

Frenchtown Naturalist Afterschool Program



In early April, the Montana Natural History Center (MNHC) and Hellgate Hunters and Anglers (HHA) held a pilot afterschool program at Frenchtown Elementary School. The program consisted of taking 12 students ranging from 9-13 years old out for 5 days, afterschool from 3:30-5:30. The MNHC started this program last fall, which usually costs \$125 per student. Working with MNHC, HHA was able to provide the afterschool program in Frenchtown free of charge, with hopes to spread the program to all Missoula county schools in the near future.

The first day's theme was Wildlife Tracking and Signs. After breaking into smaller groups, the kids played an updated version of hide and seek using a telemetry wand and radio collar. The kids also dissected owl pellets, finding lots of cool bones from a variety of rodents.

The second day was focused on birds. Unfortunately, the weather was not cooperative and the kids were forced to stay close to the school. Luckily, Frenchtown Elementary School has a great pond located on school grounds, and the group was able to see a Canada Goose, Mallards, and Shovelers. The kids also played a migratory bird game, showing the dangers birds face while traveling. The kids thoroughly enjoyed being banded, and proclaiming the way they had met their demise - whether by the neighborhood cat or being zapped by power lines.

The third day, again, suffered from less than ideal weather. But the kids put on their ponchos and headed out to Erskine Ponds. Once there, each child was given a GPS and taught how to program coordinates. They all soon learned how to navigate and orienteer from point to point while following a scavenger hunt through roughly six locations.

The fourth day was at Frenchtown Pond and focused on aquatic insects. The kids were outfitted with waders and nets, and set free to roam the shores of the pond. Leeches, blood worms, mayfly larvae, damselfly larvae, fairy shrimp, and snail eggs were among the favorites that were found that afternoon, and everyone loved being able to wade in and around the shore.

Everyone was really looking forward to the final day of fishing at Frenchtown Pond. The sun was out and the prospect of catching rainbow trout sparked everyone's enthusiasm. After learning the basics of casting, tying, and finding that sweet spot where the fish hide, the kids pulled up three rainbows during the afternoon, and many were looking forward to returning later in the week to practice their new skills.

Overall, the kids had a great time getting outside and learning a variety of new skills. The highlight was most certainly fishing, and it was exciting to be part of what was for many, their first fishing adventure.

