



Young Naturalists Newsletter



NIGHTTIME HIKE BY ELLA HENRY

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A MESSAGE FROM THE PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Spring is in the air! The days are longer, brighter and things are buzzing here at Avalon. Praying mantis nests were collected, bird nest boxes were cleaned, and the trails are picking up with visitors. Every morning I can hear the songs of Red Winged Blackbirds and I've recently been observing American Robins and Northern Flickers foraging for insects on the ground. After heading outdoors in some harsh conditions, it's nice to feel the warmth and watch buds forming on the trees patiently waiting to burst open.

This year to date so far, we've collected over 200 lbs of marine debris out of the environment! That is an impressive feat for our group of teen volunteers! Our top items were shotgun shells and other small plastic items such as food wrappers, plastic bags, bottles, bottle caps, balloon strings, and microplastic fragments. Winter is always a good time to do this activity since this season is typically associated with gusty winds, stronger currents, and more storm surges. Migratory marine life such as seals are susceptible to the dangers of small plastics in the environment.

When we weren't on the beach, we had the opportunity to observe Harbor Seals up close from a vessel in the Shinnecock Bay, start a new hydroponic garden tower project, put our wilderness survival skills to the test, watch a full moon rise on our night hike and explore an eroded valley. No matter what we are doing, the contribution of our volunteers makes a BIG impact. As always I cannot thank you enough for your support.

Looking forward to our continued adventures!

*Enjoy the sunshine,
Kayla*

SPRING FLOWERS

Captured by Medini Sistla

Check out photos of these beautiful blooms at Port Jefferson High School! They capture the essence of spring in the air.

Thank you, Medini, for sharing these with us!



Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*)



Japanese cherry (*Prunus serrulata*)



Japanese cherry (*Prunus serrulata*)

Medini is a dedicated Nature Initiative member who has an interest in photography, the outdoors, and storytelling.



Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*)

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Ella Henry



Ella standing next to her painting at the Winter Dreams tiny art show

Ella loves many different types of wildlife, enjoys being outdoors, and is the featured artist on our cover page. Her inspiration for the piece titled “Nighttime Hike” came from the Snow Moon hike we did at Avalon! Ella said when she saw the full moon rise that evening it was so bright and low to the ground that at first glance she thought it was a light shining from one of the houses. After finishing this mini canvas painting, it was on display at the North Shore Library for their “Winter Dreams” tiny art show and contest. Public voting was open for 3 weeks and Ella was selected as the winner for the teen category! We love hearing stories about what students take away from our programs and seeing that translate into other creative projects.

Congratulations Ella and thank you for sharing!



The public vote winners selected from the teen and adult categories. There were two winners from each!

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: WINTER HIKING SERIES

By Kayla Serina

Every year during February break, my coworker Sue used to lead winter hikes for kids of all ages. She was the Program Coordinator for Seedlings, but after she retired, I decided to take over the hikes this year. We planned hikes for three groups: one for Grades K–3 and their families, one for Grades 4–6, and one for Grades 7–12.

One of the most important parts of being an outdoor educator is making sure everyone is ready for the weather—and that means dressing warmly! I didn't expect it to be so cold, though. The temperatures dropped into the single digits! It was a freezing week, but the kids were amazing. They all showed up bundled in their coziest winter gear, ready to have fun—and they did, with big smiles the whole time!

On a super windy morning, we headed out to the orange trail, which goes around the Hilltop Meadow. Not long after we started walking, we spotted a ball of gray fur on the ground. At first, we thought it might be an owl pellet, but after taking a closer look together, we guessed it was from a rabbit that had been eaten. It was a little sad to see, but we talked about how hawks and other birds of prey need to eat too—it's all part of nature.

As we kept going, our youngest hikers had a blast "walking on water" and sliding across the frozen patches of ice. We also found deer tracks in the snow and looked up to spot squirrel nests, called "dreys," high in the trees.

The best part? We had a special guest join us—Mr. Johnny, a local musician, naturalist, author, and storyteller! He hiked with us and brought along a few fun surprises.

He played a fun fairy song based on an old Irish story, sang a few tunes on his guitar (including Puff the Magic Dragon, which the kids loved!), and introduced us to "Mr. Owl" for a nature-themed guessing game. The kids were so excited! We ended our K–3 hike inside, where the kids sketched and wrote in their journals while listening to Johnny's music in the background.

As the week went on, the weather got better, and we kept our hiking series going with the 4th–6th graders on the blue trail. It was a small group, but they bonded quickly as we made our way to Stickland, a favorite spot. The kids chatted, laughed, and snacked along the way. After Stickland, we slid down a hill and found a vernal pond that was almost completely frozen. We talked about what makes vernal ponds special, how they form, and which animals—like salamanders—might live there.

Once we returned to the barn, we tried a frozen bubbles activity. We mixed corn syrup and dish soap to blow bubbles on the icy ground, hoping they'd freeze and form cool ice crystals. They didn't freeze as easily as we hoped, but it was still a lot of fun to try!

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PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: WINTER HIKING SERIES

(cont'd.)

Our last hike of the week was with the teen group, and we chose the yellow trail that winds through the woods. As we passed the cedar circle, one of our volunteers spotted some rusty, reddish fur on the ground. We started guessing what kind of animal it might've come from. Maybe a deer? They do shed their bright summer coats for duller winter ones—but it was already February, so we weren't sure. It didn't look like bird feathers either. One student joked that it looked like golden retriever fur—which honestly, it kind of did! We didn't figure it out for sure, but everyone had fun making guesses.

