



By Tim Norman/ThisWeek

(Above) Audubon Center conservation leader 14-year-old Raymond Sessley points to some birds across the water as he works with Boys and Girls Club of Columbus members near the Scioto Audubon Metro Park Wednesday, July 11. Sessley participated in the Audubon's Urban Conservation program the past two summers and is now teaching children in the same program. (Below) Lashae Walker points a bird out to fellow club member Kayza McDaniels as they search for birds.

Budding naturalists work in their field

By SUE HAGAN
ThisWeek Staff Writer

Just last year, these three 14-year-old Columbus naturalists were enrolled in a Columbus Audubon summer program that introduces city students to nature conservation.

As part of Audubon's Urban Conservation Crew, Audrianna Doyle, Mardell Hawkins and Raymond Sessley—all from Columbus' East Side—were learning about birds, recycling and how to build landfills, among other things.

Now they are helping teach those subjects to the newest crop of students. This year, about 90 students are on the conservation crew, which was launched in 2005 to augment what students learn in school about earth science and to teach them about environmental issues.

"We teach kids about nature," said Hawkins, "to conserve and protect it



so when they grow up, it will still be there."

Last Wednesday, the trio worked with nine fourth- and fifth-graders enrolled in a summer program of the West Side unit of the Boys & Girls

Club of Columbus.

The task at hand was to teach the younger students how to use binoculars to view birds and other wildlife in the newly-named Scioto Audubon Metro Park on the Whittier Peninsula.

Doyle, Hawkins and Sessley moved down the row, one by one, helping individuals in the group learn to focus in on an artificial blue jay and chickadee attached to a tree.

Next, the young students were handed a folder with pictures of birds, grouped by their habitat. Describing its appearance, Sessley helped the group pinpoint an Eastern bluebird.

Then the students moved to the edge of the Scioto River, viewing Canada Geese, egrets and an unidentified white bird perched farther away in a tree.

Doyle, Hawkins and Sessley were hired by Audubon this summer to work 35-hour weeks in instruction, job shadowing and special projects. The three are among 12 former conservation crew members who applied.

Three days a week, they assist Doreen Whitley, the Grange Insurance

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Audubon Center's school programs coordinator, in instruction.

On Thursdays, they help develop a Whittier Peninsula field guide, identifying area flora and fauna. The guide will be used by the Audubon Center when it opens early in 2009.

And on Friday, they shadow people who work in various areas of nature conservation—park rangers and the landscaper for the Ohio Governor's mansion, for example. To increase their knowledge base, they visited the Hocking Hills, Lake Erie and other Ohio habitats.

Their employment is paid for by a grant from the Solid Waste Authority of Central Ohio. They were hired, in part, to grow a new generation of urban naturalists, said Heather

Starck, Audubon Center director.

"We would love our staff to come from the neighborhoods around here," she said. "But there are not a lot of kids who are knowledgeable enough to teach nature and conservation waiting around for a nature center to open."

She said the three teens on the Audubon's summer staff were chosen, in part, because they are interested in careers in the field.

Whitley said the summer employment gives them a real feel for what nature conservation is all about.

It also helps them see that the newest Metro Park—being built in the middle of the city—is not just something for other people.

"They feel comfortable that the park is for them; they know it," she said.

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