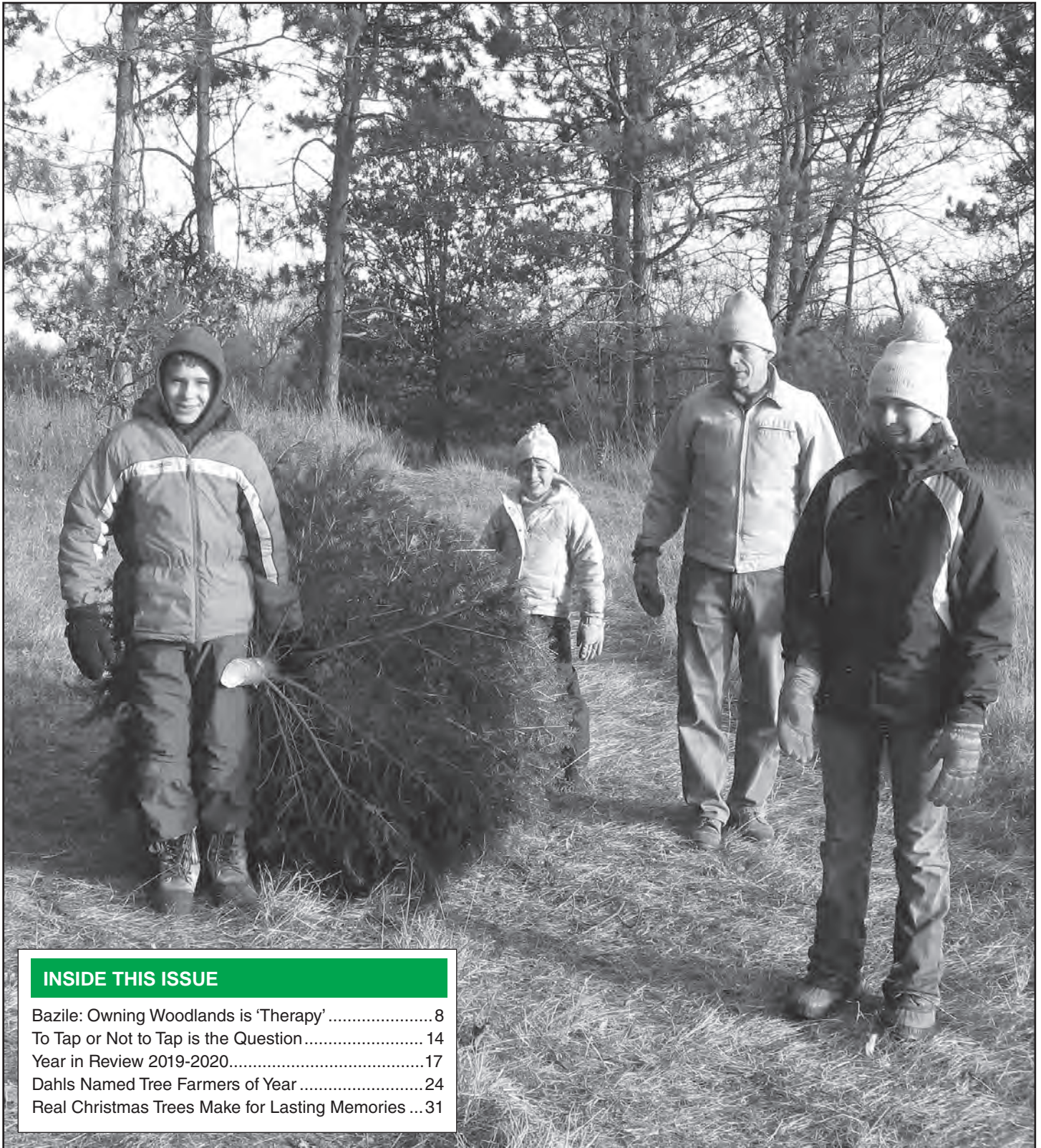


Wisconsin Woodlands



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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Bazile: Owning Woodlands is 'Therapy'	8
To Tap or Not to Tap is the Question	14
Year in Review 2019-2020	17
Dahls Named Tree Farmers of Year	24
Real Christmas Trees Make for Lasting Memories ...	31

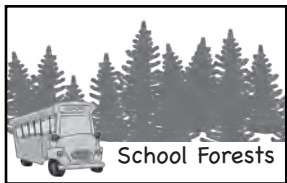
Creating Tomorrow's Woodlands Today

Southern Door School Forest

Forests, fields & prairie provide students, community members a special place

By Steve Schmidt

If your vacation destination has ever been Door County, you have likely passed Southern Door Schools on the way to fabled tourist destinations like Bailey's Harbor, Sister Bay or Washington Island. Since WWOA members have an eye for forests, you might have noticed the lush forest backdrop on the impressive school and sports facilities. Those forests, fields and prairie provide students and community members 80-acres of diverse outdoor space to hike the established trails, hold classes,



and get in touch with nature.

