

Environmental Service Learning at Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park

Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park offers large variety of hands-on learning opportunities for students, community.

*by Andrew J. Schneller, Ph.D. and Margo Olsen
Community contributors*

If you're planning a visit to nearby 2400 acre Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park (wiltonpreserve.org) this winter or spring you may find yourself snowshoeing or walking through a beautifully restored habitat in the Saratoga Sandplains.

Moving from shady forests and into the wide, open meadows, you will find wild blue lupine, little blue stem grass and butterfly milkweed that provide habitat for the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly and New York State (threatened) frosted elfin butterfly. A winter snowshoe or ski trip through the deep snow might reveal deer, red fox, or rabbit tracks. In April or May you might even spot the threatened Blanding's turtle leaving one of Wilton's many ponds to nest in the warm, sandy soils, or the eastern hognose snake, that, when threatened, has been known to roll over and play dead - complete with lolling tongue. Of course in late May, the Karner blue butterflies of the first brood emerge and can be observed as they feed among the lupine flowers.

Wilton Wildlife Preserve and Park (WWPP) offers a variety of free winter recreational activities, including X-Country skiing and snowshoeing on the groomed 3.5 miles of trails on the Camp Saratoga and Opdahl Farm parcels. No worries if you don't own snowshoes: daily snowshoe rentals only run \$5 and during one of the many environmental education events the prices drop to just \$3! Even better, snowshoes rentals are free for members of the Preserve & Park. In the spring and summer, hiking and dog walking (on-leash) on over 15 miles of trails is a great way for families to explore the Saratoga Sandplain's forests, wetlands, meadows, and ponds.

***"What we need, beginning in middle school is an orientation toward service. Environmental projects that serve the community show students the relevance of the curriculum and give community organizations an injection of youthful energy."* - David Sobel**

And speaking of environmental education, WWPP offers a large variety of outdoor and indoor hands-on learning opportunities throughout the year for school aged learners, classrooms, and adults alike at the Preserve & Park and off-site in the community. During the winter and spring of 2014, WWPP will

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Trail walk and class visit to Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park.
Photo courtesy of Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park/ by Wayne Jones



Endangered Karner blue butterfly at Wilton Wildlife Park & Park.
Photo courtesy of Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park/ by Nancy Castillo



Skidmore College Student Conservation Corps work day. For more information about recreation, education, volunteer, or donation opportunities at Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park, stop by the park office at 80 Scout Road in Gansevoort, N.Y., phone: 518-450-0321, email: info@wiltonpreserve.org or visit online at wiltonpreserve.org. Photo courtesy of Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park / by Joseph Levy



Skidmore College Student Conservation Corps work day.
Photo courtesy of Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park/ by Joseph Levy

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be undertaking an innovative service learning partnership with Skidmore College that now offers a new course in Environmental Education within the Environmental Studies Program. Taught by Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies, Andrew J. Schneller, 21 Skidmore College service learners will be assisting WWPP in the design, delivery, and evaluation of environmental outreach and education programs for the students and adults who visit the preserve.

The phrase “service learning” was coined by the South-

ern Regional Education Board and William R. Ramsay in the late 1960s to describe curriculum and teaching activities which incorporate organized, hands-on community service and volunteerism to enhance student learning and the schooling experience. John Dewey’s Theory of Experience is often used to underpin the practice of service learning, promoting the value of real-life experiences for students. For students who have studied the environment and environmental education (in the classroom), Environmental Service Learning facilitates their getting involved with community stakeholders (like WWPP) to implement and practice hands-on projects in the community in order to put what they’ve learned, to work. Skidmore College has a strong commitment to these service learning programs.

For future environmental educators especially, this is an integral component to success in the field, as many college students have never worked directly with children or adult environmental learners. And as these college students will soon (hopefully) be seeking employment with non-governmental organizations, municipal, state, and federal agencies, summer camps, and schools, this opportunity for hands-on community engagement is vital to their learning process. And the benefits? For the service learner, the practice has been shown to promote personal and social development as students set an example for others to follow; support altruistic feelings of pride and accomplishment as a result of taking personal action and working in the natural environment for the community and endangered species; and service learners often benefit from experiencing

Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park

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*Stop by or visit wiltonpreserve.org
to learn about recreation, education,
volunteer, or donation opportunities.*

Skidmore Partnership

Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park and its visitors will benefit from unique partnership with college students.

Many new and exciting, up-and-coming environmental education projects will be available to enhance the WWPP learning experience. Skidmore service learners look forward to undertaking projects including (but not limited to):

- **Developing an adult environmental education curriculum** for elder care and managed care nursing care centers in Saratoga County. While this will most likely be offered off-site, the learning experience will be hands on, utilizing animal artifacts, music, and songs.
- **Leading a snowshoe environmental education tour** and assisting with the snowshoe rental program. Students will be working to facilitate the rental process, acting as trail and environmental liaison, and offering interpretive tours of the forest and species (animal tracks and animal survival in winter).
- **Designing and implementing a learning unit** for Boy and Girl Scouts and the public at Camp Saratoga, involving maps and natural and human history
- **Designing an educational component** about the history of Adirondack fire towers and observer cabins. Students might be developing an interpretive unit for an actual fire tower, talking to WWPP visitors about fire ecology, prescribed burning, habitat connectivity, forest fragmentation, species habitat, human history, etc.



Skidmore professor Andrew J. Schneller, Ph.D. with two girl scouts.
Photo courtesy of Andrew J. Schneller

the immediate synergistic effects of their community service efforts. And as author David Sobel (a recent visitor to Saratoga Springs) noted, “What we need, beginning in middle school is an orientation toward service. Environmental projects that serve the community show students the relevance of the curriculum and give community organizations an injection of youthful energy.”

During the spring of 2013 two of Schneller’s students, Abby Smith (VT) and Marie Nicol (CA) laid the foundation for the broader service learning component by successfully working with the Preserve & Park’s Executive Director Margo Olson and educators Sarah Cartwright and Anna Papperman. The Skidmore College students successfully designed and implemented a unique conservation education unit fittingly titled “Abby and Marie’s Habitat Adventure.” The test run of their educational program included a nature scavenger hunt which encouraged young students to explore the natural setting at WWPP, and highlighted the importance of protecting habitat for threatened and endangered species in the preserve. This interactive educational event was enthusiastically attended by 30 homeschool students from throughout Saratoga County.

We look forward to seeing you at one of the programs or out on the trail!



Skidmore College students Marie Nicol and Abby Smith designed “Abby and Marie’s Habitat Adventure,” here seen teaching the environmental education curriculum to home schooled students visiting Wilton Wildlife Preserve & Park.

Photo courtesy of WWPP

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