

Out of the Classroom and Into the Field

Text and photos by Doug Carroll



Broken Bow students show off a nice northern pike they caught through the ice on a field trip to Valentine Natinal Wildlife Refuge.

Schools teach their students a lot of things: Language arts, mathematics, science, social studies and other subjects too numerous to mention. Some of these are things they'll need in whatever career they eventually choose to pursue, but many are simple day to day living skills – how to balance a checkbook and live healthy lives, etc. Broken Bow Public Schools take this a little further than most – they give students a

hands-on opportunity to learn about the Nebraska outdoors, try a lifetime sport they might not already be familiar with, and create memories that will last far beyond their school years.

Learning and Remembering

Under the inky blueness of a cold, overcast, predawn January morning, a bright yellow school bus rolls down the highway, carrying a busload of nervous,

somewhat sleepy eighth-grade boys, a teacher or two, and several volunteers as they head northwest to Valentine National Wildlife Refuge and its mecca of great ice-fishing lakes.

Over the course of what promises to be a fun-filled day – fish or no fish, freezing cold or tolerable temperatures – the boys will learn about ice-fishing, the great outdoors, and themselves. All while having fun.

Held every year since 1995 (weather

permitting) the ice-fishing trip was started by Broken Bow Public Schools physical education teacher Kevin Foster as a way to get the kids out of class for a day and teach them a sport they might not otherwise have a chance to learn.

Despite Foster's death in a 2004 car accident, the annual field trip has continued to honor his memory and because "It's good for the kids," said Jerry Scott, a science teacher in Broken Bow.



Eighth-grade students celebrate the successful landing of a rainbow trout during an all-girls outing to Arnold Park

Scott, who helps with the trips and was a friend of Foster, said that despite the school's location in some of the best hunting and fishing areas in the state, many of students don't have much experience with outdoor sports:

"I would guess less than a fourth of the students have been fishing before. I fished and hunted with my dad since before I can remember, and with my own boys since they were old enough

to walk. The bonds that we have created are something that will never be broken. I haven't regretted for a second the time I've spent on the water or in the field with my boys or my students."

Usually a week or two before the scheduled day of the trip, Scott said, students get instruction at school on the basics of ice-fishing so they can get started as soon as they reach the ice. Because few if any of the kids have

their own equipment, most of what they use on the trip has been donated or loaned for the day by some of the many area outdoorsman who help with the event, such as Roger Carroll, a retired bus mechanic from Broken Bow, and Hank Linder and Don Cox, whom Scott described as "obsessive" ice fishermen.

"We couldn't do this without Hank, Don and the guys," said Scott. "They go above and beyond."

No matter what fishing success they have, said Scott, most participants come away with many new memories, whether it's of the one that got away, the one that didn't, or which team won the impromptu tug-of-war contest held on oh-so-slippery ice.

"It is really refreshing to see these students in a different light away from the classroom," said Scott. "Kids who think they are pretty tough in the hallways and classrooms aren't quite as tough on the ice. Then there are kids who are meek and mild in the classroom, but are animals on the ice."

Something for the Girls

Not to be left out, each spring (again, weather permitting) the eighth grade girls at Broken Bow also get the chance to learn about fishing – except they don't have to drill any ice holes and usually don't have to bundle up quite as much as the boys do as they chase trout at one of many bodies of water that the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission stocks with rainbow trout in the fall and spring.

Rachelle Haines, who teaches physical education in Broken Bow, said that while fishing is taught as part of the lifetime sports portion of the school's PE curriculum (eighth-grade PE in Broken Bow is taught separately by different teachers, thus the separate trips), students are allowed to opt out if they wish. Not many do, however.

"Each year many of the girls say that they do not want to go, but once we head home, they say they had a great time," said Haines.

While some of girls have fished before and have their own equipment, for many this trip is their first real



Hank Linder demonstrates his jigging technique through the ice at Valentine NWR.



Baiting a hook is one of several things students get to experience during their outdoor adventures.

fishing experience. Using equipment loaned by the Commission and others, Haines and volunteers such as Don Wolford of Broken Bow teach the girls how to set up their equipment, show them how to cast and then answer any questions they might have, including how to unhook fish.

"It's a great experience for the girls – they seem to love the trip, have fun enjoying nature and come back with lots of great fishing stories," said Haines. "As the teacher, I think it is a lot of fun to take kids out of the traditional classroom and let them experience one in the outdoors."

Start Them Early

As great as their eighth-grade field trips are, those events are far from the only outdoor experience that Broken

Bow students get to try out: Sixth-grade students get to spend an overnight trip at the State 4-H camp in Halsey, where they experience a variety of outdoor education opportunities, and Broken Bow seventh graders travel to Calamus Reservoir to get a tour of the dam and fish hatchery before stopping to tour Ft. Hartsuff State Historical Park on the way back to school. Broken Bow is also one of the more than 150 Nebraska schools that take part in the National Archery in the School program, which teaches target-style basic archery skills to students in fourth through twelfth grades.

Although there may be other schools in Nebraska who take their students out on similar ventures, neither Scott nor Haines are aware of them. Which is a shame, said Haines, who added that although the trips don't necessarily

make lifetime anglers out of the students, they are a great experience for the kids, especially if their families are not the "outdoors" type.

Scott agreed: "I feel that the ice-fishing and trout fishing is an attempt to get kids to appreciate nature," said Scott. "Most will probably never ice fish again, but they will go away with a better understanding of nature. The more they see the more they know.

"Many of the kids tell me it is the best field trip they make in school. Some years the weather just doesn't cooperate. I've had parents comment to me they were disappointed that their younger child didn't get the experience that an older brother had.

"I really appreciate the fact that our administration has been so supportive, and that our students have the opportunity to get outside the classroom." ■