The Field Guide to the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres

Want to explore the 502 acre classroom?
On Saturday May 4th, 2024, Bill Mason Centre is having an "Open Trails" Day for everyone!

Winter 2024

BILL MASON AND MACSKIMMING OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE

OCDSB Students Planting 1000 Trees per Year for 5 Years at the Centres!

The **Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's (OCDSB) Environmental Services Department** has generously offered to fund **1000 trees per year for the next 5 years to be planted within the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres.**

Starting in 2025 to 2030, these 5000 trees will be planted by OCDSB students each spring and the variety of native tree species planted will be provided by the **Rideau Valley Conservation Authority.**

The objective of this hands-on project is to sequester carbon, retain groundwater, shade out invasive plant species, create shelter & corridors for local wildlife, enhance fungus biodiversity, provide a positive impactful learning experience and a meaningful climate change contribution for participating OCDSB students.

Since 2013, OCDSB student have planted **7874 trees** within the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres' 502 acre classroom.

Teacher Elizabeth Metcalfe on her Class's Experience with Forest School!

Sawmill Creek Elementary School *teachers and students have been so excited to be able to take part in the Forest School program at the Bill Mason Outdoor Education Centre this term. Students were enthralled and engaged throughout each visit and our days in the forest provided students opportunities for imaginative play, to build structures with sticks and notice details in nature to draw or sketch. The chickadees enchanted everyone and feeding them was the highlight of every day.*

The most valuable aspect from which all students benefited was repeated visits to the same forest location. Children were able to overcome any nervousness about chickadees landing on their hands. They were able to rethink how to tackle the problems involved with building a stable structure, identify creative solutions and learn how to cooperate toward reaching a common goal.

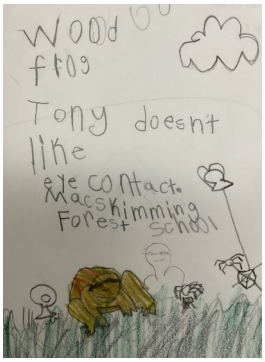
The teachers at the Bill Mason Centre helped the students to witness first hand, how their actions impact the environment and the importance of becoming stewards of the land. They modeled great respect and a responsibility toward the earth. Students who are new to Canada had opportunities to learn about their new home and were provided experiential learning from which to develop their language skills. The teachers helped to create a wealth of information from which new learning will stem.

Attending the Forest and Nature School has been a remarkable and unforgettable experience for all of us and we feel incredibly lucky and thankful to have been given this opportunity. We are all excited and looking forward to continuing our explorations in our own backyard.

Written by **Elizabeth Metcalfe** –Grade 1 & 2 Teacher at **Sawmill Creek Elementary School**

Between September and December 2023, **5,799 students** attended the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres.

Teacher Shannon Topham on her Class's Experience with Forest School!



Nuthatches, chickadees and MacSkimming staff greeted us upon arrival at Trails End at MacSkimming. Over a period of six weeks of forest school sessions, we delved into the world of trees and plants. Using our magnifying glasses, we examined leaves, bark, and mushrooms. The changing colors of the fall foliage provided a beautiful backdrop to our explorations. We marveled at the vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows, and created leaf rubbings with the fallen leaves.

The forest not only provided us with a space for exploration but also fostered a sense of wonder and curiosity. We flipped over logs to find small creatures; we discovered eastern red backed and blue spotted salamanders, worms and grasshoppers. One student discovered a wood frog she named Tony. She noticed that Tony didn't like eye contact. Tony and the rest of the creatures were examined through clear containers and carefully released back into the forest.

Our senses were on high alert during these sessions. Students learned to build forts, and then moved on to building a campfire. The smell of roasted marshmallows soon filled the air. Students commented that the smores smelled much better than the outhouses! The leaves crunching, the touch of curling birch bark, the sensation of mud and snow in the mud kitchen, and the exploration of various textures heightened our connection to the forest environment.

Each forest school day was an opportunity for discovery and a chance to develop a profound connection with the natural world. On one visit, students explored camouflage using a cape that helped students blend into the forest. We took turns with hide and seek. We discovered it could be very challenging to find people who blended into the trees and the forest floor. At times, we walked right by a person without spotting them!

