

Students from the Shepherd Hill Regional High School in Dudley, Massachusetts, participated in an environmental education program at Hodges Village Dam, Feb. 24.

Justin Sauvageau, the Environmental Science Professor at the school, reached out to the Park Rangers at Hodges Village Dam in November 2016 looking for some environmental-related projects that he could get his students involved in, according to Nicole Giles, Park Ranger at Buffumville Lake and Hodges Village Dam.

The high school seniors, all environmental science students, helped Park Rangers install five Wood Duck boxes at the dam, during the event. "The students learned about Wood Ducks and their habitat, they identified various animal tracks in the snow and they saw a beaver lodge," said Giles. "We also cleaned out three previously installed boxes at the North End. All we found were squirrel nests – lots of leaves and twigs. Maybe we'll have better luck next year."

According to Giles, Wood Ducks live in dead tree crevices, 4-12 feet high in quiet swamps and wetlands. "Chicks do not stay in the nest for very long before they jump into the water and follow the adults," she said. "Last spring I saw Hooded Mergansers on the same pond we installed the boxes. These birds will also use the nesting boxes."

This is the first time students have come to the project specifically to help out with the Wood Duck boxes, according to Giles, and their help was much appreciated. "I am in the process of updating our bird nesting program," she said. "We have a lot of old boxes that need repairs and replacement. The Wood Duck boxes are large and difficult to install, so the more hands the better."

Many of the eight boxes by Stumpy Pond have been destroyed by high water and beavers, according to Giles. She is hoping that the new relationship with Shepherd Hill High School will bring interested students to the dam to help out with the boxes. "I have devised a new installation design and with the help of volunteers and scouts this summer and fall, I hope to get these boxes back in good shape," she said.

The students have other environmental interests and endeavors that could benefit Buffumville Lake. "Mr. Sauvageau has a group of students who participate in the Envirothon, a high school competition where student groups research environmental topics like water quality, invasive species, soil, and present their findings to a judgement panel," said Giles. "The students are planning to do an invasive plant survey this spring on project lands at Buffumville Lake."

Giles said they will present their findings and inform the Park Rangers which areas are in the most need of immediate invasive eradication efforts. "Project staff have a good idea which areas need attention but a good intensive survey is necessary for ongoing monitoring efforts."

The Park Ranger believes students enjoyed the day-long event. "They not only got an education about Wood Ducks but also about ticks," she said. "We identified several animal prints in the snow, saw pine borer beetle holes in dead Scotch pine trees and learned how to identify poison ivy in winter. It was a great experience for the students and a great opportunity for us to get the boxes installed quickly before nesting season," she said.