

For Immediate Release:

E. W. Luther Elementary School fifth graders build wheelchair-accessible experiences at Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center

Going to camp is an important part of growing up—singing campfire songs, sharing a cabin and exploring the outdoors with classmates and friends can be a formative experience. But for young people who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices, the camp experience might not feel complete. Groups from three Milwaukee-area elementary schools are working to change that.

Fifth-grade classes from E. W. Luther Elementary, County Line Elementary, and Rawson Elementary are pitching in to build a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk, water ecology stations and fishing docks at UW-Extension's Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center in Wisconsin Dells so that friends, classmates and other camp attendees who rely on mobility devices can learn about the wonders of nature on the beautiful Wisconsin River alongside their peers. Last week the E. W. Luther Elementary School group completed another 24 feet of wheelchair accessible boardwalk to the camp's floating docks.

More than 400 students will contribute to the service project from start to finish, according to Upham Woods Interim Director Toby Grabs. "Each group brings about 50-100 fifth graders, and six groups from the three different schools have already contributed," Grabs says. "The E. W. Luther group was the final service project group of the year so we are glad they were able to build three whole sections of boardwalk totaling 24 feet."

The entire accessibility project will measure more than 300 feet when finished, and each group can complete one or two ten-foot sections per visit. Once the boardwalk is finished, more than 9,000 annual visitors to Upham Woods will have increased access to the Wisconsin River and important camp activities. According to Grabs, the school groups are providing about 99 percent of the supplies and 100 percent of the labor to complete the boardwalk.

The project got started after Rawson Elementary School received a grant to participate in an erosion control program. The grant brought the school to Upham Woods, where the students researched erosion problem areas and constructed a stairway leading to a challenge course in the woods. "The experience was so positive for everybody, including us at Upham, that E. W. Luther and County Line also wanted to take part."

E. W. Luther Elementary School principal, Eric Wightman, agrees: "The entire Upham Woods experience was meaningful to our 5th graders. Having a service project such as this helped our students understand the importance of giving back to others, and also supports our district's beliefs on character education."

The wheelchair-accessible boardwalk is just one of many projects to help make Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center friendlier to patrons of varying abilities. "We've retrofitted some of our low challenge course elements so they are accessible and when adding new elements try to use accessible, universal design from the beginning," Grabs says. "More importantly, our Capital Campaign has significant accessibility upgrades as a central theme. An elevator is planned for the Lodge upgrade, one of our cabins is slated to be made wheelchair accessible, the new

bathhouse will be wheelchair accessible and a wheelchair-accessible pathway to cabin hill is also part of the Capital Campaign.”

To learn more about the Upham Woods wheelchair accessibility projects or Capital Campaign, contact Toby Grabs, interim director, at Upham Woods, 608-254-6461. More information on the Upham Woods Outdoor Learning Center is available here: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/uphamwoods/>.