An educational partnership provides opportunity for suburban 7th graders to rear—and release—trout.

Raising Trout in the Classroom

Story By Marvin Strauch
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Through the Trout in the Classroom project, 7th grade students at St. Patricia School reared and released brown trout.

The day was beautiful: blue skies, temperature in the 70s and for once—no rain. Thirty-six seventh graders in Renee Bartley-Bogard's class from St. Patricia School in Hickory Hills stepped off the bus at a county park in northern Illinois, wondering just what would happen next. Meeting the bus were Oak Brook Trout Unlimited members and staff from the Department of Natural Resources and Sierra Club.

But let's step back 6 months.

St. Patricia School was the first to sign on to the Illinois Trout in the Classroom program. On this much-anticipated day, they would be the first to receive their eggs, if only by a couple of hours.

Preparing an aquarium for the delivery—testing the tank, filter system, air pump and chiller unit to ensure there were no leaks and that the tank held a steady, cold temperature—took hours of commitment by TU members over a four-month period. Once the equipment was set up at St. Pat's, a TU member made frequent checks to make sure everything was fine.

DNR hatchery staff delivered 150 brown trout eggs and food. The eggs were placed in a small basket in the tank. Within a few days, the eggs hatched into alevins, developed tails and had visible eyes. Within a couple of weeks, the alevins were ready to leave the basket, which the students dropped to the bottom of the tank and watched as the trout swam out, taking shelter in and around the gravel.

The students monitored the tank every day, keeping a log of pH, ammonia and nitrite levels. As the alevins absorbed their egg sacs, feeding the fish was added to the student's daily regiment. Dead eggs and alevins were removed as they were found.

Adults also learned valuable lessons over the six-month project, some developing after 15–20 of the troutlings died in early March: A variety of grades of trout food are necessary, and the food must be properly stored in a refrigerator. With new food and proper storage, the trout thrived.

Throughout development and the first year of the program, valuable assistance was provided by Illinois DNR hatchery manager Steve Krueger. Dan Sallee, DNR Division of Fisheries, visited the class to answer questions about everything from trout to other wildlife in a cold-water environment. Sallee and

Cindy Skrukrud, with the Sierra Club Water Sentinels program, spoke with students about water quality testing on release day.

Rick O'Neil, also DNR Fisheries, were very involved in the field day.

Over the course of the six-month program, two student leaders emerged in the class—Chris DeLorme and Nick Relstab. They took a greater interest as the trout grew, and really were involved during the field trip day.

Back to the May 8th field trip.

A program of activities was set up for the trout-release field trip, including placement of a net across the South Branch of Kinnikinnick Creek. DNR staff enlisted student volunteers to kick around in the water, where they caught sculpins, dace and crayfish.

Among the contributions to the program were T-shirts and backpacks provided by the Sierra Club Water Sentinels.

There are five Trout Unlimited chapters in Illinois: Elliott Donnelley, Gary Borger, Lee Wulff, Oak Brook, and Stephen A. Forbes, representing 2,500 local members. These chapters organize and participate in a wide range of cold-water conservation projects, including bank stabilization, erosion and run-off control, and improvement to spawning habitat. They also conduct youth education and fly-fishing classes, as well as Trout In The Classroom.

General information on TU and its chapters, as well as background information on Trout in the Classroom can be found at www.tu.org.

Contact Marvin Strauch at membership@obtu.org for contact information for your local Illinois TU chapter.

After lunch, Cindy Skrukrud, of the Sierra Club Water Sentinels program, discussed water quality testing, displayed the equipment her group uses on streams around Illinois and compared the tests she conducts with the students' daily tests.

Finally, the moment of truth had arrived. All minds focused on one question: How would the troutlings respond to their new waters?

As the students lined up behind the aquarium, trout were netted, counted (there were 61) and placed into individual cups. The students then carried their cups to the stream, where TU and DNR folks aided in releasing the trout. By all accounts, the trout looked immediately at home and soon dispersed along the creek.

The final activity of the day was an invertebrate survey. Students were divided into groups, provided identification charts, collection trays and tweezers, and turned loose in the stream to turn over rocks and discover the organisms living there. Although some of the students were a bit squeamish, most were interested in the many different life forms they found—scuds, caddis cases and free caddis, mayfly nymphs, frog eggs and snails. And of course, everyone waded into the water.

How do you judge the success of such a program?

The 7th graders of St Patricia monitored the growth of their trout and quality of their temporary aquatic habitat. They learned about the natural world of the trout. Their field trip not only linked their class work to a variety of natural resource professions, it allowed 36 youngsters from the suburbs to travel to the ultimate environmental classroom to stand in the cold water of a trout stream and discover life.

So all students could participate in the release (right), the young trout were netted and put into individual cups.

Marvin Strauch is a member of the Oak Brook Trout Unlimited chapter.

Opportunities for trout management in Illinois streams are very limited. Many streams that might be suitable for trout have resident populations of rare, native fishes that could be harmed by non-native brown trout. Kinnickinnick Creek was a good location for a trout release because rare, native species were not an issue, the trout were certified disease-free for VHS, and because Kinnickinnick Creek already has a reproducing population of brown trout. Private citizens should never undertake a fish release into an Illinois stream without the approval of Department of Natural Resources streams biologists due to disease transmission and ecological issues associated with this activity.