Closer to nature

Creek study, hiking part of fun at St. Charles Park District program

By JODY PAIGE
Kane County Chronicle

ST. CHARLES — Nick Downer of Elburn emerged from Ferson Creek in St. Charles talking about the one that got away.

The 9-year-old wasn’t talking about a fish, however; he was talking about the dragonfly that continued to elude him.

“I was one inch away from catching it,” he said. “I wasn’t tall enough.”

Nick is among children in kindergarten through sixth grades who participated in the St. Charles Park District’s Nature Camps this summer.

Meeting at LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve in St. Charles, the children have been exploring the creek and prairies, hiking and catching bugs.

Nick originally was unhappy his mom “made” him sign up for the camp. He said he would have spent his summer playing video games, watching television or playing with friends.

“My mom made me (sign up for camp), and I didn’t think I’d like it, but then I liked it,” Nick said. “I’m glad I’m here.”

The children talked over one another about their favorite part of camp, highlighting the day they caught butterflies and seeing a tree frog during a hike.

They all pointed to a large glass jar filled with twigs and grass. A large black and yellow spider — considered a treasure to the campers — hid among the grass.

Campers Alexandra, 11, and John DiFulvio, 9, consider LeRoy Oakes Forest Preserve their back yard. Their dad is a ranger, and their house

Please see NATURE page 6
is on the Forest Preserve property. Still, the children said they are learning a lot about their surroundings.

"I like the idea of going out and exploring nature," Alexandra said.

Madeline Shuitleff, 9, of Elburn, agreed. She also said camp offers her exercise and fresh air.

Max Coch, 11, of St. Charles, has signed up for the camp for two or three sessions for the past four years.

"I just like nature. It's fun to be out there," he said of continuing to come back each year.

"Things are always changing, and you never see the same thing twice."

Max said he always enjoys when they venture into other forest preserve or park areas and especially likes the night they gather for a campfire and night hike.

Without camp, Max said he would likely be watching television or playing with friends, but he would "definitely be more bored."

Tom Kohler and Katie Long, two of the camp leaders involved in the program, said they are glad to see the children enjoying their surroundings instead of playing video games.

"I think they realize there is a lot to do outdoors and in the environment and it can be fun," Kohler said. "I think kids sit in front of the TV too much. ... When we were growing up, we were out climbing trees."