

Hopkins Forest: *Students Teaching Students...*

So here's a question: what do red-velvet mites, red-spotted newts and mayfly nymphs all have in common? Answer: they all abound in and around Hopkins Forest in spring and were the subject of a recent ecosystem investigation by sixth graders from Williamstown Elementary School. On a sunny morning in early May, the 65 students, representing the entire 6th grade, came out to the forest to explore three distinct habitat types within Hopkins Forest and to compare the fauna that dwells within them.



Ellie Wachtel mentors 6th grade student.

Guided by Williams students, Erica Landsberg '14 and Ellie Wachtel, '17, the kids spent about 45 minutes at each of the three study areas: a small farm pond, a first-order woodland stream and the soil beneath a sugar maple grove. In the wetlands, students used dip nets to sift through the substrates and extract such varying creatures as newts, diving beetles, water striders, crane fly larva, caddisflies and two-lined salamanders. By contrast, the upland creatures were highlighted by red-backed salamanders, wolf spiders, centipedes and, of course, those flashy, albeit diminutive red-velvet mites.

At each site students were asked to take a close look at their captures and record at their findings. Aided by magnifying boxes, field guides and taxonomic keys, they were able to identify many of these small animals and to discern some of the distinguishing characteristics of each: the keeled tail of the newt, the thin foliate gills of the mayflies, and the chewing mandibles of the ground beetles. The bottom line was to make the connection between habitats and their resident creatures and to identify which adaptations most closely tie an animal to its environment. What makes an organism more successful in the forest soil, for example, than the depths of the stream? There's really no better a place to make these discoveries than out in the forest, (pond, or stream).

This spring's ecosystem exploration was one of several field trips that we hosted for the local elementary school in Hopkins Forest this past year. In the fall, Williams students Sara Hassan '15 and William Gutierrez '16 hosted visits -- one featuring a forest history investigation and the other a foray into tree biology, identification and measuring. This partnership between Williams and the local elementary school has been facilitated by the Williams Center for Learning in Action, which sponsored the "student educator" positions at Hopkins Forest and assisted with coordination. We hope to expand the program in the future in order to introduce many more local primary-schoolers to the wonders of hands-on learning while giving our undergraduates experience in this important area of education.

Drew Jones

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Ellie Wachtel demonstrates stream sampling.