

Students wild about field trips

By Robert Nott | Santa Fe New Mexican

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Jennifer Jewell doesn't remember much of what she learned in books when she was a child. But she remembers everything she learned on elementary-school field trips. No wonder the Gonzales Community School teacher likes to take advantage of any field-trip opportunity offered to her. That's how she ended up at the Leonora Curtin Wetland Preserve with nearly two dozen second- and third-grade students on a recent Wednesday morning. The kids were being "plant scientists," learning how to make their own plant presses filled with hand-picked specimens from the preserve. The Santa Fe Botanical Garden has hosted this type of field trip since 2003, according to Janice Tucker, chairwoman of the Botanical Garden's Education Committee.

"Our mission is to educate and focus on environmental outreach," Tucker said. "This sort of thing reinforces that mission. I think we need to help the public schools as much as possible with the science curriculum." Jewell agrees with that. She said she uses these field trips to promote literacy and speaking skills in the classroom as her students write about their experiences later in class.

"Field trips make sense," Jewell said. "Kids can't sit four to six hours a day. They're not robots. They like to explore. If we taught more toward the way kids learned instead of teaching toward tests ..."

Her voice trailed off, but it's obvious she's a big believer in experiential learning. She still vividly recalls a fourth-grade field trip she took with her class to the Gorge Metro Park in Akron, Ohio, where she grew up. She said if she could, she'd arrange a field trip once a month.

"I wish people understood just how important these trips are," she said. "They're not just 'get out of school' events. In some cases a field trip is what brings kids 'in to' school."

At the preserve, the children took a walking tour to the pond and learned about the plant and animal life along the way, be it *quisquetum laevigatum* (horse tail, which reproduces by spore, not seed) or carpenter ants (which hang out by the big cottonwood tree on the preserve.)

Kay Burdette, a Botanical Garden volunteer who has been involved with the education committee for years, said in most cases these field trips provide Santa Fe Public Schools' students a chance to visit the still-obscure preserve, which is south of Santa Fe next to Rancho de las Golondrinas.

The roughly 35-acre preserve is named after Leonora Curtin (1879-1972), an early 20th-century ethnobotanist. Santa Fe Botanical Garden funds the school buses for these trips (a minimum of \$130) and provides materials for making plant presses, as well with the help of county support, donors, and membership fees. Community support for such field trips is vital, both Burdette and Jewell stressed, what with the budget crisis facing the district.

Jewell's class was happy. One of her girls told her, "This is the best field trip ever!" Another, a veteran of about 10 field trips, said he likes these outings because "they only happen once in a while, and you get to do different stuff, and you always do the same stuff in the classroom." One of her 8-year-old boys said, "Sometimes you get to see places you've never seen before." Asked what he had learned so far, he responded, "That the back of a Russian olive tree is silver."

The Botanical Garden will continue to host these field trips through the spring. Though the organization has booked up this year's schedule, interested parties can call the organization at 471-9103.