



Newsletter Spring 2006

Sheldrake Environmental Center

685 Weaver Street—Larchmont, NY 10538

Open to the public from dawn to dusk, entrances are at 685 and 687 Weaver Street in Larchmont and on Pinebrook Boulevard in New Rochelle.

From Executive Director Marie Venezia

Dear Friends,

Although the years since I was in college have passed the quarter century mark, I remember a promise I made to myself at the time, probably while hiking in the woods of Tremain Park or at Watkins Glen: *to only live where I could sense the changing of the seasons*. It was while living in Tokyo in the 90's that I was reminded of that promise. A foundation of Japanese culture is to appreciate and assimilate the seasonal variety of nature. The "ume", Japanese plum blossom,

(Continued on next page)

Poem about spring by Wallace Irwin Jr., long-time friend of the Larchmont Reservoir, written many years ago for his father's birthday

<i>Can the Spring be Winter's child, Carried long in womb of frost, Grown in stillness under wild Naked trees December-tossed? Did some icy chemistry April's shining garlands fashion, And a snowdrift silently Suckle May and give her passion?</i>	<i>Then, ye bards, no more adorn Spring, whose native charms abound-- That outrageous princess, born Fair of sight and scent and sound! Sing me Winter all forlorn, With her skyward branches shorn, Whose enormous heart is worn In the secret ground.</i>
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Speaking of Spring by Mary B. Davis, Director of Environmental Programs

If you had to name one thing that signals spring in your mind, what would it be? A sound, a smell, a sighting, or something you can't quite put your finger on? Each of us has an inner voice – whether we're aware of it or not - that speaks to us about the harbingers of spring. It may whisper, or it may shout, but when the moment comes, it clearly says, "It's spring!" Whatever it is that triggers awareness of spring's arrival in your mind, it may be very different for you than it is for me. It may be the fact that the baseball season is starting, or the sudden realization that it is no longer dark when you're driving home from work, or the fact that the snowdrops are poking their heads up in your garden.

I hope you'll come to Sheldrake this spring, take a walk on our trails and watch the natural world come to life. Here are some things you might find that say spring to me:

- the chuckling, quacking call of wood frogs in frigid vernal pools filled with snowmelt and spring rain
- the first tree flowers, their tiny crimson petals and yellow anthers clothing the Red and Silver Maples in a haze of color
- the Spring Azure Butterfly, its blue wings briefly glimpsed as it flutters silently through the woods seeking nectar from the first flowers
- the deafening chorus of peepers, a piping so piercing and persistent it is hard to believe that the males are only three quarters of an inch long — the females are slightly larger, but they are not the ones singing
- the sun-dappled, golden-yellow and nodding Trout Lily, its purplish-brown mottled twin leaves resembling the brook trout, its namesake

Our human world may be full of change, but year after year – predictable as sunrise, miraculous as growth – the seasonal happenings of the natural world transcend our transient plans. Having evolved over thousands of years, they can be anticipated and celebrated. The rhythm is as it should be. Spring is in full bloom.

Upcoming Programs

SheldraKids Spring Programs

Call to confirm your child's spot. See enclosed card for class info.

Spring Festival

Sunday, May 7th, 1–4 pm
An afternoon of family fun
Special guest from Wolf Conservation Society!

Sundays at Sheldrake

Returning in May!

U S Open Fundraising Event

June 12th—18th
Volunteers are needed.

Earth Day Cleanups

April 22nd—23rd
• Larchmont Reservoir
• Larchmont Gardens
Volunteers call 834-1443.

Sheldrake River Cleanup Day

Sunday, April 29th
(rain date May 13th),
10:00 am at Columbus Park
Contact Linda Fava at 698-6174
or lmfava@yahoo.com.

Get to Know the Staff at Sheldrake

Meet Amy *by Amy Bisignani, Scheduling Coordinator*

Tide charts, layers of the earth, hiking trails, environmental educators, ecosystems, fossils, centipedes, millipedes, sowbugs, chickadees, a whole bunch of different hawks, woodpeckers, sparrows, finches and swallows. Until recently, I wasn't even aware that some of these things existed! Now they are becoming part of my everyday vocabulary. I have to say it's nice to be aware of the natural world and especially to play a part in inspiring nature awareness in others. That's what Sheldrake Environmental Center has given me the opportunity to do since September. I'm fulfilling my desire to combine a career with making a difference in my community!

