

From the Education and Outreach Director – November 2021

Emma Vasicek. November 1, 2021 :

Have you ever set a goal for yourself, but somewhere along the way the universe decides to send you in a completely different direction? When I first started my degree in environmental biology, I intended to pursue a career in conservation biology or natural resource conservation; I planned to work outdoors with minimal human interactions. It wasn't until my ornithology professor suggested I pursue an internship focused on interpretive naturalist work that I fell in love with environmental education. I found so much joy interacting with people as they made new connections to nature that I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Our Explore More! After-School programs this fall further affirm that course correction. We successfully launched programs at Wilmot, King-Murphy, and Marshdale Elementary schools starting at the beginning of October with six kiddos attending each program. We explore topics based on their interests and so far, we have investigated deciduous versus coniferous trees, owls/birds of prey – including owl pellet dissections! – and bird identification. One of the joys of student-led learning is that sometimes we end up exploring things that are seemingly far removed from the original lesson plan. This past week we were using digital microscopes to compare feathers from different birds, and at some point, the kids decided they wanted to spend time looking at their fingers. This led to conversations about bacteria, the texture of our skin, and how fingernails grow – which brought us back to feathers and the difference in beta-keratin versus alpha-keratin. Elementary-aged kids are not regularly given agency in the things they are learning, but it often leads to incredibly rewarding learning experiences. It is genuinely one of my favorite things to see their faces light up as they discover new things in the natural world.



Ms. Emma and two children looking for things to study in their magnifying boxes.



Recording observations in nature journals.



Dissecting owl pellets



Learning to use a loupe.



Looking at a bug through the magnifier.



•
Butterfly!



• Showing Ms. Emma what we found in the woods.



- What's under that rock?

I encourage you to listen to that nudge from the universe, especially if it seems to point in a direction that seems contrary to your original plan. Sometimes that nudge can lead to the most rewarding experiences.

