

Hands-on sugaring at Prescott Farm

DATE: March 18, 2010

PUBLICATION: New Hampshire Union Leader (Manchester, NH)

PAGE: 08

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LACONIA -- Want to have fun learning in the great outdoors, where the fun is emphasized and the learning flows naturally?

During Maple Sugar Madness at Prescott Farm Environmental Education Center in Laconia, visitors participate in that New England tradition and harbinger of spring: making maple syrup.

For the entire month of March, the environmental educators at Prescott Farm present this sugaring experience for the public on Saturdays and for school groups during the week.

Participants take a 20-minute walk into the farm's sugar bush -- a forest dominated by sugar-maple trees. There they sharpen tree-identification skills, learn the parts and functions of a tree, use measuring tools to find an appropriate tree to tap, and tap that tree using both historical and modern methods. Then, it's over to the sugar shack to help with cooking the sap down to delicious syrup.

There's lots of learning without boredom, like fun lessons in maple-sugar history including Native American legends, and the math and chemical/physical science of the boiling process.

Kim Drouin, office and communication manager for Prescott Farm, reported that this year's first weekend had the best attendance in recent years. More than 80 people helped make syrup on Saturday, March 6.

"Maple Sugar Madness is in its 10th year and has been very popular," Drouin said. "It's such a good program that many families come back each year. But we had a lot of new people this year, too, because of efforts to get the word out. We want more of the community to experience it. We have a strong volunteer base for Maple Sugar Madness, people very knowledgeable and familiar with the process of maple sugaring to teach the groups."

Three full-time staff at Prescott Farm, including two naturalists, coordinate the program.

Kids love getting outdoors and learning how to do something new. Parents love it, too, especially since it's simple to bring the family and join in the adventure.

Young sugarer Tim McCarthy, 9, of Laconia, said, "Maple sugaring is totally awesome!"

Danil Noordergraaf, 10, of Moultonborough, added that his favorite parts were "tapping the tree and tasting the sap."

On Saturdays in March, public groups go out at 10 a.m., noon, and 2 p.m. The outing lasts almost two hours, so proper clothing and foot gear for the day's conditions are important. Cost is \$8 for adults, \$7 for children ages 4 to 2 if non-members, and \$5 for adults, \$4 for children, if members of Prescott Farm. Children ages 3 and under are admitted free.

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