Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie
National Forest

Forest FEATURES

Chase Cuizon, 9, uses a compass the first time.

Kids Orient in the Woods, Discover Wildlife

Thirtyseven kids tore into Schriebers Meadow through thick low huckleberry brush with a clear view of Mt. Baker behind them and fall foliage ahead. It was the first week of fall, and they were learning to navigate their way with a compass for the first time, and looking for evidence of wildlife along the way. Several stopped to pick and eat berries. "What kind of animal do you think did this?" asked wildlife biologist Don Gay, pointing to a small tree with the bark freshly shredded. One boy thought it was a bear. Most weren't sure. It turned out to be elk, but since most of the kids had not seen one before, Gay explained that elk are really just very big deer. Gay works for the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

It was the first outing outdoors with the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood program for about half of the kids. The Mt. Vernon Police Department started the program in 2007 with the Forest Service, National Park Service and North Cascades Institute to expose urban Hispanic kids to the outdoors and careers in natural sciences. Monthly outings have taken youth hiking,

Kulshan Creek kids run through Schriebers Meadow.

to plant trees, viewing eagles on the Skagit River and looking for mountain goats on Artists Point. Most of the kids are middle school age; some bring their brothers or sisters who are in elementary school. In November they will paint a mural celebrating their experiences this year and in December they will have an open house party at the Kulshan Creek Community Resource Center in Mt. Vernon.

Jonathan Suarez, 11, has been going on the trips since he was 8. He is a wildlife enthusiast, catching frogs or snakes in his spare time, and watching the Discovery Channel whenever he gets a chance. Jonathan does well in his science classes. "I want to grow up like Don or Orlando," he said. Orlando Garcia, a visitor information assistant for the Forest Service, helps with the program coordinating trips and working as an interpreter. Garcia is fluent in Spanish, and grew up in the Kulshan neighborhood.

After learning to orient with a compass and identify elk, the kids broke for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich lunch. Leaders took groups out afterward for a hike about a mile down Park Butte Trail to Rocky Creek to play near the water. Within a few minutes of walking, one of the little boys accompanying Garcia at the head of the group asked, "Orlando, where is the shortcut? Is it close? You know where it is don't you?"

To find out more about participating in the Kulshan Creek Neighborhood program call Officer Gerondale at 360-336-0630 ext. 1456. Learn more about the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest at http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mbs/.

Story by Renee Bodine
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