



Programs & Places Spotlight

Sunny Wolf Charter School



As a light rain pelts the tidepools at Cape Arago on the southern Oregon coast, teacher Shawn Hardy's voice rings out. "Come here, everyone, you have to see this! This is something I've NEVER seen before." That is saying something because for the better part of ten years, Shawn has been bringing students tidepooling here as part of Sunny Wolf Charter School's Outdoor School program. "Stay low and slow" is advice students take as they traverse the tidepools to upturn rocks, investigate sea stars, and gingerly hold an urchin.

This morning's excursion is day three of a four day program that began with students loading a 7:00 a.m. bus at the school, located in Wolf Creek in Josephine County. Students and chaperones overnight in yurts at Sunset Bay State Park while spending days on location with park rangers, marine biologists, and Coast Guard officers.

"It's really important that students get exposed to career opportunities in southern Oregon. We want them to see themselves in jobs in the outdoors—that you can do these things as your job!" says Shawn. Oregon State Parks interpretive ranger Rider Frey is leading the tidepooling adventure, showing an enthusiasm for discovery that matches the students' excitement. Other excursions include a bog hike, beach erosion study, trips to the Charleston Marine Life Center and Coast Guard Station Charleston, and, in non-Covid years, a trip to the Coquille Indian Tribe Plank House.

A highlight for students is a canoe trip on the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve. "They see everything they've been studying," says Shawn, emphasizing how Outdoor School at Sunny Wolf is deeply connected to classroom work. Landon, a 6th-grader, reinforced that point a moment later, as he discovered a blood star: "Hey! I did a presentation on these!!" "Every kid is an expert on something before we come," says Shawn.

Outdoor School at Sunny Wolf began with funding from a plant sale. Kids raised garden plants and sold them in the community. Funding got more robust when Shawn secured a grant from Gray Family Foundation. Once Measure 99 passed, financial support for Outdoor School became secure, but Sunny Wolf's Outdoor School remains a very "do-it-yourself" endeavor. A parent of a former student "caters" meals out of a food trailer, and Shawn relies on community partnerships to enhance the experience for students.



Back at Cape Arago, the learning gets sensory. Students find several foot-long gumboot chitons. "Look at the underside—it's eating a snail! Everyone has to touch this—no exceptions!" exclaims Shawn with a wink. "We call this a wandering meat-loaf," adds Ranger Rider, and that's an apt description. Just then a student makes a fantastic find—a living sea urchin, a gorgeous purple. Holding it feels other-worldly, its delicate spines slowly rippling in my hand.

As students make their way back to the bus, Shawn shares excitement for future plans, which include piloting a partnership with the Department of Environmental Quality and the U.S. Forest Service to monitor air quality and lichen health. Next year he hopes to involve former Sunny Wolf students, now high schoolers, as youth leaders. For now, a shower and change of clothes back at Sunset Bay awaits students before they head to their next adventure.