Our gratitude extends to Juwain and Meg for sharing their expertise, to the trees and creatures for being our teachers, and to MacSkimming Outdoor Education Centre for providing the perfect setting for our forest school adventures. These six weeks were not just a series of field trips; they were a journey of exploration, learning, and forging a lifelong bond with nature. We look forward to applying the lessons learned in our everyday lives and continuing our journey as stewards of the environment.

Here's to the magic of the forest and the countless lessons it has imparted to us!

Written by Shannon Topham—Grade 2 Teacher at Charles H.Hulse Public School

Honey Production @ the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres

This summner, a total of **735 lbs. (333 kg)** of honey was harvested from the bee hives stationed at MacSkimming Centre (150 lbs.(68kg) by beekeeper **Dave Barry** & 585 lbs.(265kg) by **Canaan Road Farms** operated by **Jeremy Ash** and **Morlen Reynolds**). Production was down because of forest fire smoke.

Presently this honey is for sale at the **Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's Communication Department** at133 Greenbank Road (Contact **Heather McKinnon**).

This fall, bee keeper **Nathaniel Gauthier** took over the caring of Dave Barry's hives at MacSkimming because Dave is retiring from the hobby. Nathaniel's hives are located beside the Ottawa River.

Also this fall, **41 tonnes** (90,940 lbs) of hay was harvested from MacSkimmming Centre's fields by local farmer **Dave Williams**. These hesston bales will be used for feeding dairy cattle (mainly heifers).

Bottles designed by Heather McKinnon

Special thanks to **Kathryn Ferris** for donating two large bags of sunflower seeds to the Bill Mason Centre so students can feed the black -capped chickadees and white-breasted nuthatches by hand. Students of all ages love this interaction and experience.

Thank you to **Briar Kerr, David Laplante** and **Philippa Gross** for their great help during the Open Trails Day on September 23rd, 2023.

Also thank you to **Paul Basile, Barry Boyd and the OCDSB Design and Construction Department** for organizing the replacement of the roof and fascia for MacSkimming Centre's Trails End classroom.

What happened this Fall at the Centres!

On September 15th, Grade 7 students from **Featherston Public School** founds lots of salamanders and a foot long garter snake during their Interactions within the Environment Program at MacSkimming Centre with Instructor Gord Carter.

On September 22nd, Grade 5s from **Adrienne Clarkson Elementary School** found a spotted salamander at the Bill Mason Centre.

On September 23rd, over 650 people attended the **Open Trails Day** at MacSkimming Centre. This is the only day of this school year where the 425 acre classroom is open to the public for everyone to hike and explore. Thirty new species was added by visitors to the MacSkimming's iNaturalist Biodiversity Project. ***September 21st, 2024*** is the next MacSkimming Open Trails Day.

On October 6th, Teacher candidates from the **University of Ottawa** attended Bill Mason Centre for the afternoon to learn about the importance of getting their students outside. The candidates were so excited to find three species of salamanders.

On October 11th, Grade 3 students from **Stittsville Public School** enjoyed popping resin blisters on the balsam fir trees during their Plants and Soils program at the Bill Mason Centre.

On October 12th, Grade 7 students from **Pinecrest Public School** collected a huge variety of fungi while exploring during their Interactions within the Environment field trip at MacSkimming Centre. Using their mushroom collection, they created an impressive art piece showing fungus biodiversity. The students were so excited about their visit that they were skipping.

On October 16th, Grade 9 to 12 English as a Second Language (ESL) students from **Ridgemont High School** had fun roaming and exploring at MacSkimming Centre. They found a very large queen bald-faced hornet buried within a rotting log. The students were so excited to have a campfire!

On October 20th, Grade 3s from **Riverview Alternative School** had a blast catching falling red maple leaves during their Plants and Soils Program at the Bill Mason Centre. The art is to catch them before they hit the ground.

On October 25th, Grade 9 to 12 students from a variety of OCDSB secondary schools & the **OCDSB Indigenous Education Learning Team** played lacrosse, went on hike with an elder, practiced teambuilding activities, made beautiful art pieces and enjoyed their time around the fire, during their monthly "***Day on the Land"*** at MacSkimming Centre.

On October 30th, even with 5 centimeters of snow on the ground, Grade 6 students from **Broadview Public School** found Eastern red-backed salamanders and late oyster mushrooms in the snow during their Biodiversity program at MacSkimming Centre.

On November 3rd, **Ottawa Technical Secondary School's** Tourism & Culinary class collected plants during their hike around MacSkimming Centre and made hot teas from Eastern white pine needles, Eastern hemlock needles, wintergreen and sweet fern.

