

# Science class with a view

by Jared Johnson

Science education came alive this fall when Rountree Elementary School fifth-graders were taught in a classroom unlike anything they had seen before.

Trading brick walls for juniper trees and lakefront cabins, the school sponsored a four-day outdoor education field trip to Camp Grady Spruce near Mineral Wells, Texas. Fifth- or sixth-graders at all twelve Allen ISD schools participate in attending either Grady Spruce or Sky Ranch, a similar facility in east Texas. By the time they return back to campus, students have a new view of the world around them.

"As a teacher, I could talk about habitats or adaptations or fossils all day long, but when you take the students out of the traditional classroom and put them in a habitat where they can see the trees, foliage, insects and animals—one where they can dig in a real fossil pit—that's an educational experience they will remember," said Rountree science teacher Jennifer Stein, who has helped coordinate camp trips for the last eight years.

This year, 36 Rountree fifth-graders and nine adult sponsors attended the outdoor education program at Camp Grady Spruce during the first week of September. The camp is operated by the Dallas Metropolitan YMCA. It spreads



across the pristine banks of Possum Kingdom Lake 120 miles west of Dallas, making it fun for students to experience a natural world that's not so accessible in the suburbs.

"Many of our 'city' kids do not have outdoor living skills. They can't get a decent view of the stars at night, have never hiked a trail, baited a fishing pole, felt the exhilaration of climbing a peak, and have never seen wildlife, except in books or magazines," said Mrs. Stein. "Camp gives them a taste of these things."

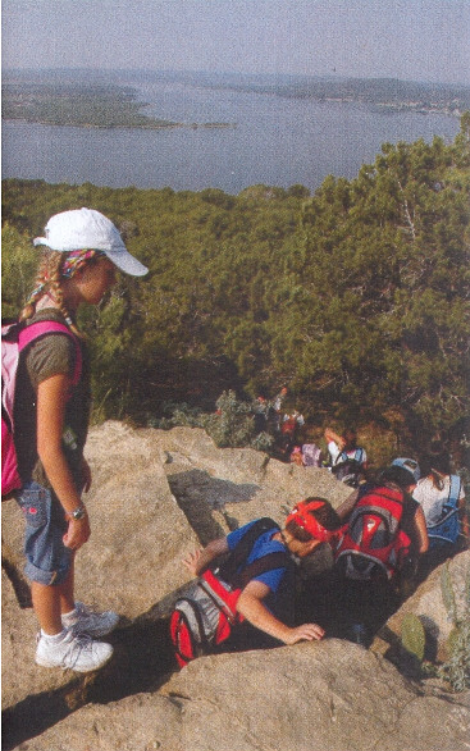
If the students' reactions at camp

this year were any indication, they will be eager to experience the outdoors again. One group gasped in awe while standing atop 1,500-foot Johnson's Peak, an outcropping with a view of the entire lake region. Previous classroom lessons on peninsulas and islands suddenly took root in their minds as they looked down and identified landforms hundreds of feet below.

The students conquered a lengthy uphill hike to reach the summit and found everything from curious insects to fossilized river remains. On the trail, they learned that the cochineal bug can be plucked from a prickly pear cactus and crushed to make a maroon dye once in high demand among Native Americans. On the trek back to camp, they plucked up fossilized crinoids—ancient sea creatures that were prevalent in the Paleozoic Era.

Other camp activities included horseback riding, canoeing, fishing, archery, an astronomy lab, blindfolded obstacle course, fire building, a catapult contest and a hike around the sheer cliffs of Devil's Island that revealed much of the region's folklore. Students' grades for the week were based on journal entries that corresponded with each activity. The catapult contest, for instance, required them to apply





foundational physics concepts, and hikes included discussions about how the lake formed through the erosion process.

Perhaps most helpful were the lessons that the boys and girls learned by being away from home for four days. Groups took turns setting tables for meals, participating in flag ceremonies, preserving the environment and cleaning up after themselves. The difference when they return is "amazing," according to Mrs. Stein.

"The students follow a curriculum... but beyond that, they learn life skills: how to interact with others, teamwork and problem solving. I can see a difference in maturity and in appreciation for our environment in just four days' time!" she said.

It's likely that everyone involved with the trip had a greater appreciation

## Education

for the work that went into it after returning home to Allen. Rountree prepared for the trip more than a year in advance, and the PTA organized two fundraisers last year to cover camp expenses. The trip coordinators—Mrs. Stein and math teacher Patricia Gear—met with parents several times, planned cabin assignments, assigned sponsors, gathered supplies and spent an extra day setting up cabins before students arrived.

The joint effort gave Rountree fifth-graders an education they will not soon forget. Their experiences at Camp Grady Spruce will serve as memorable lessons about the world around them—a world that looks much different now. ❖

*Jared Johnson is a public information specialist for the Allen Independent School District.*

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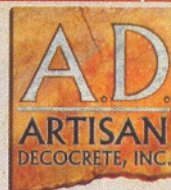
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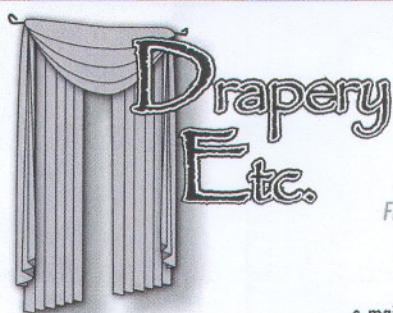
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