

Boots in the Forest

EDNA REY-VIZGIRDAS

By Jaimie Olle

“It’s a great day to be up here,” Edna Rey-Vizgirdas announces as she straps on a pair of well-traveled snowshoes over her Sorel boots at Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area’s Nordic Center located on the Boise National Forest. Gathered around her are more than 30 Master Naturalist participants, who are eager to learn more about Bogus Basin’s SnowSchool, and potentially become volunteers for the program.

As Boise National Forest’s botanist and conservation education coordinator, Rey-Vizgirdas helped to create the SnowSchool program roughly a decade ago. When she joined the Forest in 2002, she saw a need for increased public outreach. She began leading nature and wildflower hikes, as well as, guided snowshoeing trips. Not able to handle the increasing demand for these kinds of activities on her own, Rey-Vizgirdas brought in other Forest employees such as biologists, ecologists, and even forest supervisors to help lead outings.

“I saw an opportunity to mesh the science and botany realm with public education on the Boise National Forest,” Rey-Vizgirdas says about her initial efforts to combine educational opportunities with outdoor recreation in an effort to show the community what is happening on their local public lands. “If the public doesn’t know about what is going on or what you’re trying to accomplish, you’re not going to get very far.”

In 2005, a pilot program hosted over 60 kids at what would become SnowSchool. The U.S. Forest Service, in partnership with the Winter Wildlands Alliance and Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area, created an opportunity for local schools to go on guided snowshoe fieldtrips. The following year, after receiving funding from the “More Kids in the Woods” grant, the SnowSchool hosted over 600 kids. As of today, the program leads roughly 1,800 students each year.

While SnowSchool is open to all local educational institutions, the program tries to target fifth and sixth grade classes at Title 1 schools. Children in these classes often have never been to the mountains or experienced winter recreation. Bogus Basin, a non-profit ski resort, grants scholarships to these students to waive fees for the program.



Edna wears snowshoes over waterproof winter boots to lead a snow school outing at Bogus Basin Mountain Recreation Area.

“These kids aren’t necessarily getting out with their parents, many of whom may not know about local public land opportunities,” Rey-Vizgirdas says about reaching out to Title 1 students. “One of the greatest things is when kids want to come back and bring their parents or their friends.”

While the SnowSchool now has the resources to staff a full-time coordinator, Rey-Vizgirdas still participates heavily in the program. She often leads groups and helps with the pre-season training for volunteers and interns.

“I love reaching out to young people and getting them excited about careers in science and with the Forest Service,” she states about her continuing involvement with SnowSchool and other public education programs. “I love to get people hooked on the environment and excited about public lands.”

Appreciating public lands and their environments is definitely nothing new for Rey-Vizgirdas. Growing up, she spent time in national parks and forests hiking and camping with her family. During college, she worked at a variety of state and national parks, where she gave interpretive talks to park visitors. These talks introduced her to the concept of public outreach and education.

After receiving a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a Master of Science in Environmental Studies, Rey-Vizgirdas began her career doing biological surveys. This led her into a career in botany with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and eventually with the Boise National Forest.

“I didn’t know that there were careers in botany, but I knew that I liked the outdoors,” she recalls when considering how she began her work as a botanist.

Today, Rey-Vizgirdas helps local college students make their own strides in outdoor careers that combine public education and science. SnowSchool hires interns from Boise State University to lead snowshoeing groups. Interns learn not only how to teach science, but also how to lead kids in an outdoor setting. Interns and other SnowSchool volunteers receive training in a variety of topics including snow science, igloo construction, winter ecology, and wildlife.

When delivering SnowSchool programs, interns, volunteers and Rey-Vizgirdas work to relate the material back to the students to help them grasp the importance of the winter environment and how it impacts their lives. Not only do participants gain an understanding of the environment, wildlife, and watershed, but they are also exposed to role models. Seeing people with jobs focused around science presents new career paths they might want to work towards.

“My ideal workday is being in the field,” divulges Rey-Vizgirdas. “And while I love looking for rare species and things like that, it’s even more gratifying to lead people, especially kids. I love seeing that ‘ah-ha’ moment in their eyes when they understand or see something that sparks their interest.”