I started working here as a temporary employee. Previously, I worked for Berlitz

Language Center as an instructional supervisor and coordinator for children's programs as well as an instructor of Italian, French, Spanish and English as a second language. I enjoyed every moment of it up until a few months ago when it didn't feel like I was making a difference any longer. That's when I decided that, after 7 years, it was time for a change and to seek work with a non-profit organization.

I was very excited when my employ-



Amy Bisignani, Scheduling Coordinator

ment agency assigned me to Sheldrake to fill a temporary position and am very delighted to be with Sheldrake now as the Scheduling Coordinator. Through my responsibilities, I am not only fulfilling my career goals but I still have the chance to work with children. Working here is truly a wonderful and rewarding experience!

Maybe one day, in addition to my main responsibilities, you'll find me teaching the children how to say all the new concepts I've been learning in Italian! Strati terrestri, ecosistemi, alta marea, bassa marea, falchi, passeri, rondini.....

From the Executive Director *(Continued from page 1)*

and narcissus signal winter's end; news of cherry blossoms crowds the radio airwaves in April as everyone tries to predict the peak bloom days so they can plan their "ohanami" parties when entire departments from work sit under blossoming cherry trees singing karaoke. Gardens filled with peonies, irises and azaleas bring the masses to public gardens to celebrate spring's saunter to summer. Hydrangeas in Kamakura greet trainloads of Sunday visitors in June. Bush clovers, chrysanthemums, and other autumnal flowers all get people to the

outdoors in the fall, when scarlet maples (the tree we call "Japanese maple") cover the hills in Kyoto. I will never forget my surprise – and delight – at having my seasonal sensory awareness reawakened in one of the, if not *the*, most densely populated cities in the world.

How lucky I am to work at Sheldrake where I can see, hear and feel spring's unfolding right out my window. How lucky we all are to have this oasis of nature, the Larchmont Conservancy, in our midst. I

hope you enjoy reading Mary Davis's piece and Wally Irwin's poem on spring and, most importantly, that you come for walks often to hear how the season's miraculous unfolding speaks to you.

A heart-felt thank you to all who have taken the time since my arrival to share ideas and personal stories about Sheldrake. Together we will continue to make a difference.

Marie Venezia
execdirector@sheldrakecenter.org

Back by Popular Demand

Summer Ecology Program 2006 *by Dorothy Dietz, Director of Summer Ecology Program*

Trying to decide on a summer program for your child? This summer, encourage your child to explore the mysteries of the natural world by participating in Sheldrake's Summer Ecology Program. The 6-week afternoon program will take place from July 5th to August 11th.

Each day, the program begins with a daily topic in mind, such as the very popular topic of frogs. First the group meets to share any knowledge the children might already have about frogs (which is usually quite a lot), and share a book about frog metamorphosis. Daily, we head out on a trail trek to observe our topic first-hand. In this case, we become frog "detectives" by heading out to the frog pond to investigate

frog behavior. We talk about how many frogs we see, if they're located in the water or on a lily pad, and about the relationship between frogs and the ubiquitous dragonflies that are always busily buzzing over their heads. The trail trek is always an open-ended venture, because you never know what nature is going to share with us on any given day. The program continues with a topic-related craft activity and ends with everyone coming together to share what they discovered that day.

There is ample opportunity for the children to spend quiet time observing creatures and plant life in an unspoiled setting. The program is dedicated to fostering a sense of connection to the local ecology based on

the sensory experience of being in nature. Always encouraged is a sense of inquiry about what the young ecologist is seeing, hearing, touching or smelling so that he can experience his own "being" in nature. The program also tries to impart a sense of empathy with nature. The young ecologists learn that they are visitors in this special place and are encouraged to not disturb any creature or plant they encounter. If your child enjoys the outdoors and getting dirty, this program is the one!

Note: special arrangements will be made for Monroe campers who are dismissed at 1:00 and wish to transfer directly into our afternoon ecology program.

Whenever I have the chance, I like to sneak downstairs when Cindy is teaching her nature classes. I understand why all the children look forward to coming to class. SheldraKids classes are not only educational, but they are also really fun!

A few days ago, Cindy invited me to join the class at snack time. Of course, I'm always up for having a snack. I was even more excited because we weren't having just any ordinary kind of snack. We were putting together and then eating "layers of the earth!"

