

Published in the Rocky Mountain News on April 22, 2008

Outdoors school a high-class act Students learn mountain-life lessons at Balarat Education Center

By Janet Reese

Jessica Hartig, 11, is the first to attempt climbing the 40-foot wall. Hooked into the belay rope, she climbs up a short way, gets stuck and comes down. She tries again and approaches the top.

“I’ve never gotten that high before,” she says with a proud grin. “I felt airborne and the view was amazing. Climbing down was fun.”

It’s not a typical school day for Hartig, a student from Southmoor Elementary School in Denver. She’s at Balarat Outdoor Education Center located near Jamestown, about 18 miles northwest of Boulder.

Throughout the school year, fifth-grade students from Denver Public Schools visit Balarat to learn about nature, ecology, history, team building, goal setting, and climbing and orienteering.

For some students, the trip is their first time away from home by themselves. For others, it’s their first time at an outdoor camp in the mountains. For everyone, it’s an exciting overnight adventure filled with fun and engaging outdoor learning activities.

The adventure starts on the bus where students from Kaiser Elementary School and Farrell B. Howell K-8 School in Denver begin to shift their thoughts from the classroom to the mountains. Along the way, they talk about changes they see from the city to country to mountains.

While the group is en route, two other classes from Southmoor Elementary School start their second day at Balarat. They came the day before and will return to Denver midafternoon.

This first day of spring, the wind rustles the ponderosa pines surrounding the camp lodge and dorms. Inside the lodge, the kids eat scrambled eggs, biscuits and gravy, and eagerly chat about their full-moon hike and the magnificent sunrise.

After breakfast, the Southmoor group packs their gear in the bunk-style dorms. Their teacher Zack Bastoky, asks the boys, “Who’s missing this pair of boots?” With no takers, he jokingly quips, “If no one claims them, I’ll sell them on e-Bay.”

Bastoky advises the boys to use the bathroom before hitting the hiking trail. “There’s no flushing toilet for the next four hours,” he says. They belt out a loud shriek, preferring the comfort of the indoor bathrooms to the rustic outhouses on the trail.

Challenges by choice

After dropping off their bags at the duffle depot, the girls and boys hike in single file on a trail through patches of melting snow. They’re headed toward one of the most popular activities at Balarat: the high ropes challenge course.

Built in a clearing, the course features a high ropes gorilla grab, pirates crossing, 40-foot climbing wall and a beam walk. Kids are roped in and on belay at all times while climbing.

Sitting on logs with workbooks on their laps, the students listen intently to their teacher Zack Bastoky. “Take some time to decide on your goals for the course,” he says. “A small goal is to put on the harness, a middle goal--touch the wall, and a big goal--climb the wall. When your goals are written in your workbook, reflect on them awhile.”

Students choose which challenges they want to try. “Your challenge today is to set your goals and reach them,” says Paul Cox, a Balarat outdoor education teacher. “We want to get out of our comfort zones. Encourage your teammates, but don’t push them to where they don’t want to be.”

At the climbing wall, Cox talks about safety. “It’s important to keep each other safe. Listen to the rules and follow directions. Pay attention to your group. With the belay system, someone’s got you and you’re not going to fall. Use your helmets.”

Cox explains how to belay. In groups of three teams each student takes a turn climbing and belaying.

Eco-hike bingo

At 10:30 a.m., the buses from Denver arrive at Balarat and the Kaiser and Howell students unload at the trailhead. The fun begins with an hour-and-a-half-long ecology hike at 8,000 feet where the kids learn about nature in the area.

Balarat counselor Jay Pearson, 17, a junior at Thomas Jefferson High School, leads the hike. “Keep your cameras, water bottles and workbooks in easy reach,” he says. “Stay on the trail and don’t leave anything behind.”

Walking along the trail, they play “nature bingo,” crossing off blocks in their workbooks when finding ponderosa pine, coyote scat, pinecones and more. “Remember: Alice algae, and Freddy fungus liken each other,” says Pearson, explaining how lichen grows.

Guadalupe Toque, 10, likes the experience, so far. “This is better than I imagined,” she says. “It’s fun and messy. I’m looking forward to seeing the animals, birds and rabbits.”

They end up at the Duval Mine, an historic, restored gold mine. They eat lunch in a nearby cabin, tour the mine, assay gold and learn about Colorado’s mining history.

Teacher is keen on Balarat

“I love Balarat,” affirms Carol Austin, a Kaiser teacher who has taken her students there the past nine years. “It’s a time for students to bond with friends and become independent.”

The experience impacts kids in various ways, says Austin. “Some learn a lot about the environment. Some are engrossed with nature, constantly taking in the sights, sounds and smells.”

After the night hike, Austin leads her class in an activity at the lodge. Kids write notes about Balarat on cards and draw nature pictures on cut-out paper hands. Back in their classroom, they will make a paper quilt with the cards and cut outs. “We’ll call it our ‘Balarat memory quilt,’” she says.

“At Balarat, you can find curriculum and education, solitude, friendship, inner peace and inner strength,” says Austin. “Sometimes the most challenging kids find the most benefit. Wide-eyed and observant, they’re into the whole experience. Looking back, many students say, ‘We had such a good time.’”

(Box)

About Balarat Outdoor Education Center

- Balarat is derived from an Aboriginal word “balaarat” meaning “a resting or camping place.” In the late 1800s, miners from Australia founded the town of Balarat, which is now a ghost town nearby the outdoor center.
- Balarat Outdoor Education Center was founded in 1968, when Roger Calvert donated his 700-acre property to the Denver Public Schools with the stipulation that inner-city

kids would have the opportunity to learn in an outdoor setting. The outdoor center evolved into a “school in the mountains where learning comes naturally”--its tagline; 5,000 DPS students visit Balarat annually for the overnight program.

- The camp has two comfortable dorms with bunk beds, a lodge with a dining room and classroom, and field cabins and shelters for educational programs; 15 full-time instructors and support staff are onsite.
- DPS high school students can elect to become Balarat counselors and eco-interns and earn community service and academic course credits.

Programs

Gold mining at the Duval Mine: mining history, safety and assaying gold.

CSI (crime scene investigation): solve an animal poaching crime using natural clues.

High ropes challenge course

Low ropes playground

Western history: pioneers, trappers, traders, Indians

Compass and orienteering course

(Box)

Support Balarat, hit the trail

What: Third-Annual Balarat Trail Run/Walk, a fund-raiser to benefit Balarat educational programs. Music and food will be provided.

When: Saturday, May 10, 10 a.m.

Where: Balarat Outdoor Education Center

Fee: 6-mile trail run: \$30, \$35 after May 1

2-mile trail walk: \$20, \$25 after May 1

Register at <http://balarat.dpsk12.org>

(Box - mini-portraits)

Comments from Southmoor Elementary School fifth-graders

Anne Clinton (photo DSR_0077)

What is your favorite Balarat activity? The morning hike. Starting at 6:30 a.m, we hiked a half-mile to an overlook where I could see everything in silence--the sky and nature.

Brooke Engel (photo DSR_0081)

What do you like about Balarat? How it's so peaceful and calm. You don't have to worry about anything going wrong.

Sam Kumagai (photo DSR_0127)

What do you think of Balarat? I wish I could come here every year because it's really fun and we learn some stuff, too.

###