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Cobbossee group offers winter vacation camp to GET THE KIDS OUTDOORS

KENNEBEC JOURNAL Morning Sentinel

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From Morning Sentinel staff

Dissecting owl pellets and staring at a hole in the ice in the freezing cold may not fit your idea of winter fun. But to Brad Hart, 11, and Emily Malinowski, 10, those were two of their favorite activities during Winter Vacation Camp, run by Friends of the Cobbossee Watershed.

Last year, the fifth graders at Helen Thompson School in West Gardiner and about a dozen other young campers took part in an outdoor adventure. They explored animal tracks, went ice fishing on Cobbossee with an expert and played winter nature games.

And yes, they also scrutinized owl pellets -- the regurgitated, undigested remains of animals that an owl ate for dinner.

"Once I got into it and started taking hair out and finding bones, I thought it was pretty cool," Emily said.

"We learned what owls eat by dissecting an owl pellet. They eat mice, small rodents and small birds. I saw bones and fur. I found a jaw and a skull bone," Brad said.

Both Emily and Brad are looking forward to spending another three-day winter session this year. Geared for grades 3 through 5, the educational camp will be held Feb. 19-21, school vacation week, at Cram's Point Nursery School on the east shore of Cobbossee Lake in West Gardiner.

"I had so much fun last year with all my friends that went there. It's all very good. It seems like a whole week. You spend so much time there and learn so much," Emily said.

For more information about winter camp, contact Tamara Whitmore, education director of Friends of the Cobbossee Watershed, at tamara@watershedfriends.com

The nonprofit organization has about 5,000 members. Its mission is "to protect and improve the 28 lakes and streams in the Cobbossee Watershed," according to their Web site: watershedfriends.com

"It is hands-on, with an emphasis being outside. We do winter ecology the first day, how animals adapt to winter survival," Whitmore said, of the camp.

"We learned about the eco-system -- how animals survive in winter, by camouflage, like rabbits (snowshoe hares), which are brown in summer and white in winter. We saw a lot of squirrel and bird tracks," Brad said.

Emily was impressed by the way animals make winter shelters.

"We found some tracks that looked like a muskrat's and also a muskrat house. It looks like a beaver dam, but not as big. It's made of twigs built up with the ice around it. We found a hawk or an eagle's nest high up in a pine tree. They (animals) have to make

their shelters to survive," said Emily, who hopes to have a future career that involves animals.

"Animals are my passion. I'd like to visit the rain forest. They have cool animals, like the ocelot and tree frogs," she said.

Both agreed that going ice fishing was the most fun.

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