

The Field Guide to the OCDSB Outdoor Education Centres

On May 5th, 2025,
the OCDSB
Centres will start
registration for field
trips & facility
rentals for the
2025-2026
school year.



Spring & Summer 2025

**BILL MASON AND MACSKIMMING OUTDOOR
EDUCATION CENTRES**



Eastern Phoebe @ MacSkimming Centre taken by Bill McMullen on April 2025



Spring into the Outdoors Learning Conference at the Centres!

On Saturday April 26th, over **155 teachers and educators** from the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) and Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), braved the rain and attended the **Spring into the Outdoors Learning Conference** at MacSkimming Outdoor Education Centre.

This joint professional development day was to demonstrate the benefits of experiential, land-based and environmental education and their integrated connections to the Ontario Curriculum.

Over **39 outdoor workshop sessions** were available which incorporated Indigenous perspectives and connection with the land.

Workshops were facilitated by members from OCDSB, OCSB, City of Ottawa, Honeybee Simplicity, Learning Tree Canada, University of Ottawa, Orienteering Ottawa, Ottawa Wildflower Seed Library, Camp Kawartha, St. Laurent Academy, Good in Every Grain, Rideau Valley Conservation Authority, Makatew Workshops and Indigenous elders.

Aaskii Environmental, OCSB, Canadian Museum of Nature and Growing up Organic, set up exhibitor booths for this event.

The event was opened by OCSB Director of Education Tom D'Amico, OCDSB Superintendent of Education Kristin Riddell, OCDSB Indigenous Education Department principal Chantal Verner & Brian, Merv and Francis Sarazin (*Pikwakanagan*) who opened with very impressive drumming and provided everyone an opportunity to smudge.

Elder Doug Comegan closed the ceremony, everyone got on the buses and then the rain started to pour!

Thank you to the volunteers, community members, MacSkimming Centre's custodians and OCSB & OCDSB Conference Planning Committee for making this day a huge success!



Babies!

Centres' Office Assistant **Megan Verbeek** and her partner Gab are proud parents of **Mavis Michaela Wilhelmina Verbeek-Croteau** who was born on January 17th, 2025. Also Instructor **Kathleen Tanner**, her husband Chris and their family welcomed **Martha Anne Joly** on February 8th, 2025 to their busy household.

Evening grosbeaks @ MacSkimming Centre
taken by Bill McMullen on January 2025



Our condolences to the family of Bill Jeffrey!

On April 13th 2025, Bill passed away at the age of 80 years old. For a large number of years, Bill worked as an elementary teacher at MacSkimming Centre.

Bill was a highly skilled woodworker and his works can still be seen today around the Centre.

A Word from the Teacher Candidates on their Placements at the Centres!

In February, I had the opportunity to complete a 4-week placement at the Bill Mason and MacSkimming Outdoor Education Centres, as part of my Bachelor of Education at Queen's University, and I could not have asked for a better experience!

I was surprised by the variety of programs offered in the winter, to the point that I only participated in the same one a few times, and most I only observed once. Observing different instructors whether on new or repeating programs, I noticed the flexibility in presentation styles. What stood out the most was passion and knowledge displayed by every instructor, creating incredible learning experiences for students, something I hoped to demonstrate when teaching components and in my future classes.

Even with so many options, Forest School remains my favourite. While instructors are excellent at seizing learning opportunities whenever possible, Forest School is built around those opportunities. One of my most prominent memories was the visit of a duck at the Nearby Nature experience, following a child's question about the possibility earlier in the day. Naturally, the students were mesmerized, providing learning opportunities built on their interests.

Another time, I watched students rapidly develop confidence in their own abilities as they chose to climb, at first barely leaving the ground but eventually reaching the highest point and jumping off, all on their first visit.

Facilitating this experience felt so rewarding and having seen students on their first and last visit, albeit from different groups, I know that comfort, confidence and care for the outdoors continues to increase.

These experiences inspire me to provide similar opportunities to my future students whether in an outdoor centre or classroom setting.

