

Wisconsin Woodlands



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Creating Tomorrow's Woodlands Today

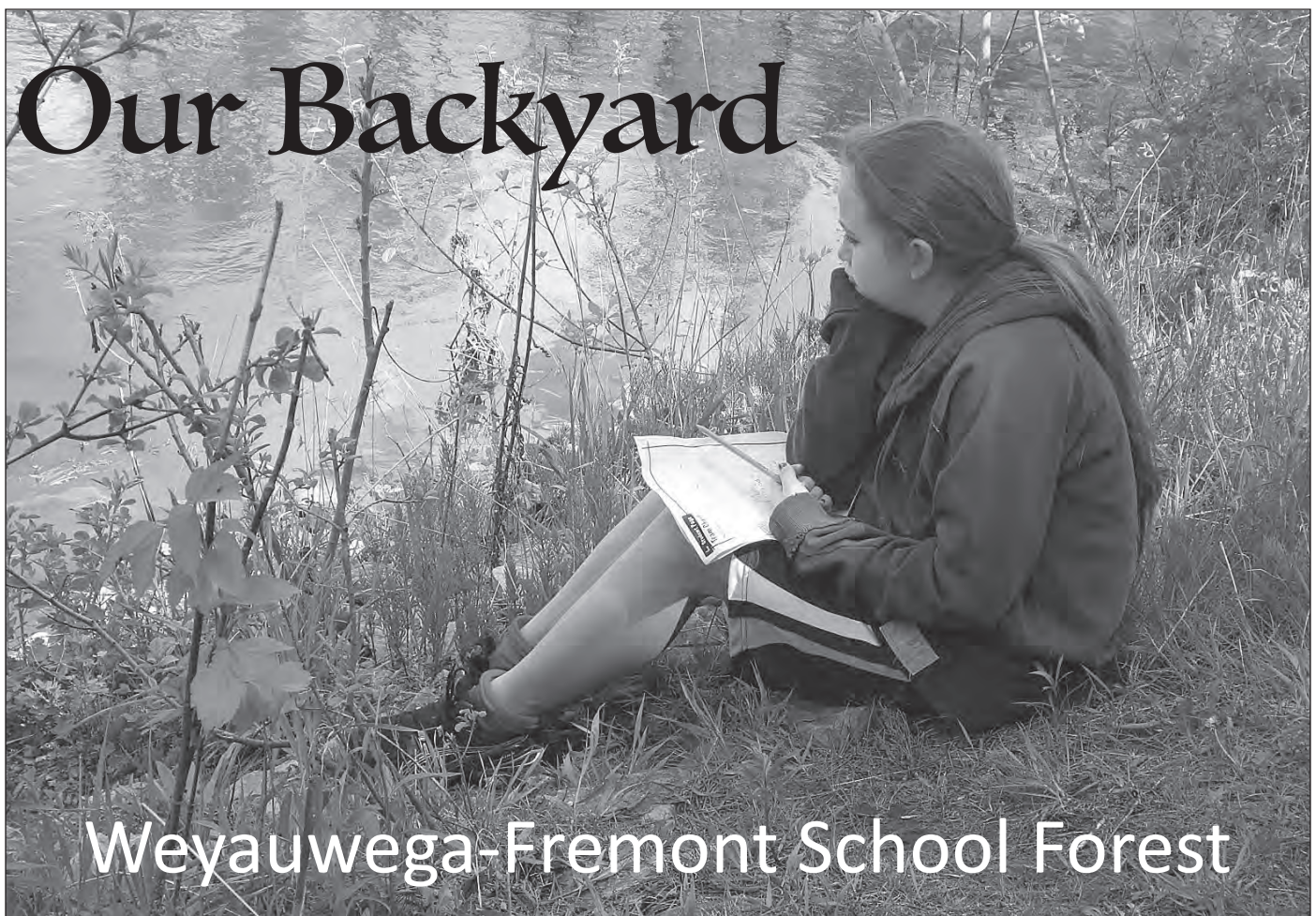


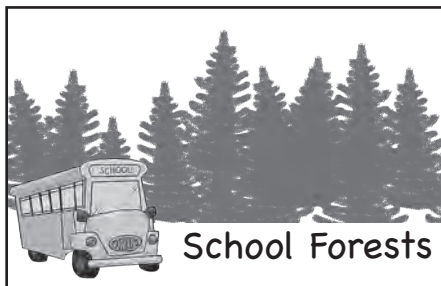
Photo courtesy LEAF

By Stephen Schmidt

Location, location, location! Real estate value depends on it. School forests have aesthetic and intrinsic ecological value, as well as educational value. However, school forests that are close to schools, like Weyauwega-Fremont's Our Backyard, often see more use and thus, have higher educational potential.

Our Backyard lies south of the Waupaca River downstream from Weyauwega Lake and has almost 2,600 feet of river frontage with most of the river accessible from the nearby trail. As the name implies, the forest is on school grounds and is north of the buildings and athletic complex.

Weyauwega-Fremont (W-F) students are active learners in the forest two or more times per year in their physical education, agriculture and science classes. Agricultural teacher Sandy Dykes and physical education teacher Rich Tomaszewski organized spring fishing days on the river in collaboration with Walleyes for Kids, a nonprofit



dedicated to getting children outside to fish. High school students in agriculture classes help fourth and fifth grade students learn to fish. As many as 70% of the younger students do not know how to fish. Students and community members can try their hand at disk golf

A student observes the Waupaca River at Our Backyard, the Weyauwega-Fremont School Forest.

on the course or snowshoe the various trails. Staff members have been known to gather after meetings to snowshoe. Middle school and high school students study water quality annually in science teacher Lynn Ponto's classes. Our Backyard clearly plays an important role in development of the whole student.

On the northern edge of the southeast glacial plains of Wisconsin, the school forest has a variety of habitats such as open fields and prairie, stands of spruce, majestic white pines, mixed hardwoods and river floodplain. Fertile silty soils are providing good growth for the mature white pines that provide excellent bald eagle roosting sites along the river. Prior to becoming a school grounds, some of the property was farmed and the woodlands were not under a management plan. Several invasive species