Amid the tall mix of hard-

woods, it seems obvious that this is a special place. Species such as maple, beech, basswood and some hemlock are present and comprise the typical climax forest for Door County. This is the dominant mix at the school forest. But these forests are not as common as they once were due to overbrowsing by deer, increasing invasive species populations and land being cleared for other uses.

Providing contrast are a few pockets of aspen and some plantations of white pine and spruce, as well as white cedar on the western side of the property. The strips of evergreens can be easily seen from online maps set to satellite view. A few species of invasive shrubs, such as autumn olive, multi-flora rose and Amur honeysuckle have been identified and some control work has been done.

A small pond is located at the intersection of several different stands of trees, just to the north of the evergreen stands. It provides wildlife habitat and a place for students to catch and study aquatic critters. The diversity of the habitat between the stands of trees, pond and prairie make the school forest an exceptional learning environment for students of Southern Door Schools.

A newly installed prairie provides



Aerial photo by Brett Kosmider. Follow him on Instagram @brettkosmider

Top: Aerial view of Southern Door Schools with backdrop of the school forest. Left: Students look for signs of life in a small pond. Right: High school students help elementary students tap maple trees during the syrup season.

another habitat on the edge of the forest. The school forest committee, consisting of teachers, community members and resource professionals, grew the idea and wanted students to be involved in as much of the process as possible. In fall 2016, fifth grade students plotted out the land and younger students scattered native prairie seed. After several seasons and one controlled burn to reduce competition from invasive plants, the prairie was in full bloom with pollinators buzzing and flitting in summer 2020, according to community member and LEAF school forest award winner, Mike Toney. Other student projects to

improve the habitat can be seen around the prairie in bluebird houses built by Girl Scouts, bat houses on trees in the forest, and wood duck houses around the pond built as a Boy Scout Eagle Scout project.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the forest is its cave. Although the cave entrance is locked and off-limits to the public, some people used to climb down into it with a ladder to explore the precarious dolomite carved by water on its way down to the water table. The cave has been studied by bat ecologists, and although no bats were found in the cave, five species of bat were

Forest Facts

- Certified in 1960
- Total acres: 80
- School district enrollment: 1,021 (2019-20)
- Student visits: 5,510 (2019-20 estimate)
- Southern Door School District forest website, http://www.southerndoor.k12.wi.us/district/services/buildings_and_grounds/school_forest
- Contacts: Jessica Marchant, teacher, jmarchant@southerndoor.k12.wi.us, and Mike Toneys, community volunteer, mctoneys@charter.net

Southern Door School Forest



detected with an acoustic survey of the forest paths in 2014. Bat species found were little brown, northern long-eared, eastern red, big brown and silver-haired. This was prior to the detection of white-nosed syndrome, or WNS, in Wisconsin, so a follow-up would be interesting. WNS is often fatal to bats and has caused several populations to decline to the brink of extermination as it made its way to Wisconsin from the northeast.

Students benefit from the school forest in seasonal activities such as maple syrup processing in the sugar shack and snowshoeing the marked trails. Students in all grades visit the school forest at least once per year, and most do so several times. Here are just a few examples of the many activities shared by Toneys, fifth-grade teacher Jessica Marchant and Supt. Patricia Vickman: ropes course to practice leadership and teamwork; ecological studies, for example flying squirrels with science teacher Tony Kiszonas, who also was instrumental in starting the prairie project; orienteering



Above: The School Forest museum is housed in a 100+ year cabin, which includes hands-on touch displays. Cory Vandertie donated funds from his state Teacher of the Year award to have the cabin moved there. Right: Students walk on a path in the Southern Door School Forest.



with a compass; soil and water quality analyses; winter wildlife track identification; and veterans walk with eighth graders every fall to share stories, artifacts and enjoy the outdoors together.

The community has been very active in supporting and benefitting from all the forest has to offer. A maple syrup program was restarted by Angie and Mel Jonas who donated and built the stainless steel apparatus to boil down the sap. They trained Mike and Carol Toneys who volunteered their time leading students in sugar shack programs for many years before recently passing it on to Terry Vogel, former Door County sheriff. A community improvement grant was received a few years ago to install the trail system and a disk golf course. This required open access to the public and it has been instrumental to the community buy-in. An annual fun run organized by Parents Involved in Education is another example. Clearly,

the village has come together to raise the children in this outstanding outdoor classroom.

Southern Door School Forest Committee welcomes help from willing volunteers. Contact Marchant at jmarchant@southerndoor.k12.wi.us or Toneys at mctoneys@charter.net to find out about volunteering opportunities.

The school is easy to see on the north side of Highway 57 at 2073 County Road DK, Brussels. Ample parking is available. Visitors will find several trails that wind through the mixed acreage and are best accessed on the west side of the school behind the elementary part of the building or next to the sugar shack just west of the stadium.

Stephen Schmidt, a state-certified science educator, is an educational outreach specialist for LEAF, Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program.