

Mountain Pine EAST Lab seeks to identify important bird island

By **JEFF MEEK** Outdoor writer



Approximately 8,000 purple martins appeared on the island in Lake Ouachita.

EAST lab students from Mountain Pine, Jessieville and Little Rock Central high schools met last week with Audubon Arkansas officials Dr. Dan Scheiman and Mary Smith to determine the possibility of nominating Lake Ouachita's Bird Island as an Important Bird Area or IBA.

Also joining the group were Lake Ouachita Citizen Focus Committee members Al Behm, Sue Hale and Al Gathright. The committee concerns itself with environmental issues surrounding Lake Ouachita.

IBAs are sites that provide essential habitat for bird species of conservation interest.

They provide opportunities for hands-on education and conservation.

Arkansas IBAs include 15 wildlife management areas, eight national wildlife refuges, six natural areas and four state parks.

Smith, director of education of Audubon Arkansas, told the students "your project is a national model, not just a state. A lot of people are interested in this."

Smith strongly believes that birds are a window to our future. "What happens to birds, happens to people," she said. Securing a quality environment for birds does the same for people.

Bird conservation director Dr. Scheiman attended the event to see what it's all about.

"I'm here on a reconnaissance mission," he said. Scheiman is heavily involved in the oversight of Arkansas IBAs.

To prove Bird Island is a possible IBA, officials must collect bird population data: number of birds, when they congregate and several other factors are involved.

After going over preliminary information and the handing out of binoculars and bird field guides, the students were given instruction on how to use the binoculars.

The group then made their way to Brady Mountain and, on a barge, made their way to the submerged island.

Facilitator Michael Vincent said, "The real learning happens right here on the water. We can talk about wildlife migration all day, but numbers found in textbooks and other media are just numbers and don't accurately describe what you will experience when these birds come to roost."

Sure enough, about 7:30 p.m. birds started to arrive. Within an hour, an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 purple martins congregated on the island.

Jessieville student Paige Wiliford said, "Wow, look, it's a bird tornado."

Evan Harper said, "This is crazy. I can't believe this island has been here, and this has been going on and no one knows about it."

The Mountain Pine EAST Lab program is quickly growing. The Lab has 58 students, 38 of which are returning and mentoring others.

"We teach by different methods. We start with a problem and ask them, 'How are you going to figure it out?'"

"The students solve things by their own methods and creativity. It's about the ownership of learning," said Vincent.



Michael Vincent Mountain Pine School District EAST Lab facilitator

About the bird island project, Wiliford said, "It's a good way to get to know kids from other schools. You learn a lot. It's a good project for the community. They'll get interested in seeing the environment and all it has to offer."

More documentation is needed, but it was an encouraging first visit to the island.