see mountain goats as part of the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Kids Program.

Each month, the program takes the kids to various sites in the region to give them unstructured time in the outdoors, said Lee Whitford, the U.S. Forest Service contractor who helps run the program.

In January, the Kulshan kids went eagle watching. Last month, they traveled to Port Susan to see trumpeter swans. Next month, they'll be at Padilla Bay to see migrating shore birds.

"This is a time they can socialize," Whitford said. "We teach about public lands. These places belong to all of us."

The program began in July 2007 as a partnership between the Mount Vernon Police Department, North Cascades Institute, Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest and North Cascades National Park.

During the winter, the mountain goats move to lower elevations, making it a good time for the kids to see them, said Don Gay, a wildlife biologist for the Forest Service.

Jonathan Suarez, 11, said he saw mountain goats last year during a similar field trip. He took another look Saturday.

"It's big and it has lots of hair — furry," Jonathan said.

The Kulshan Creek neighborhood is one of the Mount Vernon's densest.

Forty percent of the area's 2,400 residents are under age 14, according to a 2009 report on the kids program that was prepared by the police department. Many families are poor, and 65 percent are Latino. Many children are unsupervised after school while their parents are working, so they are at risk of getting involved with gangs,



Kids and their chaperones explore the bank of the Baker River as part of the field trip.

police officials said.

Typically, Kulshan Creek children hadn't visited a national park or forest, police said.

Fifteen years ago, Kulshan Creek was considered one of the city's highest-crime neighborhoods.

Since a neighborhood police station opened and started various programs to prevent crime and create after-school activities, crime rates have dropped, according to police statistics.

Police Officer Jon Gerondale, who is Kulshan's neighborhood resource officer, said older teens who have been in the program for a few years volunteer to mentor the younger ones.

After viewing the goats, the youth headed to the river, where they waded and tossed rocks into the water. They ate lunch and then took a hike

along the river. The kids got to shout and run and be kids.

"We do tell them, if they are quiet, they might see more wildlife," said Whitford with a grin. "The first time I took these kids out, I had a boy say: 'Is that a stream?'"

One of the adults on Saturday's field trip was Orlando Garcia, a 21-year-old Forest Service employee, who grew up in Kulshan Creek at a time when the crime kept pizza restaurants from delivering to the area.

The neighborhood station was just getting built, and there were no wilderness field trips for children at the time, he said.

"I would have loved something like this," Garcia said.

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