I am grateful for the experience and the support of all of the instructors.

By **Katrina Hupe**-Queens University teacher candidate

I got the amazing opportunity to spend four fun-filled weeks at the OCDSB's Bill Mason and MacSkimming Centres as a practicum experience for my Bachelor of Education program through Queen's University in the Outdoor Education Program Track. I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to attend both Centres because their differing programs allowed me to learn the characteristics of a huge variety of trees at the Bill Mason Centre and variety of animal species at the MacSkimming Centre. From both Centres, I was able to learn and implement strategies for leading groups in outdoor settings, how to effectively managing the timing of program activities and how to handle group safety.

As someone who enjoys being outside but has not had much diverse experience in the outdoors beyond hiking, I loved having the opportunity to learn from staff at both of these Centres. Staff at Bill Mason took importance in personalizing their Land Acknowledgement, were enthusiastic to be outdoors showing the land and animals to the students, and eager to teach me the different activities for each grade so I could teach them myself. Under their guidance, I have improved my ability in class management and have learned how to correctly put on snowshoes and cross country equipment. Staff at MacSkimming were very accommodating, providing me with opportunities to demonstrate initiative and leadership, always came to work with an energetic demeanor which went over well with the students, and were keen to teach me fire building.

I learned so much about outdoor education, the importance and ease of tying curriculum subject material to interacting with nature, and how learning outdoors can have such a profound positive influence on students. Some of my own personal highlights include tapping maple trees, learning how to cross country ski through the beautiful trails, becoming friends with the staff through hearing about their own outdoor and life experiences, and finally spotting a sleeping porcupine on my last day. This practicum experience has been so influential allowing me to thrive in my alternative practicum experience where I had the opportunity to extend what I learned at these Centres. I am so beyond grateful for the lessons and opportunities I received while being at the Bill Mason and MacSkimming Centres, and I look forward to integrating the outdoors and these activities into my own classroom in the future.

By **Megan Box**-Queens University teacher candidate

The OCDSB's Shared Learning Space

What happened this Winter & Spring at the Centres?

On January 7th, Grade 10 students from **Elmwood School** hiked the entire perimeter of MacSkimming Centre's 425 acre classroom as part of their *Duke of Edinburgh* program. While hiking through a coniferous tree stand, they discovered a large pile of regurgitated owl pellets from a great horned owl.

On January 8th, Grade 1 students from **Carleton Heights Public School** hiked about two kilometers to go see a porcupine during their first Forest School session at the Bill Mason Centre.

On January 10th during their Orienteering Program at the Bill Mason Centre, a Grade 3 student from **Stittsville Public School** found a porcupine in a tree. Unfortunately during the time while the student was under the tree, the porcupine pooped and the dry pellet landed on the student. As a reward, the student got the privilege of naming the porcupine which they named it, "James".

On January 23rd, Grade 3 students from **Featherston Drive Public School** tried cross-country skiing during their fourth Forest School session at the Bill Mason Outdoor Education Centre. This was the first time skiing for all of these students.

On February 4th, 2025, Grade 1 students from **Charles H. Hulse Public School** had a funny experience with a male mallard duck during their Nearby Nature program with Bill Mason Centre instructors in a green space near their school. While the 34 students were sitting in a circle, this mallard duck flew over their heads and landed in the middle of the circle. The duck just sat there and modelled as the instructors (Christine and Raven) talked about ducks and their adaptations. The students voted on the name of the duck and called it, **Sir Leon the Mallard!**

On February 21st, Grade 4 students from **Farley Mowat Public School** snowshoed and cross-country skied for the day at the Bill Mason Outdoor Education Centre. For all 48 students, this was their first time cross-country skiing!

On February 27th, Grade 2 students from **Trillium Elementary School** were enthralled watching the swarms of springtails (snowfleas) crawling on top of the snow during their *Growth and Changes in Animals* program at MacSkimming Centre. The parent volunteers were captivated as well.

On February 28th, students in the English Literacy Development program at **Gloucester High School** snowshoed in the deep snow and built their own fires, successfully during their visit to MacSkimming Centre.

