**Showcasing the DNR: Getting wild in the classroom**

**By HANNAH SCHAUER**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

Connecting children to wildlife and other natural resources can be one of the most exciting, rewarding and fulfilling endeavors for educators and students.

With another school year beginning, some people may not know the Michigan Department of Natural Resources provides numerous opportunities to help teachers make those valuable connections between the state’s natural and cultural resources and students of all ages.

**Elementary students get wild**

Through the [Go Wild for Michigan’s Wildlife](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79135_79220_81142---%2C00.html) curriculum, elementary school educators can introduce young learners to Michigan’s wildlife species and their habitats.

“Go Wild for Michigan's Wildlife brought an excitement into my class that I wasn't anticipating,” said Charlotte Simpson of Shettler Elementary, part of Fruitport Community Schools in Muskegon. “My youngest of learners – kindergartners – were engaged in the lessons and materials and were making connections to their beautiful home state.”

Included with the lesson plans and activities, are “critter cards,” featuring 19 different Michigan wildlife species.

While each educator receives a PDF version of the cards, the DNR also prints a limited supply of the cards, so students can have a set to keep. The available card sets are distributed to Michigan teachers on a first-come, first-served basis.

“Throughout many lessons, I would hear, ‘I've seen that animal before’ or ‘I'm going to look for that animal tonight when I get home,’" Simpson said.

During the 2017-2018 school year, over 800 kindergarten through fifth-grade educators registered to receive this free curriculum.

**Middle school is for the bears (and ducks)**

Using actual location data from radio-collared Michigan black bears, middle school students can find out what bears are up to throughout the year.

[A Year in the Life of a Michigan Black Bear](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79135_79220_81142---%2C00.html) provides lessons, videos, activities and bear location data to help students learn more about bear behaviors and habits at various times of the year. Like other DNR wildlife classroom curricula, this program is offered free of charge.

Sixth- through eighth-graders will learn all about bear biology, as well as the DNR’s role in managing bear populations in Michigan. This year, additional bear location data have been added to the curriculum and educators can choose which bear, or bears, they want their class to “follow.”

Educator Brandy Dixon, from Holy Ghost Lutheran School in Monroe, said she uses the curriculum in her classroom and she loves the program.

“It was a great way to show my students how there are people in the state of Michigan whose job it is to protect our natural resources. It encouraged them to think about how to maintain our environment, and it taught them about bears,” Dixon said. “They gained in-depth knowledge about these creatures, and I think that knowledge – because it was spread through an entire school year – will stick with them for the rest of their lives.”

With knowledge and experience comes greater understanding.

“I had some students who started in my class dead set against hunting,” Dixon said. “I think they now have more of an understanding as to why hunting, in particular, is an effective management practice for our Michigan wildlife.”

Classes that participate in the curriculum also have the option to enter a Year in the Life of a Michigan Black Bear contest.

After learning all about black bears in Michigan, students can create a way to share the story of a black bear’s journey throughout the year. Educators representing the top three projects are awarded gift certificates to purchase science supplies for their classroom.

Prizes for the contest are provided by the Michigan Bear Hunters Association and the DNR. [Learn about last school year's winners.](https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDNR/bulletins/1f362b0#link_1527599431139)

The DNR also offers middle-schoolers curriculum centering on wetlands and some of the birds that live there.

[Michigan’s Wondrous Wetlands and Waterfowl](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79135_79220_81142---%2C00.html) offers an opportunity to learn about the ducks, geese, and swans found in Michigan, as well as the critical importance of wetland habitats.

Lessons include several activities. Students can become a bird in a migration simulation that illustrates the perils that waterfowl encounter during their bi-annual flights. Students also will engage in land-use planning, and analyze Michigan waterfowl population data.

**High-schoolers become elk managers**

Michigan once had elk across the state, but by the late 1800s, all the native elk had disappeared due to unregulated hunting and drastic landscape changes that led to a lack of habitat.

In 1918, seven elk were brought from the western United States to Wolverine, Michigan to re-establish our state’s elk population.

Now, 100 years later, Michigan has a healthy and abundant elk population resulting from intentional land management and increased law enforcement.

Students can learn more about this conservation success story and celebrate elk in the classroom with [Elk University](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0%2C4570%2C7-350-79135_79220_81142---%2C00.html).

“This educational program gives high school students to chance to step into the role of a wildlife manager,” said Katie Keen, DNR wildlife communications coordinator.

Students will learn about elk, their habitat needs, Michigan history, wildlife disease and forest management. They also will explore social considerations for wildlife management.

“I was really impressed with the way Elk University uses real data, video and photos to teach biology concepts, but doesn't ‘preach’ or ‘tell’ information to the kids,” said Chad Miller of Hamilton High School in Hamilton. “Instead, it was clear that whoever designed the lessons understood inquiry learning and the art of getting kids to ‘uncover’ concepts. It is so rare to find – especially in free, pre-written programs – this approach used so well.”