This is how we did it. Each of us had a clear plastic cup and there were several yummy ingredients. The ingredients were added to our cups only as we named the layers of earth in the correct order. First of all, we added strawberry syrup. That was the molten core of the earth. Then came

the rocks, represented by chocolate chips. Within the rocks, there were fossils. I'm so glad the store sells the gummy dinosaurs that we were able to pretend were fossils. Next, crushed chocolate graham crackers stood in for the soil, crushed animal cookies for the remains of former animal and plant life forms, and gummy worms were the perfect edible substitute for earthworms. Of course soil can get damp on the surface and form mud; we used chocolate pudding for that. Oh... and let's not forget that in winter it snows! That's where the Cool Whip® came in



handy. Now we could finally take our mini shovels and "dig in!" I was glad that the children were very quick at naming the layers of the earth in the correct order because I really wanted to eat my snack. However and most importantly, I was impressed at how much the children had learned and how Cindy reviewed the material with them.

Before making and eating my much-enjoyed SheldraKids snack, I wasn't knowledgeable of the components and order of the layers of the earth. I left the class thinking I had just had fun and a snack, but actually now a few days later I realize that I also walked away from the class educated on a bit of geology. Now, don't you agree that SheldraKids classes are really fun... and, of course, educational?

Birds, Fish, Turtles, Frogs . . . Lambs and Lions! by Janet Beal, Lions Teacher MCDC

This year, Sheldrake Environmental Center and the Mamaroneck Child Development Center (MCDC) will complete a two-year partnership in nature education for preschoolers. Funding from a Mamaroneck Schools Foundation grant has provided for weekly visits to Sheldrake by the staff and 35 children attending Mamaroneck's Head Start day care program. Classes (the younger "Lambs" and older "Lions") alternate visits, joining Naturalist Cindy Polera enthusiastically in nature walks, stories, crafts and impromptu games. (The normally glacial process of helping a 4-year-old dress for the outdoors accelerates greatly with some magic words: "Ms. Cindy!", "Yaaaaay! Let's go!")

During the time with Ms. Cindy, children learn the secrets of the Conservancy: there's a certain large water-bird who just

loves to munch on dandelion flowers; frogs sleep in the mud over the winter; a chipmunk's front door is made of leaves; and "eat like a bird" really means eat and eat and eat some more. There's lots to talk about—names of plants and animals, new words like "hibernation" and "chrysalis." There's lots to be silent about—not just quiet, but truly silent—body still, eyes and ears wide open, soaking up new sights and sounds, experiencing nature at its very best.

The Sheldrake/MCDC partnership means one-plus-one adds up to much more than two. Plans for training preschool teachers will enable the program to continue when the grant expires. Terrible weather brings Sheldrake to MCDC classrooms—Ms. Cindy has critters, will travel, and children can hardly wait to see her. Children's enthusiasm for the new bird-and-critter-

spotting list in the Potting Shed is forming the basis for a family-friendly log that can add to overall Sheldrake information on migration and animal-behavior. The Center's vegetable garden went from teacher-led to children-led, as children's nature-enthusiasm grew, fostered by Sheldrake. By the time the red Mums for Moms were ready to harvest last August, children could describe plant-growth from small beginning to glorious finish and say with assurance, "we really grew these!"

New sightings at the Conservancy are always exciting. Lambs and Lions have definitely been seen, and we hope they will continue to be for a long time.

Sheldrake's After-school Nature Club "Explorers" Unearth Remains of Ancient Life at Sheldrake by Cindy J. Polera, Sheldrake Naturalist

A true fossil find at Sheldrake? The "Explorers" certainly think so. The active and inquisitive group, made up of mainly 3rd graders includes: Stephen Breitman, Alexis Kemp, Tyler Levine, Emily McCarthy, Matthew Rabinowitz, Madeline Starks and Jacob Stillman (who, unfortunately, was not present that day). Geology was the theme this past February 7th, coincidentally. After a classroom discussion of the Earth's crust, how rocks

and minerals were formed and a game with magnets, we continued our lesson outdoors. As we combed the river's edge pointing out rock diversities, we came upon a very special rock. The 3" by 6" gray rock (most likely shale) has shell impressions in it! These "Explorers" imagined how and when it was formed and we brought our treasure back to the center and showed it to SEC Staff, Mary Davis, Program Director and Amy Bisignani, Sched-

uling Coordinator. They were as amazed as we were. Although my student-geologists-turned-accidental-paleontologists were excited about their discovery, they demonstrated sheer jubilation by jumping up and down at the wishful thought that their find is sure to bring them loads of fame and fortune!