Our Backyard Fast Facts

- Certified in 1969
- Total acres: 40
- School District enrollment: 871 (2017-18)
- Student visits: About 2,130 (2018-19)
- Contacts:
Sandy Dykes, agricultural science teacher, sdykes@wfsd.k12.wi.us
Lynn Ponto, science teacher, lponto@wfsd.k12.wi.us



Waupaca County School Forests



Photos by Sandy Dykes

have colonized the various stands and control and removal is addressed in the 2010 forest stewardship plan.

Ponto and English teacher Kyle Scherwinski received an Environmental Youth Connections grant in 2017 to put the stewardship in the hands of students as they designed experimental plots and tested various methods to control buckthorn. Invasive control and removal have provided educational opportunities to students and community members who can then go identify and manage invasive species in their communities. This project truly embodies the spirit of the school forest program by educating youth while managing the forest.

In 2011, the district registered four other properties as school forests: W-F Natural Area (3 acres), Weyauwega

High school agriculture students teach elementary students how to sample and identify aquatic critters from the Waupaca River.

Community Park (12 acres), Gill's Landing (11 acres), and W-F County Forest (199 acres). Although these properties are not commonly used by the schools, registration in the school forest program provides benefits as it ensures access to professional forest management, support from the state school forest program at LEAF, Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education program, and access to free seedlings from state nurseries.

More information about these school forests may be found at http://www.wegafremont.k12.wi.us/district_info/our_backyard/forest_information.

Directions: From Hwy. 10, exit County X or W. Main Street north

into town. Follow X (which changes to Mill Street) to Ann Street and turn right. Weyauwega-Fremont schools are on Ann Street. As a courtesy during school hours, stop in the high school office to check in. Outside of school hours, park on the north side of the middle school.



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