

5 March 2013

Today I accompanied Wade to the Celery Fields to observe the program ***Celery Fields Explorers*** that SAS is sponsoring and for which Karen Fraley and guide/naturalists of Around the Bend Nature Tours teach elementary students about birds, plants and the environment. A full busload of third graders arrived with four classes and their teachers from a school in North Port. Karen had two assistants, so the children were split into three groups. I chose to follow one group for the entire learning experience. These children were very enthusiastic, especially when binoculars were given to each child. At one point when Karen asked if anyone would like to be an ornithologist, every child's hand went up!

On the boardwalk, pictures of various birds had been clothes-pinned to the fence. The children were shown feathers, a bird bone and beak. Karen stressed that one must have a permit in order to own such items. Then they were told to stand in front of a picture of a bird with webbed feet, or a long or curved beak, as she explained how these features were used and what various species eat. This was followed by a lesson on how to use binoculars before one was given to each child. Excitement reigned as they sought out birds with their binoculars.

The next lesson was a walk to point out various plants, stressing the type of habitat at the Celery Fields and which species of birds use them for food or shelter. The children still had their binoculars and were focusing on both birds and plants on this walk, having been warned about fire ants.

The third lesson was a "Limpkin Hunt". After being shown a picture of a limpkin and being told various distinct features for identification, the children formed a wide circle. Two of them were chosen to be the nesting limpkins. One was the predator that steals eggs. Another was a handicapped bird, having lost its mate, but trying to gather enough food to feed six chicks. Then all participated in gathering as many cards from a pan as they could. They had to be quiet and walk, not run. As the instructor gathered up the cards bit by bit at the end, there were lessons on the types of predators, the environment, the food chain, behavior when birding, and leaving no trash behind while enjoying and identifying the beautiful birds.

Each child got a worksheet on which he or she must answer questions about things learned and a checklist of the birds seen. Normally this is done on the spot, but today the bus was running late from North Port, so the teachers said they would all be done back in the classroom.

***Celery Fields Explorers*** is free of charge to schools and schoolchildren and is funded by SAS members and the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. This appears to be a very worthwhile program and I feel sure our members will want to fund it again next year. Congratulations to Jeanne and our board for starting it this year.

Betty Matthews