For the Birds by *Mary B. Davis*

We hope you have all had a chance to visit our new bird blind. What a great feeling to be able to observe birds from close-up! Children don't usually get to do this, because they can't keep still and when the birds see them, they fly off. But, in the bird blind, we are invisible to the birds. Now, when we take children to our new bird blind, they will be able to observe not only the birds themselves, but also their mating displays, territorial behaviors and feeding habits. To actually watch how long a diving duck can stay underwater or to see a Hooded Merganser raise its crest makes birding something even a first grader can love.

Whether you are a bird lover, bird enthusiast, beginning birder, or just someone who wants to come and enjoy the quiet of the natural world, the bird blind is a great spot to come and sit. Take a deep breath and see what comes into your view. It is meditatively peaceful.



Visitors to newly opened bird blind/wildlife observation station now have the benefit of an Alpen spotting scope and tripod donated by the Bronx River Sound Shore Audubon chapter.

Above, left to right: Doug Bloom, BRSS Audubon President; Suzanne Frank, Sheldrake President; Robert Wirsneck, BRSS and Sheldrake Board Member; Marie Venezia, Sheldrake Executive Director; Sam Suharto, BRSS Audubon Vice President.

Native Plant Center: "Using Native Plants Is Essential to Restoring Biodiversity in the Suburbs"

by *Jenny Geer, Sheldrake Naturalist*

The Native Plant Center in Valhalla recently held a conference on "Nature in the Suburbs," with messages of interest to suburban nature enthusiasts. In the keynote talk, entitled "Creating Habitat in Suburbia," Douglas Tallamy, Chair of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware, sounded a rallying cry for the use of native plants to restore biodiversity to the U.S.

"Suburbia is the last refuge for biodiversity today," Tallamy proclaimed. While acknowledging the value of preserving undeveloped land such as national parks, he stated that it is too late to depend on such efforts, because 95 percent of the U.S. has already been developed, with a full 54 percent taken up by the suburbs alone. The only hope for restoring biodiversity is to redevelop the suburban ecosystem.

Tallamy focused on the interaction of plants and insects to document how important native plants are to maintaining biodiversity among insects -- the principal herbivores in the ecosystem, and in turn, the principal food for many other animals, including amphibians, baby birds, and other insects. In order to be able to eat specific

plants, he explained, insects need long periods of evolutionary time to develop the ability to break down the plants' special chemical defenses (bad tastes, poisons, etc.). When we create gardens filled with alien plant species, insects are unable to adapt and must seek food elsewhere or perish. The organisms that depend on those insects for survival are also adversely affected, setting up a chain reaction that reduces overall biodiversity.

Native plants provide support for insects at all stages of life -- they provide a place to lay eggs, and food for both larvae and adults. It is a mistake, says Tallamy, to assume that alien plants that fulfill one of these functions provide full support for the species. For example, many people have created butterfly gardens using alien Buddleia (butterfly bush) as the centerpiece plant. However, although adult butterflies do flock to these gardens to feed on Buddleia nectar, the sad truth is that not a single species will lay its eggs there because its leaves are inedible -- the alien plant provides only a snack, not a permanent habitat.

The number of different species of insect supported by a given plant is an

the ecosystem, continued Tallamy; by that measure, most alien plants fail the test. For example, the alien eucalyptus tree, which supports 48 species of moths and butterflies in its native Australia, provides support in the U.S. to only one species. By contrast, our native oak trees support close to 400 species! Dr. Tallamy provided a list of the 20 most valuable native trees in the mid-Atlantic region, and even #20 (chestnut) supports a whopping 85 species.

So, concluded Dr. Tallamy, if you want to plant one tree, let it be an oak. But don't stop there -- if you want your garden to support biodiversity, make sure that it contains a significant number of native plant species. Finally, spread the word -- to your neighbors, your landscapers, and your plant suppliers: Native plants are critical to the health of the suburban ecosystem.

For more information about the conference and native plants, visit the website of the Native Plant Center at www.nativeplantcenter.org.

Wildflower and native plant sale on April 29th at Westchester Community College

WJWW Construction

Construction at the Westchester Joint Water Works facility adjacent to the Goodliffe Pond will be ongoing through early July. For your safety and to minimize any additional stress to the land, we suggest during this time that you enter the trails from the lower parking lot.