November 10th, Grade 3/4 students from **Maple Ridge Elementary School** accidently dug up a hibernating spring peeper frog while creating a soil profile hole during their *Plants and Soils* program at MacSkimming Centre. The frog was more surprised than the students.

On November 13th, Grade 5/6 students from **Trillium Public School** had fun chasing a flock of wild turkeys as they were making their way through the forest to the classroom at MacSkimming Centre.

On November 29th, about 80 indigenous students from a variety of OCDSB elementary schools & the **OCDSB Indigenous Education Learning Team** had a great day on the land, searching for owl pellets in the Eastern hemlock forest and having hot chocolate and marshmallows around the camp fire at MacSkimming Centre.

On November 30th, Grade 6 students from **Hopewell Public School** had a couple opportunities throughout their Bill Mason Centre field trip to get a close look at long-tailed weasel (Ermine).

On December 1st, Grade 8 students from **Fallingbrook Community Elementary School** worked together in teams and they all started their outdoor fires by using steel and flint, during their time at MacSkimming Centre.

On December 8th, Grade 5 and 6 students from **Manor Park Public School** went on a long hike during their Biodiversity field trip at MacSkimming Centre with Instructor Pollux Thain. They found fisher, white-tailed deer, moose, raccoon and American re squirrel tracks in the snow. This field trip was sponsored by the **Ottawa Field Naturalist Club.**

On Friday December 15th, Grade 6 students from **Vincent Massey Public School** were very excited to find a mature American beech tree that was not infected by the invasive wooly beech scale during their Biodiversity field trip at MacSkimming Centre. It created some great questions and discussions about genetic biodiversity.

On December 19th, Specialist High Skill Major students from **Cairine Wilson Secondary School & Nepean High School** were certified in **Canadian Wildlife Federation's "*Below Zero"*** education workshop at the Bill Mason Centre.

Look Who is inside the Classroom!

Birch sawfly larva

American dagger moth

Unicorn caterpillar moth

Dogwood sawfly larva

Willow oak sawfly larva

Large gray dagger moth

The above insect pictures were taken by *Ottawa Field Naturalist Club* member **Diane Lepage** during MacSkimming Centre's Open Trails Day on September 23rd, 2023.

Many Ottawa Field Naturalist Club members have generously contributed their time, expertise and knowledge in the natural world, to monitor and protect the biodiversity within this OCDSB outdoor classroom.

New Species of Salamander @ Bill Mason Centre

Four-toed salamander#1

On October 26th, 2023, **Nepean High School** co-op student **Kaia Whitfield** found a **four-toed salamander** with the help of the Grade1 students from **Carleton Heights Public School** during their 2nd Forest School day at the Bill Mason Centre.

This is the first time this species of salamander has been observed at the Centre since its creation as an outdoor classroom 34 years ago.

Oddly the very same day, another four-toed salamander was found in the same area by the Grade1 class and Instructor **Brandon Burda**.

This very uncommon salamander refers to live in bog wetlands and can be easily identified by its white belly with black spots.

Four-toed salamander #2

Taken by Bill McMullen on September 2023

Gray tree frog @MacSkimming

OCDSB's Shared Learning Landscape!

A very special welcome from the OCDSB Outdoor Centres team to **Pollux Thain!**

Pollux who started this past fall, is working at both Centres as a part-time outdoor education instructor.

Forest School Sessions at the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres!

This past fall, four chosen Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) elementary schools visited the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres once a week over 6 weeks, as part of a Forest School program. These place-based educational sessions were organized by the **OCDSB's Program and Learning Department:**

Here are just a few of the students' learning experiences and nature-based connections:

Week#1: On this cool but sunny day, Grade 1 and 2 classes from **York Street Public School** climbed apple trees in the orchard at MacSkimming Centre and practiced tying knots for their tarp shelters.

Week#1: Grade 2s from **Charles Hulse Public School** found many friends while exploring at MacSkimming Centre: Tony the wood frog, Cindy the wooly bear caterpillar, Amber the eastern red-backed salamander and Lizzo, the blue-spotted salamander. Students collected sugar and red maple leaves to bring back to school and make leaf rubbings in the classroom.

