

Outdoor education Tahoe-style for 5th-graders



Neyeli Jimenez, left, and other students pet avalanche dog Peak. Photo/Terra Breeden

By Terra Breeden

Playing in the snow isn't all fun and games. It can be deadly without the correct preparation or tools.

At the avalanche awareness and snow safety station hosted by David Reichel from the Sierra Avalanche Center, students learned how to rescue an avalanche victim by using a beacon and probe. They also learned how to check avalanche conditions by looking at the layers of snow in the snow pack. Avalanche

conditions on this day were moderate.

On this particular day students from Bijou Community School were being taught a wealth of information about the outdoors.

“We realized that not every kid gets a chance to get outdoors, so this gives them that experience,” Adam Jensen, environmental education specialist at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The goal is to get every student outdoors to learn about their natural environment.”



Alaina Corona and her classmates trek on snowshoes from station-to-station. Photo/Terra Breeden

Fifth-graders from Bijou joined the third annual Winter Adventure EpicPromise Program at Heavenly Mountain Resort last week. Designed to educate local kids about Lake Tahoe winters, more 300 children from across the Lake Tahoe Unified School District have joined ski patrollers and teachers for the program this year.

The program brings a different group of fifth-graders from the district to the mountain. During the event, the children snowshoe to education stations at the top of the tram at Heavenly where they learn about Lake Tahoe's winter wildlife, avalanche awareness, snowpack conditions, environmental protection, and snowmaking technology.

At the avalanche awareness station, Heavenly rescue dogs Peak, a golden retriever, and Vader, a black Lab mix, were introduced to the students. Ski patrollers explained how the dogs are trained to locate people who have been buried in a snow slide.



Heavenly snowmaking gurus explain how they help Mother Nature. Photo/Terra Breeden

"My favorite part of this learning station were the dogs," 10-year-old Neyeli Jimenez said as she petted Peak who wagged his tail.

Students were divided into three groups and snowshoed to three different learning stations set up by Heavenly staff.

"Snowshoeing is tiring, but fun," 11-year-old Alaina Corona told *LTN*.

Each learning station had its own educational goal. At the winter wildlife station volunteers from the Tahoe Institute for Natural Science (TINS) taught students about the animals that live in the basin during the winter season. There are three types of winter wildlife in Lake Tahoe the volunteers explained; animals that hibernate, those that migrate away from the cold, and animals that tolerate the snowy season.

"I enjoy having an outdoor experience with the kids and teaching them about the wildlife that's in the area where they live," TINS intern Gary McGaughey told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It helps the students relate what they're learning in school to the Tahoe region."

Students took part in a scavenger hunt where they discovered evidence of winter-tolerant wildlife. At this station, the children learned how to spot animal tracks, identify droppings left by wildlife, and find pine cone seeds discarded by hungry animals.

"We like to show them how animals adapt to survive the winter," TINS education manager Michelle Witte said.

At the final station, students were taught about the snowmaking science and environmental restoration Heavenly employs on its slopes. Ski runs can be erosion hot spots, flowing with muddy water in the spring. Heavenly rehabilitates the soil by sowing a native seed mixture of wildflowers and grasses to prevent erosion.

"This is what Heavenly does to protect our environment and Lake Tahoe," Heavenly sustainability manager Frank Papandrea told the students.

Heavenly has 100 miles of pipeline pumping water to its snow-guns in the winter. The children were shown how snowmaking

technology works and learned about the weather conditions needed to produce snow.

“Heavenly didn’t get much snow over the winter so we had to make it,” snowmaking supervisor Billy Clark said. “We are snowmakers, scientists and weathermen. Without us, you would have been skiing down dirt this year.”

After visiting the learning stations, students gathered in the snow for a picnic lunch.

All in all, the Winter Adventure Program was a big hit with the Bijou students. The children had the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors on a day that was sunny and clear, snowshoe to the top of a mountain with views of the lake and received a winter education whilst doing it.



Bijou fifth-graders spend a day at Heavenly learning about the outdoors.
Photo/Terra Breeden

“I like being at Heavenly today because I get to be with my friends and be outside,” Alaina said. “I learned how to snowshoe, how to make snow, and about avalanches and animals. It’s fun.”

The Tahoe Institute for Natural Science, Sierra Avalanche Center, and the U.S. Forest Service partnered with TRPA to provide the educational activities during the Winter Adventure Program. Funding for the program was secured by TRPA through the Vail Resorts EpicPromise Foundation.

“A lot of kids in Lake Tahoe don’t get to experience snowshoeing or other outdoor activities. We saw that need and decided to do something about it,” Jensen said.

The EpicPromise Foundation is designed to enhance education and sustainability in Vail Resort communities. For the Winter Adventure Program this year, Heavenly comped 400 tram tickets for students and donated \$675 to provide bus transportation from the schools to the resort.

“EpicPromise provides funding to a large number of nonprofits on the South Shore,” Papandrea told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Our goal is to provide support in our resort communities and give back.”