Notes from this year's class of Environmental Educators: their impressions of the 2005/2006 classes ...

Last Spring I had been reading Central Calling, the weekly newsletter from Central School in Larchmont. There was a small ad about a class that was forming to become an Environmental Educator at Sheldrake. Just the kind of thing I was looking for.

I've always been environmentally aware and interested and I love kids and interacting with them. Perfect. It has been more exhilarating than I had ever imagined. I'll never forget our lesson at the pond. There I was, a middle-aged woman jumping up and down at my discovery of a dragonfly in the nymph stage. Did you know that they breathe under water for a time before they grow wings?? Amazing.

I have become totally aware of my surroundings wherever I am and see nature in a whole new light. I now understand how much there is to learn and observe. I can't wait to share my enthusiasm with children from the elementary schools.

I'm honored to be a part of this dedicated group and hope I can contribute to this vital program.

Jackie Merker

Becoming a naturalist is for the young at heart. I am a senior citizen who was born and raised in New Rochelle and spent many happy hours at the shore with my family. I have a long history with both the LIFE Center and Friends of the Reservoir and was on the committee formed to unite the two into what is now the Sheldrake Environmental Center. A dear old friend, Ruth Chelimer loved the Reservoir and introduced our family to the property when our children were young. We both lived in Larchmont Acres. In the 70's, when I taught first grade at Central School, I escorted my students to the LIFE Center classroom that was at Central at the time as often as I could for hands-on experiences to open their eyes to the environment around us. A few years ago, I participated as a Streamwalker for the county where a bunch of us traipsed along riparian land and recorded what we found that was encroaching on waterways.

I have recovered from a serious auto accident, and am grateful to be physically fit again. I love children and love the natural partnership that has evolved at Sheldrake. Now that I have retired from a variety of teaching experiences I find that I miss doing what I did before. What a perfect way for me to combine my interest in ecology with my teaching skills. In Mary Davis' class, I've enjoyed honing my vocabulary and knowledge of things that grow, creep, crawl and swim. I am energized by being in a class with enthusiastic people who are probably half my age.

Alice Model

It was a beautiful but chilly November morning when we headed to Dog Beach. I had spent countless summer days on neighboring Manor Beach, looking for hermit crabs with my 6-year old son and collecting shells with my 4-year old daughter. I did not expect to see much more than sand, broken shells, a couple of crabs and sea gulls. Instead, we stumbled upon a magic world of thousands of periwinkles, barnacles, live slipper shells, mud snails and blue mussels. We found Irish moss and dead man's fingers (fear not: it's a sponge). I discovered that barnacles are tiny shrimp-like creatures settling on rocks close to each other to improve their survival chances when the tide brings in their own food. I did not know that clams burrow in the sand, that slipper shells find their home on top of blue mussels and change sex as another slipper shell settles on their backs. I was surprised to learn that the now predominant Asian Shore Crab only arrived on our shores in 1988 and has taken over much of the territory of the green, mud and fiddler crabs. I now know that a carapace is a molt when there is a splitting line through which the crab exited and that a molt usually does not smell. I have come to realize that our beautiful shoreline is a fragile ecosystem: it is the home of millions of interesting creatures – each with its own story- and I can't wait to share it with the children in our community.

Carine Verschueren

Thursday mornings at Sheldrake Environmental Center and the incredible fieldtrips that Mary B. Davis has facilitated for our Environmental Educator's class have been the highlight of many of my weeks since arriving in New York from Montana. I came to a nanny job in Larchmont on sabbatical from a teaching position at an environmentally based education program in Missoula, MT. and was so pleased and relieved to find a group of people to explore the local habitats with and from whom I've learned so much. Our trips to Dog Beach, the Sheldrake River Trail system and Goodliffe Pond have been full of laughter and awe as, one by one, we've begun to really see the world around us in a new light and to make and share our own discoveries. Mary has been so adept at leading us into a growing understanding and confidence about how to share what we've learned with others ... lots of good information and important facts, but, more importantly, the awe and deep sense of peace, excitement and belonging that developing a relationship to the natural places around us provides. I'm looking so forward to the spring and the chance to get out with kids from the local schools to see and share the wonders this part of the earth has to show us. I greatly appreciate Mary, my fellow classmates, and the Sheldrake Center for making this great opportunity possible! Thank you!!!

Robin Bryne

You too can be an Environmental Educator!

Call to find out more about the fall 2006 program.

