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Emiquon Preserve is living lab for SRC biology students

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Spoon River College biology instructor Kristy Boggs sprayed a cloud of tick repellent over herself as she prepared for class. "The ticks are thick here," said Boggs as she passed the spray on to her students.

Boggs obviously isn't teaching in a classroom. Instead, her summer Field Ecology class has had the unique experience of meeting at the Emiquon Field Station, which was established by the University of Illinois Springfield as an education and research center in the midst of the Emiquon Preserve, the Nature Conservancy's wetland restoration project located northwest of Havana.

Boggs's students planted turtle head, monkey plant, and a wet marsh prairie grass, all of which are native to the Illinois floodplain region, under the guidance of David Hedrick, Illinois River Outreach Manager for the Nature Conservancy.

"We've planted almost 16,000 plants this spring, so we appreciate not only the help, but also the enthusiasm of Kristy and her class," said Hedrick. "To be involved in a project of this size is a tremendous opportunity for these students. Emiquon's 7,100 acres make it one of the largest floodplain restoration projects outside of the Florida Everglades."

This isn't the first trip to the field station for Boggs, a full-time biology instructor at the Spoon River College Macomb campus. Dr. Mike Lemke, assistant biology professor at the University of Illinois Springfield, has given Boggs and her classes tours of the site since 2006.

"When we first started coming out here, we would stand on the levee and gaze at a soybean field as we tried to envision what Dr. Lemke told us would someday exist," said Boggs. "Three semesters later, we canoed in that former soybean field, and looked eight feet down into water that was crystal clear."

Boggs and Dr. Lemke are exploring the possibilities of co-teaching future classes at the field station.

"Kristy is an excellent asset to the Spoon River College faculty, and it's great that she is taking advantage of this opportunity," said Lemke. "The field station allows us access to an incredible restoration project and natural setting that would not otherwise be possible. We are able to explore field ecology topics on ground and do follow up analysis and learning in the laboratories and classrooms of the Emiquon Field Station. Real-time water data is available via the EFS website and will be useful to teach topics about Lake Thompson."

Boggs and several of her students also earned the distinction of being the first to utilize the field station when it opened on April 25 of this year. Working under the direction of UIS biology professor Dr. James Bonacum, they extracted DNA from organisms collected from Thompson Lake in order to catalog the biodiversity of the area.

"This is exactly the type of work I hope to do after I graduate," said student Josh Knouse of Beardstown as he dropped another plant into the soil. Knouse plans to transfer to the University of Montana to pursue a degree in Wildlife Biology.

Class member John Kachanuk, fire chief of the Havana Fire Department, will transfer to Western Illinois University after graduating from Spoon River College. While he intends to continue a career in the field of fire science, he was motivated to take Boggs's class because of his interest in biology and conservation, and because the class was going to be held at Emiquon.

"Participation in activities like canoeing and planting native plants greatly enhances the hands-on classroom work we do," said Kachanuk. "This also blows away conventional learning by being a part of history."

Boggs will continue to combine her classroom teaching with active participation at the Emiquon Field Station, and she encourages others to take advantage of the unique circumstances that will allow the Emiquon Preserve to be open to the public.

"This is an opportunity for people to view first hand how clean the water is and learn about the importance of the aquatic and vegetative life that is already coming back to the area," said Boggs.

Along with biology classes, the SRC Natural Resources and Conservation program is working with the staff at the Emiquon Preserve and the University of Illinois Springfield to develop hands-on learning opportunities for students. Spoon River College is one of only two community colleges in Illinois that offer a natural resources and conservation degree.

Registration for the fall semester is ongoing with classes starting Aug. 25. For additional information, contact an advisor at 1-800-DEGREES.

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