

# Area students learn about native plants at Wild Daze

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JEFFERSON — As the group of Daingerfield High School students finished rubbing the sleep out of their eyes Friday morning, Gary Endsley stressed the importance of young people continuing the ongoing work of habitat restoration and nature preservation.

“You guys are the future, and that’s why we are putting all this time and energy into this,” said Endsley, the director of Collins Academy. “What you do counts, and it is our job to support and equip you.”

The students were at the Port Jefferson History & Nature Center, across the street from the Jefferson Transportation & Visitor Center, at 8:30 a.m. Friday on a field trip to “Wild Daze,” an annual event held by Collins Academy to teach area students and the community about local plants and animals, as well as to celebrate the public opening of the nature center, which is a public, outdoor park.

Wild Daze is intentionally butted up against National Public Lands Day, celebrated Saturday, Sept. 27 to encourage volunteer efforts on public lands.

“We involve the community in habitat restoration and improvement,” Endsley said. “We combine that effort with conservation and with info from expert speakers and guest presentations.”

On Friday, Sept. 26, volunteers from the community and several are garden and naturalist clubs met to weed out invasive species in the area like Chinese Tallow, Privet Hedge, Japanese Climbing Fern and Mimosa Trees, many of which were introduced by nurseries and are now crowding out native plant life.

They planted and transplanted plants like the blue mistflower, cardinal flower, copper canyon daisies and the endangered Neches River Rose-Mallow, a shrubby perennial that grows 3-7 feet tall.

Three percent of the world’s population of this strain of mallow grows in this park, Endsley told the students. Cross pollination between different mallow strains, and the stranglehold of Chinese Tallow,



The Fourth R: Restoration Area students learn about native plants at Wild Daze

Gary Endsley, director of Collins Academy, shows off a garden of native plants to high school students from Daingerfield High School during Jefferson's Wild Daze event.

have led to this particular one nearly dying out.

Collins Academy and partner scientists are working to restore the plant to its former glory by pulling the seed pods off the plants before they're pollinated by bees and planting the seeds in a laboratory to grow plants. Those are then planted in the park.

"It's a very slow process, but these are our babies," said Sarah Griffin, site coordinator for Collins Academy.

After the students were taught about the native plant life in the park, they gathered inside with three other schools for a presentation on the paddlefish experiment at Caddo Lake by Jim Neal and another on birds by Texas Parks and Wildlife Ornithologist Cliff Shackelford.

Then they headed back out to the park to watch Beverly Grage, a wildlife rehabilitator for the nonprofit Wild & Free Again, release two previously-injured Great Horned Owls into the wild.

William Goldman, 18, was especially fascinated. The Daingerfield senior plans to attend Northeast Texas Community College next year for welding, but only to have a job that can allow him to save to go back to school for a career in environmental science.

"When I was a kid, I never really watched kids' shows," Goldman said. "I watched a lot of National Geographic and the History Channel. I've always been interested in birds and larger mammals."

Goldman said the appeal of environmental studies came from being able to work with his hands and get up close and personal with animals.

"It's cool to see animals in their natural habitat and what they're supposed to be doing," Goldman said. "I also got mean eyed by that owl. He eyeballed me."

Programs like the Paddlefish Reintroduction Education Initiative, which is a part of Wild Daze, Endsley said, allows students in East Texas and Northwestern Louisiana schools to participate and help run the paddlefish reintroduction program in the next two academic school years. They're made possible by partnerships with groups like the Caddo Lake Institute, and in part by grants like the one from the Environmental Protection Agency for \$125,000.

"We're putting real science in the field with the teacher and student groups about topics important to this area," Endsley said. "It's making learning more meaningful."

"It's more impactful than getting it out of a textbook or a stand-up lecture."

Endsley said that the Port Jefferson History & Nature Center, as well events like Wild Daze that bring the students out to it, helps rural schools get around the issue of low funding for science equipment.

"We call (the park) a learning laboratory for the kids and community," Endsley said.

Wild Daze also included a bat watch, self-guided nature tours and presentations from various master gardeners and naturalists.