

Science takes flight



PHOTO BY SHAWN DALEY

Ann and John Sykes hope a blue bird trail at Penny Road Elementary School will help develop students' interest in science.

Penny Road bird trail helps spark students' interest in science

BY SHAWN DALEY
EDITOR

As an employee of the Environmental Protection Agency, John Sykes has seen a disturbing trend take place over the past few years.

Fewer American students are pursuing science degrees and more scientific tasks are being outsourced to different countries.

So when Sykes and his wife, Ann, were asked to take charge of the building and grounds committee at Penny Road Elementary School, Sykes added one provision. He wanted to make sure the students became involved in projects dealing with the environment.

The one Sykes project generating the most interest among students and teachers is a



PHOTO BY SHAWN DALEY

Ann Sykes adjusts a bird house near a classroom window at Penny Road Elementary School.

recently completed bluebird trail.

With the help of N.C.

Bluebird Society President Fred Benson and volunteer Bill

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Trail: Birds ignite interest in science

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Satterwhite, the Sykes have established an impressive avian environment. Besides bluebird houses, the trail also includes houses for song birds, woodpeckers and owls.

The Sykes hope students will learn about the importance of birds in the environment and, in the long run, develop a lasting interest in science.

Although Sykes' expertise is computers he is still worried that American schools are falling behind in promoting math and science.

"Last year, one of UNC's chancellors came and spoke to us (at the EPA)," said John. "There were only 200 graduates in computational science in the U.S. while there were 20,000 in China alone. We do a lot of computational research in toxicology, genomics and others and that work is going to be outsourced to other countries.

"That makes me somewhat concerned that maybe we aren't doing the best job with math and science and we need to get the kids involved outside and learning about the environment

and science. Getting them involved at an early age will help develop their interest."

Ann, a former EPA employee and avid bird watcher, said children need to learn about the environment because their generation could face serious problems decades from now.

"Global warming is going to be an issue for these kids," said Sykes. "They aren't going to have a choice and will have to get involved somehow."

Birds are a great way to develop children's interest in science because kids love watching wildlife.

"This school has a number of children bused here from Raleigh and other urban parts of the area," said Ann. "I seriously don't think those kids have seen birds in a setting with feeders and houses. I think it's important for them to recognize why the birds are important to the environment.

"Also, it's important for people living right here to take notice. Maybe it will help them realize that you don't have to cut down that tree or put pesticides on things."

Building a bird trail and getting students involved in the

environment also seemed to make sense at a school that shares land with a public park.

"This is such a unique environment where we have a school and park together," said Ann. "In a day and age when we are trying to build new schools and we are wondering where the land will come from this is a nice way to combine it all.

"Hopefully, the kids will learn that there are options and you don't always have to tear down things and wreck woodlands to build something."

Besides the bird trail, the Sykes have also set up rain barrels and have planted hundreds of flowers to add to the school's natural setting. Both projects involved participation from students who learned about water conservation, soil and planting.

"Whatever we do with the grounds we try to work it into the curriculum and help the teachers out," said John.

So far, the Sykes' efforts have received plenty of positive feedback from school administrators and parents.

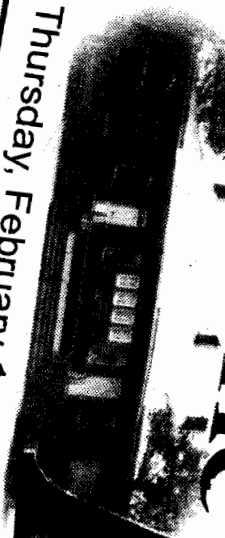
"I think the grounds really set the tone for a school," said John. "We've added a lot of flowers and birdhouses, especially in front near the carpool line. I think if the grounds are colorful, nice and clean it sets a tone the school is also clean and well kept."

"I hear from the principal (Mark Barber) all the time that kids love seeing the birds," said Ann. "They are always telling him what types of birds they see. I've heard from teachers, too, who have said the kids love watching the birds near the windows. Thankfully, we haven't had any reports of kids getting pooped on or dive-bombed."

Perhaps the only negative coming from Penny Road's environmentally friendly landscape can be felt at the nearby subdivision of Waterford Green. The Sykes have already received a few lighthearted comments from their former Apex neighbors.

"Some of the parents from Waterford Green, where we use to live, said now they know where all their bluebirds have gone," said John. "They are all living here at the school."

Thursday, February 1, 2007



The Apex Herald

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