On March 4th, an American red squirrel ate sunflower seeds in a balsam fir tree at the Bill Mason Centre. All of the Grade 1 students from **Pinecrest Public School** were so quiet that everyone could hear the squirrel eating.

Between March 11th and 12th, participants attending the **Black in Nature's** March Break camp at MacSkimming Centre, tapped sugar maple trees, collected the sap, boiled and made their own maple syrup over the campfire.

On March 21st, Grade 6 students from **Huntley Centennial Public School** fed black-capped chickadees, identified and tapped maple trees, examined snow fleas, looked at porcupine scat and found blue jay feathers during their Biodiversity Program at the Bill Mason Centre. **All this took place in the afternoon!**

On March 26th, Grade 1 students from **Bayshore Public School** found a large pileated woodpecker hole inside a maple tree during their 4th Forest School session at the Bill Mason Centre. The students tasted the sap dripping from deep inside the hole.

On April 1st, Grade 7 students from **Castor Valley Elementary School** were surprised by the appearances of white snowshoe hares during their food chain simulation at the Bill Mason Centre. One student commented "It was huge! I thought it was a small dog at first!".

On April 2nd, Grade 1 students from **Turnbull School** got the rare chance to see a fisher during their *Needs of Living Things* program at MacSkimming Centre.

On April 4th, Grade 4/5 students from **Arch Street Public School** were dead silent when instructor Brandon Burda called in an energetic winter wren which sang it's heart out for the students during their *Habitat and Communities* program at MacSkimming Centre. This field trip was sponsored by the **Ottawa Field Naturalist Club**.

On April 14th during their 10 hour long field trip at MacSkimming Centre, Grade 6 students from **Connaught Public School** built fires, practiced their compass & map skills, played a predator/prey simulation, had hot dogs around the fire and compared the size of white-tailed deer scat versus moose scat.

On April 22nd, while the Grade 1 students from **Vincent Massey Public School** were hiking through the forest with instructor Brandon Burda, they came across a porcupine just sitting on the ground during their *Needs of Living Things* program at MacSkimming Centre. The students were enthralled as the porcupine got up and walked away.



Students Letters to the Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club!

On January 28th, Grade 7 classes from **Agincourt Road Public School** were able to take part in a hands-on Biodiversity program at MacSkimming Centre through funding from the **Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club & Ms. Violetta Czasak's family**. Here are some letters written by students, on their learning experience.

Dear Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club,

Thank you so much for paying for our first field trip ever!

We had such a good time especially when we played the Hunter vs Prey game. I also found it interesting when learning about the different animal tracks. Like how deer and moose tracks are nearly the same other than size!

Once again I had so much fun and hope to go out in nature again sometime!

Dear Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club,

Thank you so much for paying for the field trip.

It was my very first field trip ever.

I really enjoyed the predator prey game we played and mostly just being outdoors.

I learned from the instructors there about animals tracks and how to recognize what animal was there.

I had so much fun and we all really hope to go again.

Thank you for making this field trip come.

Dear Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club,

Thank you for having me at MacSkimming and teaching me about animals and plants.

My favorite game was the carnivore, herbivore and omnivore one.

That trip made me want to explore and look for things in forests.

Thanks!

Dear Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club,

Thank you for the classes' first field trip. I enjoyed hiking through the woods and looking for animal tracks.

I learned mice can burrow under the snow.

I had an awesome time and I would love to go back again

Dear Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club,

Thank you for letting us go to MacSkimming.

It was my first field trip ever!

At first I wasn't so sure about this because I'm a bit of a shut-in and don't go outside unless I have to but I had a lot of fun.

Please bring us back.

Dear Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club,

Thank you for paying for our field trip. It was amazing and what makes it even better is that it was my first field trip. It taught me some cool things and another thing was pretty awesome, was that we were the first people to be there since the new snow so it was beautiful. And thanks again, I think it really inspired some of us.



OTTAWA-CARLETON
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

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Barred owl @ MacSkimming taken by Gord Carter in May 2025