Elk University is offered free of charge to ninth through 12th-grade educators.

**Forests and field trips**

“Forests are critical habitat for many species, such as bear and elk, and a field trip is a great way to have students experience these resources first-hand after learning about them in class,” Keen said.

For those teachers hoping to get their students out for some forest exploration there is funding available to schools for field trips through a program called “Wheels to Woods.”

Any pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade school in Michigan is eligible to apply for funds to go on a field trip to a school forest, private forest, public forest or forest products company.

“Wheels to Woods pays for the bus so that students, teachers and parents can go on an educational field trip to explore a nearby forest,” said Mike Smalligan, DNR forest stewardship coordinator. “Teachers are free to use any topic about forests that fits in with their lessons and curriculum.”

For more information and an application form, visit [treefarmsystem.org/wheels-to-woods](http://www.treefarmsystem.org/wheels-to-woods). Applications are accepted throughout the year.

If a field trip is not feasible, educators can incorporate trees, forests and more into the classroom with Project Learning Tree.

With this award-winning outdoor curriculum that meets both state and national standards, educators can find lessons and activities for learners of all ages to incorporate into classrooms and other educational settings.

Learn more about Michigan Project Learning Tree at [www.michiganplt.org](http://www.michiganplt.org).

**More ways to bring natural resources to the classroom**

* Project WILD workshops offer professional development for bringing hands-on natural resources-related activities to classrooms. Several Project WILD guide books for kindergarten through grade 12 are available. Find out more at [michigan.gov/michiganprojectwild](http://www.michigan.gov/michiganprojectwild).
* Get salmon in the classroom. Caring for young salmon encourages third- through 12th-grade students to think and care about conservation and creates a connection between caring for their fish and caring for their local environment. Learn more about the Salmon in the Classroom program at [michigan.gov/sic](http://www.michigan.gov/sic).
* The DNR’s Academy of Natural Resources, a week-long program offered in two locations during the summer months, gives teachers the opportunity to learn about Michigan’s diverse natural resources and how to bring that knowledge to the classroom. Learn more at [michigan.gov/anr](http://www.michigan.gov/anr).

To register for wildlife classroom curricula and learn about additional opportunities the DNR has to offer educators, visit [michigan.gov/dnreducation](http://www.michigan.gov/dnreducation).

To get the latest education updates from the DNR, sign up for DNR emails at [michigan.gov/dnr](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr) and choose “Education and Outreach” to subscribe to the Essential Educator newsletter.

The Michigan DNR offers numerous opportunities for the state’s schoolchildren to learn about wildlife and natural resources in closer, more involved and more in-depth ways.

These opportunities offered for today’s youth may cultivate a bumper crop of wildlife and natural resources stewards for tomorrow. That’s what the DNR is aiming for.

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [michigan.gov/dnrstories](http://www.michigan.gov/dnrstories) To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles sign-up for free email delivery at [michigan.gov/dnr](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr).

**/Note to editors:** Contact: John Pepin, Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Bear:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058484/Bear.jpg) A Michigan black bear is shown.

[**Cards**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058437/Cards.jpg)**:** Critter cards, featuring 19 different Michigan wildlife species, are included with the Go Wild for Michigan’s Wildlife curriculum. The facing card shows a painted turtle, Michigan’s state reptile.

[**Core:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058438/Core.JPG) A student takes a crack at coring a tree during a Forestry Field Day event at Presque Isle Park in Marquette County. Wheels to the Woods helped fund transportation for the event.

[**Elk:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058489/Elk.jpg) A Michigan elk is shown.

[**Group:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058439/Group.JPG) Aspen Ridge fifth-grader Kendra Scherer tries to determine the height of a tree by gazing through a clinometer, while classmate Athena Kinnunen follows the line of sight. Students Madelyn Reader, Ella Brand and Catherine Bartanen are also pictured, from left. Wheels to the Woods helped fund transportation for the Forestry Field Day outing.

[**Lakeview:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058440/Lakeview.jpg) Students from Lakeview Community Schools pose for a photo after visiting their school forest. Wheels to Woods provides field-trip funding to forests for pre-K through 12th-grade schools in Michigan.

[**Release:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058441/Release.jpg) A student releases salmon raised in the classroom at the mouth of the Tahquamenon River at Lake Superior in Chippewa County.

[**River-1**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058442/River-1.jpg) and [**River-2**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058443/River-2.jpg): A fish sampling outing on the AuSable River is shown, part of an Academy of Natural Resources teacher-training workshop.

[**Shore:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058444/Shore.jpg) Bob Wild, right, a park interpreter with Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park, and a teacher-student look at stones collected along the Lake Superior shore as part of teacher training at the Academy of Natural Resources North.

[**Students:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/08/21/file_attachments/1058445/Students.jpg) Whitefish Township students haul buckets filled with water and salmon raised in their classroom to the mouth of the Tahquamenon Falls River for release**./**