

Picture this: you and a friend are on an amazing snowshoeing trip in the backcountry. You pass through forests of snow-covered trees and learn avalanche safety skills, you work as a team to build your first snow cave, you cook an amazing meal in a kitchen made entirely of snow, and you end the day by watching candlelight dance on the roof of your cozy snow cave. The icing on the snow cake: you are getting school credit for this!!

On January 7 & 8th, Mt. Baker's Geography 12 class, run by Leigh Cormier met students from the Crawford Bay Outdoor Ed class, led by Jessie King, at the Salmo Creston Pass for a winter survival skills & avalanche safety camp. Also joining the crew and providing invaluable lessons were Sandra Bernier, an experienced outdoorswoman and Dave Quinn, a wildlife biologist, avalanche safety instructor, and wilderness guide. The camp was generously supported by the Columbia Basin Environmental Education Network's Wild Voices For Kids program, an environmental and heritage education program designed to foster a deeper understanding of, and connection to, the land, history and culture of the Columbia Basin.

At the Salmo-Creston Summit, the highway avalanche crews set the scene by explaining how they keep the highway safe, despite frequent avalanches. With the sun shining down from a blue sky, the threat of avalanches seemed a distant nuisance, clouding an otherwise beautiful day that students were itching to get started on. With heavy packs shouldered, and initially awkward snowshoes cinched in, the group started climbing towards Ripple Ridge. Along the way, students learned how to spot avalanche-prone terrain, how sub alpine spruce & fir adapt to snowy conditions by growing tall & narrow like rockets, and how hiking in snow shoes makes you quickly overheat!

Once we reached the cabin at Ripple Ridge, there was no time to spare, as students got to work shoveling out, stomping down, and carving in five very impressive quinzels – or snow caves as they are commonly called – some even had candles for ambience (and light)! Next was supper, cooked in the kitchen, where counters were made out of snow, and water bottles became large ice-cubes before you knew it. A fire was made in the cabin to help thaw out frozen fingers, water bottles, and dry damp gloves, but in essence, the students spent the entire time outside – an impressive achievement! With dinner done, students crawled into their cozy snow caves, where temperatures were significantly warmer than outside. Waking up the next morning & “seeing nothing but snow” was the highlight for many.

The following day, students learned and practiced how to locate buried avalanche victims using avalanche transceivers and probes. Before long, camp had to be cleaned (snow kitchens being white, they tend to reveal any and all spills!), packs loaded again, and off we raced back down the mountain. Descending a mountain with snowshoes can be a safe & enjoyable experience, but when you're a teenager bent on returning to a hot shower, you tend to increase the pace, and sometimes find yourself face down in deep powder!

In the end, students learned vital skills for winter wilderness travel, stereotypes about other schools melted away, and students shared many laughs over frozen fingers, water bottles, and chocolate. Students also learned about themselves and what is possible. Mt. Baker student, Kaitlynn Harris realized how powerful she is, “constructing a snow cave, preparing a healthy meal outside and having a good sleep in freezing temperatures, showed me how important it is to know how to take care of myself and that I can, even outside up on top of a mountain in below 15 weather.” A big thank you to all those involved and to our supporter, Wild Voices for Kids.

The Columbia Basin Environmental Education Network (CBEEN) is pleased to support this outdoor learning experience through its' Wild Voices for Kids Program. This is the kind of essential environmental experience students need to help instill in them responsible environmental values and yet it is often the last type of program schools are able to fund. The Wild Voices program is bringing these opportunities to classrooms for free by providing a database of local experts in the fields of environmental, cultural and heritage that are willing to bring that expertise to the classroom or lead a field trip. An honorarium is provided to presenters and bussing costs are also covered. CBEEN is happy to announce the expansion of the Wild Voices for Kids Program into the Kootenay Lake, Kootenay-Columbia and Arrow Lakes school districts in February. It is our goal to bring this opportunity to every classroom in the Columbia Basin.

CBEEN would like to thank our partners that make this opportunity a reality. All of our funding partners: The Columbia Basin Trust; the Regional Districts of East Kootenay, Central Kootenay and Kootenay Boundary; Environment Canada's EcoAction Community Fund. Many thanks also to the Southeast Kootenay (#5), Rocky Mountain (#6), Revelstoke (#19), Kootenay Lake (#8), Arrow Lakes (#10) and Kootenay-Columbia (#20) school district boards for their support and help. In school districts #5, #6, #8 and #20 the Resource Centers provide direct support and time without which this program could not run.

Wild Voices is always looking for more presenters in all areas. If you would like to share your wild voice or need further information please contact the program coordinator at wildvoices@cbeen.org or visit www.cbeen.org .