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Mars Area 'Trout Release Day' goes swimmingly

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Students from Mars Area Middle School participate in this year's Trout Release Day on Monday, May 15, at Glade Run Lake in Middlesex Township. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle

MIDDLESEX TWP — As temperatures reached over 70 degrees Monday, a group of determined Mars Area Middle School students set to work releasing 173 rainbow trout into Glade Run Lake.

“It was like 70 degrees, and they were going into shock once they got put into the water,” eighth-grader Isabella Lippke said.

While the first few trout struggled to adjust to the warm water near the boat launch, organizers and science teachers Amanda Stavish, grade eight, and Misty Thurber and Jessica Winter, grade seven, asked students to test the lake's chemical properties.

Since January, the classes have been raising the trout in two tanks as part of the Trout in the Classroom program, and according to Thurber, these measurements were part of the grade seven students' daily study with the fish.

“In seventh grade we do chemical parameters,” Thurber said. “We test for nitrates, nitrites, ammonia and pH — they also have to test water temperature.”

While the tests came back normal for the lake, the water temperature near the dock measured 72 degrees.

“We might have to walk over there, near the pier, and release them over there because this water, since it's so shallow, it's like a bathtub,” Stavish told the students. “It's going to get heated up so quickly, and obviously there's a lot less oxygen in it.”

More oxygen would be available to the fish in cooler water, Stavish explained, and with the classroom's aquariums being set at 56 degrees, the 72-degree shallows made it nearly impossible for them to breathe.

“So we wanted to go underneath the pier here because its been shady a lot of the day and the water's deeper, so that way the water wasn't going to warm up as quickly,” Stavish said. “And we wanted to be away from a lot of the algae, just so they'd have that space to be able to access that oxygen.”

As the students gingerly dumped the first fish into the water, it darted off into the depths.

Students and teachers alike gave a little cheer before freeing more and more of the tiny trout into the lake.

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“We’ve always had a good success rate,” Stavish said.



Seventh-grade science teacher Amanda Stavish prepares Mars Area Middle School students to release 173 rainbow trout into Glade Run Lake in Middlesex Township on Monday, May 15. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle

An ‘interactive experience’

Stavish said every year has been a little different in the seven years that she has participated in the program.

One thing, Winter said, has always remained the same though.

“They seem to love the program every year,” Winter said. “They work really well in their groups, they take turns at all the stations and the water testing. They really get into it and look forward to it.”

Seventh-grader Jenna Sheller said watching and learning about the life-cycle of the trout was “really interesting.”

“I also really loved how interactive it was,” Jenna said. “Learning has always been kind of hard, but whenever it comes it this — it just makes it a lot easier.”

Jenna said she even had a favorite fish, which she named pequeño.

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“He was the smallest, like, he was visibly way smaller than the rest,” Jenna explained. “And ‘pequeño’ is ‘tiny’ in Spanish.”

Pequeño, Jenna reassured readers, survived and was released into the lake.

Isabella said while she did not have a favorite fish, her favorite part of the program was studying the trout’s behavior and personalities.

While the seventh-grade classes focused on chemical properties in the tanks, Stavish said the eighth-grade classes looked at the genetic traits and “life science” of the trout.

“We look at trout anatomy, we study habitat as well — looking at what they need to have in an ecosystem versus what they need to have in the classroom,” Stavish said. “We look at what the trout are going to eat inside of the new home that they’re going to have — all of the macro-invertebrates instead of the fish food that they’ll have inside of the tank.”

Thurber said the program is in partnership with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and Trout in the Classroom.

And while the commission supplies the eggs, food, and resources for the program, the equipment is provided by the teachers.

Stavish and Winter said their equipment was donated to the teachers, but Thurber said she recently received a grant for new equipment through PennEnergy Resources and the Butler County Conservation District.

“I mean, after 10 years a lot of the equipment that I had was very, very old,” Thurber said. “So PennEnergy helped supply new materials.”

The hope of the program, according to Stavish, is that students walk away with an appreciation for the county’s cold-water ecosystems.

“We talk about the cold-water ecosystems and trying to promote healthy watersheds, promote healthy waterways, and the fish are just a small aspect of that,” Stavish said. “Even though you’re raising the fish in the classroom, we talk about why it’s important to maintain these waterways.”

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Seventh-grader Jenna Sheller, left, prepares to check the chemical properties of the lake while seventh-grade science teacher Jessica Winter, middle, and eighth-grade science teacher Amanda Stavish observe. Austin Uram/Butler Eagle



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