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## Camp gets kids excited about outside

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Photos by Jordan Dawson/Bigfork Eagle -- Campers cheer each other with their water bottles before going on a hike to nearby Horseshoe Lake to explore and swim.

### By JORDAN DAWSON / Bigfork Eagle

Summer can be a boring time for kids, filled with television re-runs and baby-sitters. But one organization, Ravenwood Natural Science Center near Bigfork, provides an adventurous alternative.

Ravenwood offers a variety of nature camps for kids of all ages.

Last week Ravenwood held Cedar Camp, a three-day camp for kids ages six to nine in which participants explored the outdoors in a variety of ways. Campers learned about common wild edible plants, constructed a survival shelter, played games, learned fire skills and safety, sang songs, listened to stories, explored beaver lodges, tracked animals and spent time in quiet places by themselves in nature exploring and observing things on their own.

"The most important thing we do is let the landscape inspire and teach us as we go along," said Ravenwood co-founder Brett Holmquist in an e-mail last week.

"Nature holds no bias and spending time outside teaches us to be ourselves and interact with the world in a relaxed and straightforward manner. Kids love to be

outside and our job is to encourage safe, hands-on learning adventures that are fun and rewarding for all."

The group of nine kids had nothing but positive things to say about their time at camp, which they attended August 4-6.

"I like it because it's in nature and I like being outside," said Molly Adams-Hyde, an eight-year old from Missoula. "It teaches you about the world. Brett shows you and lets you explore. The songs are really fun and even though some of the stuff we're learning is kind of hard he makes it really fun."

Cedar Camp ends with a family campfire and potluck celebration on the evening of the last day of camp. It was then that one of the camper's mothers, Annedith Schneider, realized how much her son, Teoman Ozydin, enjoyed the camp.

"He said it was the most fun day he'd had," Schneider said. "When I asked him how it compared to Christmas he said it was just as good."

Schneider and her son split their time between Kalispell and Turkey. She said she wanted him to experience a day camp because they give children an opportunity to be away from their parents and do things independently, and she thought Ravenwood would be a good place for her son because the family spends a lot of time outdoors.

"There's practical things that he learned, like how to make a fire without matches. He thought that was really exciting," Schneider said. "He also had a good experience being away from his parents. I think that's important for a six year old; learning to be independent and build relationships with other kids in a nurturing environment."

Schneider said that type of environment is what she likes best about Ravenwood.

"They are so nurturing and good with the kids," she said. "I watched Brett's interaction with the kids and he's so warm and supportive."

Laura Meissenburg sent her niece, Claire, to Cedar Camp while she was up visiting from Missoula.

"I think these people have remarkable patience," Meissenburg said. "Brett is able to control the children and teach them something. It is remarkable to watch."

Holmquist said that is the goal of the camp. He hopes that the kids leave "happy, inspired, and worn out from a day of big adventures."

"Kids, particularly young children, experience life differently than adults," Holmquist said. "Attending the needs of the whole child allows them to feel safe, loved, and in flow with what is going on around them. Once we accomplish that, the learning flows as their natural curiosity is sparked and we begin facilitating what the Lakota tribe call "oyase," or a burning desire to know."

Holmquist uses this same thirst for knowledge in the other camps he puts on at Ravenwood. These include Wilderness Kids Club, which takes place one day a week in June and July for ages six to 12 and is similar to Cedar Camp; Fledgies, a one day camp for kids that meets weekly in June and is split into two age groups,

two-to-three years old and three-to-five years old, and provides pre-school age kids an introduction to nature; Teen Adventure Camp, a one day orientation and three-day and two-night camping trip that will be held August 21-24 for ages 13-15. Ravenwood also offers workshops for teachers and mentors during the summer, and they host a family campout September 12-14.

Ravenwood was incorporated as a non-profit educational organization in the fall of 2000 and has been running programs since the fall of 2003. Brett Holmquist and his wife Laura decided to create Ravenwood after spending the 90s working with youth in outdoor programs and as field technicians for various wildlife projects. It was then that they noticed how much an impact outdoor learning experiences had on the youth they encountered, as well as how little they seemed to really know about natural history.

"We decided to combine our passions and strengths to create a year round center and chose Northwestern Montana as our target area," Brett Holmquist said.

Since its organization, Ravenwood has become increasingly popular. They have added more programs and are continuing to see a growth in attendance. A total of 125 kids attended one of Ravenwood's programs this summer. Ravenwood also offers a variety of programs and services for kids, teachers and organizations throughout the year.

"Our aim is to assist teachers in reaching their curriculum objectives and give the kids a taste of learning -- Ravenwood style -- at the same time," Holmquist said. "Our mission at Ravenwood is to connect people with nature, community, and self."

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