

# Elementary students unite against invasive species

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(Photo: SIMON WHEELER / Staff Photo)

English immigrants brought house sparrows to North America, but the invasive birds have been found to kill native birds and destroy their eggs, according to Caroline Elementary School fifth-grader Bridget Garret.

Bridget and her teammates, Maggie Bonassar, Wes SanMiguel and Curtis McIntosh, were among about 175 students who presented their findings on invasive species during a Tuesday morning symposium in Ithaca.

Ithaca teacher Jennifer Wilkie helped coordinate the symposium.

Students have learned about invasive species since the beginning of the year, and the project aims to connect children with the community, giving them an audience for their research, Wilkie said.

"(The project) lets them see that the work they do in the classroom matters to the community," Wilkie said. "They can have an impact on people's understanding of invasive species."

The students conducted field research, processed data, and wrote and presented reports through the project, Wilkie added.

Students from eight fifth-grade classes participated in the program. The classes were from Beverly J. Martin, South Hill, Caroline and Enfield elementary schools, Wilkie added.

Cayuga Lake Floating Classroom Director Bill Foster said he worked with each of the classes.

When the students were fourth-graders, they got to raise trout and then release the fish into the local watershed.

This year, Foster saw the students take a sense of ownership in the watershed where they released the fish, he said. The students conducted full biological surveys at the trout release sites, and the field research played into the students' work on invasive species.

Taking the students into the field for research was rewarding, Foster added.

"There were kids for whom this was a completely new concept, to be learning outside the school ... the idea of actually going out into the real world and thinking critically, scientifically, logically about what you're seeing and what you're observing is a huge experience," he said.

Cornell University professors, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Cornell Plantations, New York State Parks and Finger Lakes Region of Partnership for Invasive Species Management all worked with the students on their projects, Wilkie added.

South Hill Elementary students Cole Rudert and Max Owens studied the hemlock woolly adelgid, and they sampled for the invasive pest at Buttermilk Falls State Park in Ithaca.

"(The hemlock) holds up all these things," Cole said. "It provides shade for fish, it provides dozens and dozens of homes for animals, and without it, the ecosystem would be destroyed."

Cole and Max said they didn't find any hemlock woolly adelgid during their sampling.

"Right now, we just need to help the trees, save them," Cole said.

The house sparrow team has observed house sparrows in the field, they said. Many of the birds live by Home Depot in Ithaca, student Wes SanMiguel added.

Trapping house sparrows doesn't work well because native birds can be caught and killed, Maggie Bonassar said, but people who have an infestation on their property can build a nest for the birds to keep them away from their home.

Wilkie said the Ithaca City School District is planning to expand this type of learning in the future.

"That is where we are going as a district, building our understanding, building capacity as teachers, to give children these experiences," she said.



South Hill Elementary School fifth-grader Nicholas Kellerman explains his research into the invasive rusty crawfish Tuesday to his mother, Laurence Kellerman. Students from four Ithaca City School District schools came together at The Space to share their research. (Photo: SIMON WHEELER / Staff Photo)

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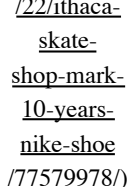
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