

GUEST COMMENTARY

Concord and Roxbury find a Nature Connection

By Dr. Joseph L. (Joel) Andrews

Volunteers for Concord's Nature Connection packed a van with April's bounty: sprigs of forsythia and branches with early lilac blossoms were loaded in the back. Then came several robins' nests, small logs chiseled to sharp points by beavers' teeth, a hawk's wing (without the hawk). Next came Plexiglas enclosures for the animals.

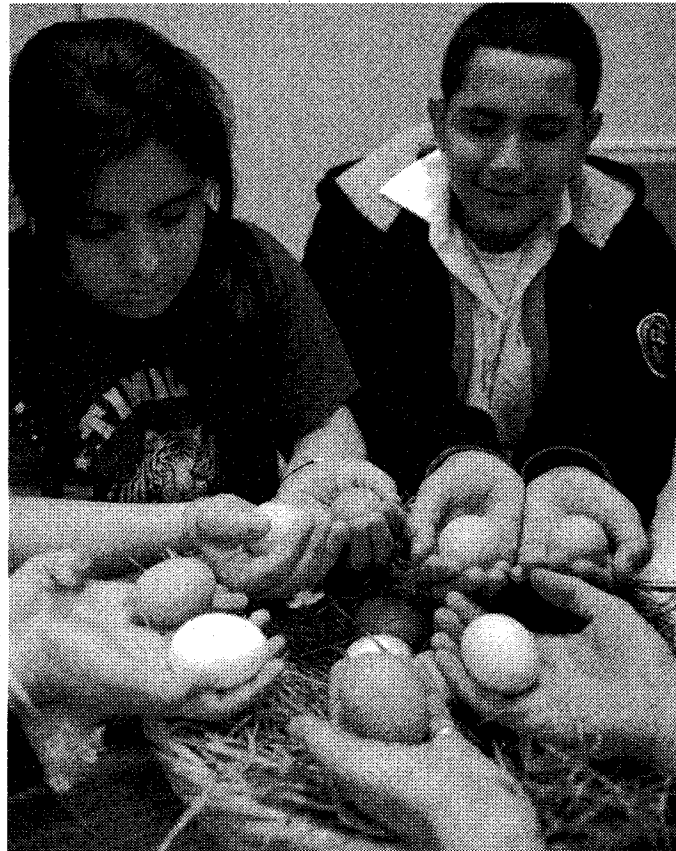
Then came the animals themselves in separate cages: three young chirping chickens, a cooing mourning dove named Light, Houdini the hamster, Ababa and Silky two guinea pigs and also a handful of (unnamed) snails. These and various other representatives of suburban spring were packed tightly into the van for their journey to Roxbury. Henry Thoreau joined us too — in spirit — along with we four volunteers.

Forty minutes later, after driving through the streets of Boston, the van arrived in Roxbury at the large white First Church of Roxbury. The sign out front

proclaimed that the original meetinghouse on the site was built in 1631 by English settlers, which is four years before Concord was founded. Today it houses the Roxbury Urban Ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church. Here about 30 Roxbury grade-school and middle-school students on spring vacation spent the day with their mentors, college volunteers from suburban churches and also from Roxbury.

Once inside we Nature Connection volunteers unloaded our spring freight from the van, we carried the items downstairs and divided it among three rooms. Jude and I staffed the Bird Room. For the next two hours we passed around tidbits of avian nature for the children to handle with their own hands: robins' nests covered with mud and lined with grass, feathers and the hawk's wing.

Jude then uncovered Light's cage and passed her from hand to hand around the circle so that each child could stroke her gently with their forefinger. "So soft," the kids cooed, as Light also cooed contentedly. Then



Children handle robins' eggs and nests at the First Church of Roxbury, during a visit from the Nature Connection.

PHOTO BY SUE HUSZAR

Jude removed the three two-week-old chickens from their covered cage and placed them on a tarp encircled by the Plexiglas fence. The chicks strutted and clucked to the delight

of the children. They oohed and aahed when I told them about birds' dinosaur ancestors.

Before the 20 minutes of their musical chairs-like room shift was up children

in the Bird Room constructed fist sized balls of string and yarn — to hang from bushes near their houses for neighborhood birds to use as a materials home depot for building their own nests.

Next the 10 children in our first group along with their teenaged mentors walked to the adjoining room, which had been set up as the Garden Room. Here volunteers Marcie and Jack had arranged forsythia and lilac stalks on the table along with sprigs of many other spring plants. Children were taught which seeds go with which plants. (Henry Thoreau would have been proud.) The kids giggled as they allowed snails to slither from their hands, up their forearms, over their elbows and to their upper arms.

Their final room change saw our first group enter the Beaver Room Here Josey had set up a small tent on a tarp to simulate a beaver lodge. Children crawled on all fours to enter their tent "beaver lodge." Inside they petted Houdini the hamster and Ababa and Silky, guinea pigs, who substituted for actual beavers.

Children also ran their hands down small logs, whose tips had been chiseled sharp by actual beavers. Josey told them that two beavers can fell up to 400 trees each year to dam streams after they build their lodges.

After their visits to the three theme rooms were complete, all 30 of the children along with their mentors returned to meet in the large Garden Room. Here they shared excited reports about their suburban/urban encounters. I introduced them to Henry Thoreau and his spring meanderings over 150 years ago amid the forests, streams and ponds of Concord. I invited them to partake of his spring encounters with robins, plants, flowers and beavers for real...in Concord in the near future.

The Nature Connection, formerly called Animals as Intermediaries, enables children and elders, many confined to institutions, to have direct contact with the natural world. New volunteers and supporters are welcomed. Information is at www.nature.connection.org or call 978-369-2585.