COMMUNITY CONSERVATION:
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH LAND CONSERVATION

TUG HILL TOMORROW LAND TRUST

Birdwatching from the School Window

Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust gets kids paying attention to local wildlife—with Bird Quest in over 30 schools.

For fifteen minutes each day, Susan Jeffers’ second grade class watches birds. The seven and eight year olds get excited as birds approach the row of feeders set up outside a long row of windows in the school hallway. They might jump or shout, but gradually they learn: if they want the birds to come to the feeders, they can’t scare them.

The bird feeders and birdseed at their school—Mt. Markham Elementary School in West Winfield, NY—were provided by Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust through their Bird Quest program. Tug Hill Tomorrow is a small nonprofit serving the snowiest place east of the Rockies, the Tug Hill Plateau.

In May, colorful birds signal the approaching summer. Over the course of a week, the students see cardinals, blue jays, crows, robins, sparrows, juncos, and goldfinches. They even see hummingbirds flitting and hovering around the flowers in the school garden.

They record the kinds of birds they see and they start asking questions. Why are the male birds more colorful? Why do they go to this feeder and not that one? Why are they drawn to bright flowers more than white ones? What do they eat when they’re not eating birdseed?

Soon, it’s not just the birds at the school feeders that get their attention. Susan says, “It was exciting because they’d come back in from their weekends and say, ‘Oh, I saw this, Mrs. Jeffers.’ ‘I saw a cardinal,’ or ‘I saw a Blue Jay.’ So they were becoming more observant of their own world, not only in school but outside of school.”

EDUCATION TO INSPIRE STEWARDSHIP

Tug Hill Tomorrow has a two part mission: to conserve natural resources...
and to strengthen the connection between people and place. So, in addition to protecting land, the group sponsors a wide range of outings—birdwatching, paddling, snowshoeing, wildflower walks, volunteer trail work and more. They provide environmental education in local schools, daycares and homeschool programs. They’ve produced local guides for outdoor recreation, field trip destinations and wildlife watching. Bird Quest grew out of an annual birdwatching competition, as a way to get the next generation engaged.

Linda Garrett, the executive director of Tug Hill Tomorrow, says, “It’s fun to hear the kids get excited about seeing the birds and knowing what they’re seeing. I think it makes them more aware of what’s happening right outside their door. A big part of our mission is trying to make people more appreciative of all the cool resources that are right in their backyard, so they’ll be better stewards of Tug Hill.”

Over the years, the program has expanded to serve 30 to 35 schools each year, as well as the homeschooling community. Tug Hill Tomorrow gets local businesses to donate the bird feeders and birdseed, which they provide for free to the schools. They also provide copies of the local naturalist guides and a

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teaching guide, which connects birdwatching activities to state curriculum standards.

To hone their science skills, students can observe and research one species, answering questions like: Where do they sleep? What kind of nest do they build? At your feeder, do they pass food back and forth? Do they make raucous sounds? Do they chase other birds? Which birds flock and which ones feed alone? Which ones act like bullies?

To learn math, students might calculate the amount of birdseed needed to stock their feeder. For art, they might use binoculars for close observation, then draw what they see. Writing ties in with a science journal where students record their observations. According to Susan, Bird Quest gives some students who don’t always shine in school a chance to shine.

**BIRDS, BEETLES AND BUNNIES**

Last spring was Susan’s first year teaching Bird Quest. She got all four of the second-grade classes at her school to participate—and Bird Quest caught on across all the grades. “The kids walk by this hallway with glass windows, so everybody in the school, pre-K through 4, was able to watch the birdfeeders and enjoy the birds,” she says. “When the kids were walking down the hall, you’d hear different comments like, ‘Did you see that blue bird?!’”

In one case, Susan says, a second grade girl with a broken arm refused to be left out of Bird Quest activities. “She still insisted that she had to be the one to fill the feeder. She got herself up there and got that feeder down and was helping fill the bird feeders along with the other kids. It made me realize how involved they really were in it, that even with her situation, she really wanted to be involved.”

It helped that the class had been raising mealworm beetles and monarch butterflies that spring, watching the insects transform from egg to pupae to larvae to adult, then releasing them in the school garden. “The kids really became involved because they were doing a variety of things with the world around them,” Susan says. One day, as they were watching birds, they spotted a baby bunny. Then, they wanted to find out where the bunny lived and went exploring to find out. Susan says, “It makes them more aware about what’s going on in the world around them.”