

# Where the Farm Meets the Forest

by Ray Patacca, INTERPRETIVE AND EDUCATION MANAGER

**“WHERE THE COUNTRY MEETS THE CITY”** is the slogan on the Willoughby Hills welcome sign. This slogan conjures up a picturesque image of tranquility and charm. What if the slogan were “where the forest meets the farm,” what kind of image would you now have? Does the phrase conjure an image of pigs scurrying through the woods or wild grapevines invading the fields? Are you having a hard time imagining a farm and a forest together? Well, you are not alone.

Today, many people think of them as two separate landscapes but in reality they are inextricably intertwined. To help people understand the connection between our climate, natural areas and farmland, Lake Metroparks has created a new program called the Outdoor Connection at the Environmental Learning Center (OC at the ELC). During the first programs, the participating families worked out of the ELC facility and the associated Big Creek Park to undertake a scientific investigation of the environment and learn about the connection between the forest, farm and climate.

The program brings park professionals and park guests together to collect weather data, log evidence of animals, observe native plants and chronicle seasonal changes. Did you know that this study of how seasonal changes affect plants and animals in an ecosystem is a branch of science called phenology? All participants become part of the research team and every Lake Metroparks staff member has a role. The naturalists discuss natural history, the recreation staff leads the hike and Farmpark interpreters

make the connection between the natural world and the farm. Best of all, participants collect data for our nature report which will become part of Lake Metroparks’ Global Information System.

One Sunday each month, program participants and staff gather at the ELC where they are given a backpack filled with a compass, a GPS unit, data collection sheets and tree and bird identification books. Then, they set out into the woods around the center in search of three sites for us to explore. We visit Jordan Creek, a meadow, and a wooded area with grape vines. Data for the study is collected at each location.

At the first program in January we donned snowshoes to hike the trail and look at lake effect snow. And if you recall, it (snow) was all around us. Along the way each staff member discussed a different aspect of the area, including the geology, weather, flora, fauna and how all of this related to agriculture. We discovered that lake effect has had a great impact on the crops and economics of Lake County, encouraging the proliferation of wineries and nurseries in the county and region. Some of the other monthly topics are tracking, maple syrup, summer animals, a camp out, fall colors and more. You can join us for one or all of these free programs as space permits.

Oh, by the way, do you recall the wild grape vines we referred to earlier in this story? Well, they are, indeed, the origins of today’s modern grape cultivars. Now, do you have an image of “where the forest meets the farm?”

“Lake Effect” OC at the ELC



SIGN UP NOW for upcoming OC at the ELC programs:

- May 22: Migration & Planting
- June 26: Watershed Day
- July 24: High Summer Creatures
- Aug 28: Camp Out

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