As we continued hiking through the East Farm preserve, we stopped to check out BirdsFoot Farm, which you can see from the edge of the trail. We talked about the animals they have—like sheep, goats, chickens, and ducks—and chatted about things like rotational grazing, regenerative farming, and what they sell at their farmstand. We had a good time just watching the chickens from a distance.

After our “chicken break,” we kept moving, looking for something one of our volunteers had called a “giant crater” she had seen on a family hike. We went downhill, climbed over a boulder, and wound our way around the trail until—boom—we found it!

There it was—a giant, deep hole in the ground, created by the heavy rainstorm back in August. It was wild to see! Some trees had been completely pulled out of the ground. We all carefully made our way down into the eroded valley, and it turned into a fun spot to explore. For me, the best part was watching the kids' faces light up with joy, curiosity, and excitement. We climbed around, jumped, balanced on logs, and shuffled across the frozen, muddy ground.

I was really impressed by how much the kids supported each other. The trails were icy, hilly, and definitely pushed us out of our comfort zones. But the students helped one another through tricky spots and made sure no one was left behind. These hikes weren't easy, but every group showed so much determination and teamwork—it was awesome to see.

Despite the cold, the ice, and the wind, everyone leaned into the adventure and made the most of it. And of course, we ended each hike with a well-earned cup of hot chocolate!

Check out the photos from our winter hikes on the next page!

»» PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: WINTER HIKING SERIES



»»» We've reconnected with some of our alumni from Avalon's youth programs to see where they are now!
Meet them below ...



JOHNNY CUOMO

Participated in Nature Initiative from 2021-2022

Prior to Nature Initiative, Johnny did Miss Sue's Seedlings Program!

Johnny is completing his freshman year at SUNY ESF

»»» **Favorite experiences, stories or Avalon memories:** My favorite project that I was a part of was the amazing shellfish restoration project. A group of peers and I routinely cared for and reared a large group of oysters and clams that eventually were released into the waters around Stony Brook Village and Sand Street beach.

»»» **Major/Area of Study:** I am in my first year studying Sustainable Energy Management.

»»» **Favorite hobby:** Snowboarding

»»» **How did our programs at Avalon inspire you?** The programs at Avalon inspired me highly and allowed me to see that no matter how old you are or what knowledge you bring to the table, you can always enjoy and advocate for the natural world. By being stewards of the environment, it allows us to not only care for and protect the unique and necessary flora and fauna all around us, but also allows for us to be working in an outside environment and in the beauty of nature that is both calming and refreshing. I am thankful for the eye-opening experiences that the programs at Avalon provided me with, and also allowing my love of the outdoors and the creatures within the different ecosystems to flourish.

»»» **Advice you would give to a high school student:** The biggest thing I have learned in college is that everyone's path looks different, and this means to do the things that make you happy and increase your wisdom as a person. Do not be afraid of criticism from peers or friends, because that only means you are doing something noticeable, but also do not be afraid to take genuine constructive criticism from a trusted source who has an outside perspective on something you may not have originally seen.

»»» **Career goals/future plans:** I would like to look for an internship with an energy company within the next year or two, and eventually wind up graduating with a degree as well as experience in many different situations and environments. I will take all of this with me to a job and maybe even owning my own business in the distant future.

IT'S OFFICIAL, SHORE FARM IS OPEN!

By Kayla Serina

If you've visited Avalon lately, you might've noticed an underpass being constructed on Harbor Road. After 5 years of restoration work, our latest addition to the preserve is now complete and is officially open to the public! Shore Farm is an extension of our Coastal Corridor habitat and spans approximately 30 acres looking over the pristine Stony Brook Harbor.

The pedestrian underpass connecting the two parts of the preserve can be accessed from the portion of the yellow trail starting from the northernmost parking lot on Shep Jones Lane. As you walk along the winding trail on the new property, there are many different types of unique features you can observe. There is a natural sculpture garden with weathered stumps, wood stacks, an expansive meadow that was a former cattle pasture and the harbor overlook. You may hear the calls of eagles, ospreys, hawks and other birds of prey or grass dwelling species such as the Northern Bobwhite quail.

One significant fixture I wanted to emphasize is the sculpture of Boulder the dog. The preserve was established and is maintained by the Paul Simons Foundation in memory of Paul, an avid outdoorsman who's vibrant life was interrupted prematurely. Like many visitors to Avalon, Paul Simons was frequently accompanied by his dog Boulder during his outdoor adventures. Visit this tribute to the intrepid spirit of our dog friends, situated on a hillside with commanding views of Stony Brook Harbor.

My favorite area, the Harbor Overlook, allows you to step out into the tidal zone and make connections with the intertidal organisms inhabiting the area. The railing of the observation platform even has various species depicted on it. With a wide tidal range, this area offers a dynamic nature and showcases the fragility of this ecosystem.

Next time you visit Avalon, feel free to visit the Shore Farm property and share your photos with us! Enjoy this [drone video tour](#) of the waterfront area.



PHOTO CREDIT: @PRIMALATHLETICSNY OF BOULDER THE DOG SCULPTURE

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO





WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

(cont'd.)



UPCOMING PROJECTS

>>> Vertical Oyster Garden Workshop

 April 16th & 18th

 10:00 AM-12:00 PM

 Avalon Barn

>>> Sea Turtle Facility Tour

 April 17th

 10:30 AM-12:00 PM

 AMSEAS Office in Westhampton Beach

>>> Garlic Mustard Pull

 April 26th

 10:00 AM-12:30 PM

 Frank Melville Memorial Park

Please register on our website if
you would like to attend!

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