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TRACKING LEWIS AND CLARK



Geoff Crimmins/Daily News

Palouse Prairie School sixth-graders Emma Seckington (left to right) John Kole and Avery Jaeckel stop to record information from a GPS receiver while mapping trails at Idler's Rest Nature Preserve north of Moscow on Thursday.

Young explorers map Idler's Rest

Palouse Prairie sixth-graders design trail map for land trust

By Estelle Gwinn
Daily News staff writer

Sixth graders at the Palouse Prairie School of Expeditionary Learning wrapped up their fall expedition on Lewis and Clark on Thursday by exploring Idler's Rest hik-

ing site, northeast of Moscow.

The students used global positioning systems to track their adventures, which will be compiled and converted into a digital map for the Palouse Land Trust.

The sixth-graders stepped into the shoes of Lewis and Clark this year to learn the

area's history, the mathematics of map making and the importance of adventure.

"The whole focus is on adventure and what we can learn from it," said Greg Miller-Pierce, the sixth-grade teacher who taught a unit on Lewis and Clark by leading the class through the forests of the

See **EXPLORERS**, Page 6A

Explorers

from Page 1A

Palouse. "When I think of Lewis and Clark, I think of adventure."

The class began the school year by trekking to the summit of Moscow Mountain.

"That's where they found out they would be learning about Lewis and Clark," Miller-Pierce said.

Rachel Caudill, a parent chaperone on the expedition, said her family had been to Idler's Rest many times, "but we've never had a map. I think a lot of people don't use it because there isn't any map."

The 35-acre Idler's Rest is managed by the Palouse Land Trust, which designed a trail map years ago but needed a new, digital map made with GPS devices.

"We have a hand-drawn map and someone put together a trail guide but there were no GIS (geographic information system) layers for the trails," said Amy Trujillo, executive director of the Palouse Land Trust. "One of our goals is to upload the GIS later so people could have more access to it."

Ideally, the land trust would upload the trail map to a hiking website where people could download it onto their handheld units. Having the layered, digital map would also help the trust with planning and management of the property.

"One of the things about expeditionary learning is we look for a final product to fulfill an authentic need in the community," Miller-Pierce said. "That real world purpose really drives the quality of the students' work."

Using GPS devices they borrowed from the University of Idaho range-land department, the young cartographers hiked through the wilderness, writing descriptions and taking pictures of landmarks.

During their 10-week unit on Lewis and Clark, students learned how to make maps from simple sketches to more accurate compass readings to, finally, using GPS units.

"They're following in Lewis and Clark's footsteps and becoming them through map making," Miller-Pierce said.

After working with compasses for so long, he said, the children were relieved

to use some modern technology.

"It's awesome because we're not freezing our fingers off," said Owen Forbes, 11, who described the long process of recording coordinates using compasses before they received the GPS devices.

Collecting abandoned birds nests and wasps nests, examining uprooted trees and climbing on rocks, students got the full explorer experience.

"It's like nature's playground out here," said Lahde Forbes, Owen's mother, who has gone on a number of past field trips. "It's fun to come along and I actually learn a lot from the kids themselves."

Owen and Caudill's son, Avery, 11, enthusiastically led the way through the forest. Caudill and Forbes said their children were nature-oriented, hands-on learners.

"The kids that go to this school actually have the opportunity to be outside all day, there aren't many schools that can make that happen," Caudill said.

Chaperones watched the students as they followed trails through the site, but were instructed not to guide the children.

"The chaperones aren't here to help them," Miller-Pierce said. "The adventure side of it is what really connects with Lewis and Clark and in order to get that adventure they need to be more independent."

Trujillo, who is also the parent of two Palouse Prairie students, said using Idler's Rest as an educational destination was one of the mandates the trust accepted when they purchased the land from the Nature Conservancy in 2004.

"One of Idler's Rest's objectives has always been to engage educational institutions and engage learning about habitat management so we're really excited the school has taken part in that," Trujillo said.