Week#1: Grade 1s from **Sawmill Creek Elementary School** learned the boundaries for exploring at the Bill Mason Centre and found a very small spring peeper frog (See attached picture). They were so excited to climb fallen trees and logs. One brave student held a wolf spider for the first time.

Week#1: While walking the exploration boundaries, Grade 1 students from **Carleton Heights Public School** found and caught an Eastern garter snake at the Bill Mason Centre. The Centre Instructor held it so all the students got to touch it. Snake was called "*Slippery Snake!"*

Week#2: Grade 1 & 2s from **York Street Public School** had to go find a tree friend at MacSkimming Centre which they would visit every Forest School Day. One student found and made an American beech tree as their friend and named it, *Rosey the Flakey Snowflake (Tree was still green!).* They also built a big shelter with sticks and some students spent their visit exploring for fungus in the forest. The fall colours were at their peak!

Week#2: The black-capped chickadees finally found the **Sawmill Creek Elementary School** students in the afternoon at the Bill Mason Centre and many kids loved feeding them by hand. Forts was constructed with tarps (*One fort called Fort Boston)*. Students caught a small-winged blister beetle.

Weeek#3– **Carleton Heights Public School** students made mud cupcakes, apple pies and fish stew (*Nothing was eaten*!), watched flocks of Canada geese fly over and feed a lot of black-capped chickadees.

Week#4- **Charles Hulse Public School**– Teacher **Shannon Topham**'s son (*Kevin*) who is serving in the **Canadian Military** brought his camouflage equipment and he hid in the forest so the students could go searching for him. The Grade 2 students had a difficult time finding him until he began calling "Marco" with the students replying "Polo" that he was discovered.
The rest of the day, students played with the camouflage poncho so they could hide and find each other. They also had fun playing in the snow.

Week#4– **Sawmill Creek Elementary School's** students found & measured 6 different species (*Squirrel, mouse, white-tailed deer, red fox, eastern coyote and some sort of bird*) during their animal tracking hike in the snow to their play area. Students did some watercolor art and we used the snow to melt and smudge the watercooler for their artwork!

Week#5– **York Street Public School's students** checked on *Rosey the Flakey Snowflake* and its leafs had turned golden brown or yellow and most of them had fallen off. Students balanced and played on a fallen Eastern Hemlock tree and on a temporary slackline in the forest.

Week#6-**Carleton Heights students** overfeed the chickadees for their last Forest School session, the chickadees will greatly miss them!. Lots of wet socks from breaking ice and playing in the muddy water in the wetland. Roasting marshmallows around the fire were a huge hit.

Co-op Students at the Bill Mason Centre

This past fall, two OCDSB secondary school students participated in a co-operative education placement at the Bill Mason Centre with Instructors Christine Bull & Brandon Burda. Here is the students' view of their work experience while at the Centre:

I'm Sasha, *I am a grade 11 student at West Carleton Secondary School, and for my fall semester I am doing a half-day co-op at the Bill Mason Centre! I have a huge interest in environmental science and conservation education, and knew that Bill Mason would be the perfect place for me to explore those interests through a Co-op. Doing my Co-op here has been such a great experience for me, there is such a variety of different tasks and experiences I get to do, and it has given me so many different job experiences that I wouldn't have thought of myself doing until now. I have already learnt so much about both teaching and the environment from Christine and Brandon, and all staff have been incredibly welcoming! My current favourite programs that we do at the BMC is Outdoor Skills and Forest School. I love exploring the forest and finding little creatures like frogs and salamanders to show to the students, and everyday the forest never fails to teach me something new!*

Written by Sasha Bailey– West Carleton Secondary School Co-op student

Hi! *My name is* ***Kaia Whitfield*** *and I am one of the high school co-op students working at the Bill Mason Centre for the fall semester. I am part of the Environmental Stewardship program in grade 12 at Nepean High School. I am passionate about sustainability and the environment. This semester I loved working on our forest school program. I enjoyed getting the chance to see the same kids every week and get to know them. Working at the Bill Mason Centre is a wonderful opportunity to spend time outside and gain experience in outdoor education. Every day at the BMC I learn new things and have fun sharing the forest with the kids.*

Written by Kaia Whitfield– Nepean High School Co-op student

Above are new trail signs built & installed by volunteer Bill McMullen throughout the 502 acre classroom.

This art piece was made by OCDSB secondary students on October 25th during their monthly "Day on the Land" at MacSkimming Centre with the OCDSB Indigenous Team.

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