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Kids: It's Time for Snow School!

Translated from this Month's Amigos de Nuestras Tierras (Friends of Our Lands) Column in El Sol de la Sierra

Por Louis Medina

Bishop Elementary fifth grade teacher Meghan Avila knows full well that even though we are surrounded by snowy mountains, there are parents who don't have the opportunity to take their children for an outing in the snow.

That is why she is grateful for Snow School, which Friends of the Inyo, in collaboration with the Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association (ESIA), offers free to fifth grade students in Bishop and Mammoth each winter.

"It's a really great opportunity for the kids to experience snow," she says. Although she emphasizes that it is not just about playing in the snow: Snow School is an interactive lesson in science.

For example, students learn to walk on snow using snowshoes, while also learning that the reason they don't sink in the snow, like when they are wearing only shoes or boots, is because the snowshoes allow distribution of their body weight over a wider area.

They also learn animal adaptation and survival techniques in winter: There are birds and mammals, like some deer, that migrate to warmer climates, others like bears that hibernate to save their energy, and others like foxes whose fur and tail help keep them warm.

Likewise, the children also get a lot of tips from their teachers and volunteers from Friends of the Inyo and ESIA on how to protect themselves from the elements in winter: It's important to bundle up and stay dry without letting snow get into your gloves, shoes or coats; wear a wool hat to keep your head and ears warm; and don't forget your sunglasses and sunscreen, as the reflection of the sun off the snow is very bright and can hurt your eyes and cause sunburn.

Karlos Galicia Haro, 11, had not been to the snow in three years until he went to Snow School with his teacher, Christina Kinzy, and his classmates last Thursday. He has two younger brothers and a younger sister, and in winter they don't go out much and just play at home, he said. He was very excited but a bit cold at Bishop Snow School, which took place at Cardinal Village in Aspendell, at an elevation of about 8,500 feet. He learned that layers of snow accumulate on top of each other with each snowfall and that the temperature of the layers changes depending on whether they are in the shade or exposed to the sun. What's more, he learned that the deeper layers are warmer than the upper layers. Which is why a human being can protect himself during a snowstorm by digging a shelter in it.

His classmate, 10-year-old Kasen Taylor, who like Karlos also lives in Bishop, learned that there are animals like the snowshoe hare whose fur turns white in winter so it can better camouflage in the snow and hide from its predators.

Ms. Kinzy is very grateful that Snow School allows her students to work as a team—for example, helping each other face the challenges of the cold—and use new equipment such as shovels and snowshoes.

Several mothers of students came to Snow School as volunteers. One of them, Jaime Albrecht, from Chalfant, wishes there were more opportunities like Snow School, which allows children to get out of the classroom and enjoy outdoor activities. Her daughter, Sophia, age 10½, said she likes to rollerblade and play roller hockey, and now that she has participated in Snow School, she is inspired to learn how to ice skate or play ice hockey.

There is actually a lot to learn from snow, which not only graces the Sierra Nevada landscape, giving it its name (as Sierra Nevada literally means "Snowy Mountain Range" in Spanish), but also becomes the largest source of drinking water in our state when it melts in the spring.

Snow School began in 2017, and after a COVID hiatus in 2020 and 2021, it returned as an annual offering last year. Friends of the Inyo and ESIA work with the public schools in Bishop and Mammoth to continue to provide this activity to fifth graders. This year, between 200 and 300 students are expected to participate in Snow School, which follows a curriculum set forth by the Winter Wildlands Alliance, a national organization dedicated to protecting the winter recreation experience. In Mammoth, Snow School 2023 will take place next week.

Until next time, let's all continue to be friends of our lands.

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