

THE SPOTLIGHT

A Sand Island adventure

Connie Erickson's fourth-grade class gets a hands-on lesson about habitat restoration from the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership

BY

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On a blustery Thursday at Sand Island, stewardship educators from Portland placed sharp metal objects in the hands of 26 fourth graders and unleashed them on some misplaced Himalayan blackberries. It might sound a little reckless, but it's actually going pretty well.

The kids belong to Connie Erickson's fourth-grade class at Lewis & Clark Elementary, and this is part of an extended lesson plan on habitat restoration. It started several days earlier in the classroom when members of the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership's stewardship team paid them a visit to talk about invasive species and then continued on the banks of the Columbia where the class met back up with the team to get out and get their hands dirty.

The team educates kids along 44 river miles of the lower Columbia River estuary from Bonneville to Astoria, serving up a little adventure in the process. Today's field trip cost the school nothing; instead the funds came from The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. On the river here are two 34-foot canoes awaiting the children, their teacher and the half-dozen-or-so parents who've tagged along.

The team divides the class into two groups and gets them ready to paddle from St. Helens to Sand Island. Outdoor educator Katie Jacobson's group will shove off in the Osprey and she uses expert classroom management techniques to get everyone's attention long enough to teach them about habitat restoration and boat safety.

When she says 'Osprey', she tells the children, their job is to pretend to have talons.

"Osprey!" she shouts.

Thirteen kids curl their hands into talons and bare their teeth. Things, so far, are going very well.

"Who can tell me what's an invasive species?" Jacobson asks.

Six hands go up. One of the girls says it's a plant that takes over an area. Jacobson praises her answer and adds that invasive plants probably came from somewhere else as well.

Jacobson moves on to boat safety.

To get to the island, she explains, each group of children will be paddling one of the wood-colored fibreglass canoes across the channel. She explains how to stay safe – stay in your seat and wear a properly fitted life jacket and paddle together – and scatters the parents, teachers and even press evenly through the canoe to use available manpower to brave the choppy water.

But for the kids it wasn't the least bit scary, says Erickson.

"I'm happy," nine-year-old Ryann Wilcox says of the boat ride "I thought I didn't want to go because the boat was wobbly."



Fourth grade students Rhys P. (left) and Gabriel Johansen are shown using tools to remove Himalayan blackberries from Sand Island. ERICA RYBERG/SOUTH SPOTLIGHT

It was all in a day's lesson planning as far as Jacobson is concerned. She's a jocular blond whose train includes years spent doing outdoor education for a YMCA in New York and a recent Master's Degree in Education.

That training qualifies her to not just herd 10-year-olds into giant canoes and paddle with them to th but the set them to work when she gets there.

Under her direction, the kids use loppers and shovels to remove blackberries near the beach. A pile o blackberries grows on the sand.

"They will do a heap of work — it's just amazing how much workthose kids will do," Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership staffer Maggie Jones says.

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