

Incline Elementary Kindergartners learn about nature through Wild Sierra Nevada

News | Jun 6, 2024



Kayla Anderson

On a beautiful Friday afternoon in Incline Village, a bunch of wriggling and happy yet well-behaved kindergartners file into Ms. Trina Kleinhenz's Makerspace at Incline Elementary School.

That day's class was joined by two special guests, author Joanna Howes and illustrator Alex Bailey of Wild Sierra Nevada: A Family Nature Guide. When the students sat attentively and settled into the class, Howes and Bailey introduced themselves.

"I always loved to draw and paint, did that throughout my life, and went to school to become a scientist. And now I draw and do art for my job," Ms. Alex Bailey tells the kids. "I always loved to read and write, wrote poems and short stories. I became a teacher and wrote on the side. I worked on this for a few years. If there's something that we love to do that is calling to us, it doesn't take a special brain or ability to do it. If you work hard, then you can do whatever you want to do," Howes explains.

Howes then asked the kindergartners what they loved to do, and many of them said they love to play soccer, dress up their dolls, and/or play on the monkey bars. A few said they liked to draw and make books.



Joanna Howes (left) and Alex Bailey (right) in front of Trina's kindergartner class
Kayla Anderson / Special to the Tribune

Then Howes and Bailey read a passage from Wild Sierra Nevada about the Western tree squirrel and sang a song.

"That was so fun!" one of the girls said afterwards. More pages were read, and songs were sung about a red robin, quaking aspen, and incense cedar tree, the animals and plants prevalent in Lake Tahoe.

Every kid in the class then received a "My Nature Journal" activity book with their name on it. They spent the next 10-15 minutes drawing, stamping, coloring, and stickering up their covers.



Kids decorating their nature journals.
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As Kleinhenz and Bailey wandered around the class admiring the beautiful stamps, stickers, and drawings adorning the students' books, Howes shared how Wild Sierra Nevada came about.

Living in North Lake Tahoe for 10 years, Howes taught at Montessori schools in North Lake Tahoe and worked on this book on the side for most of that time. She explains that she wanted to create something that was fun, positive, and educational for kids along the John Muir Laws' ideology, "I explore. I wonder. I notice."

"I feel like when kids go outside, they get that wild, calm, connected sense with nature," Howes says.

Then the teachers wrapped up the indoor session and we headed outside into the trees.

"All right scientists, ready to work," Bailey told the kids as we all lined up at the door and marched single file outside and across the street. Kleinhenz led us down a nature trail a short walk away from the school to a shady area amongst pine needles. The students were then prompted to hone into what they noticed. After a moment of silence, they said that they saw butterflies, bees, birds, and heard the creek, and then went crazy over a Steller's jay hopping around on the ground.



Out in nature exploring, wondering, and noticing.
Kayla Anderson / Special to the Tribune

On the way back to the classroom, Bailey talked about how her and Howes went to two schools last week, were at Incline Elementary School that day, and then planned to visit two more schools the following week to spread the word about Wild Sierra Nevada.

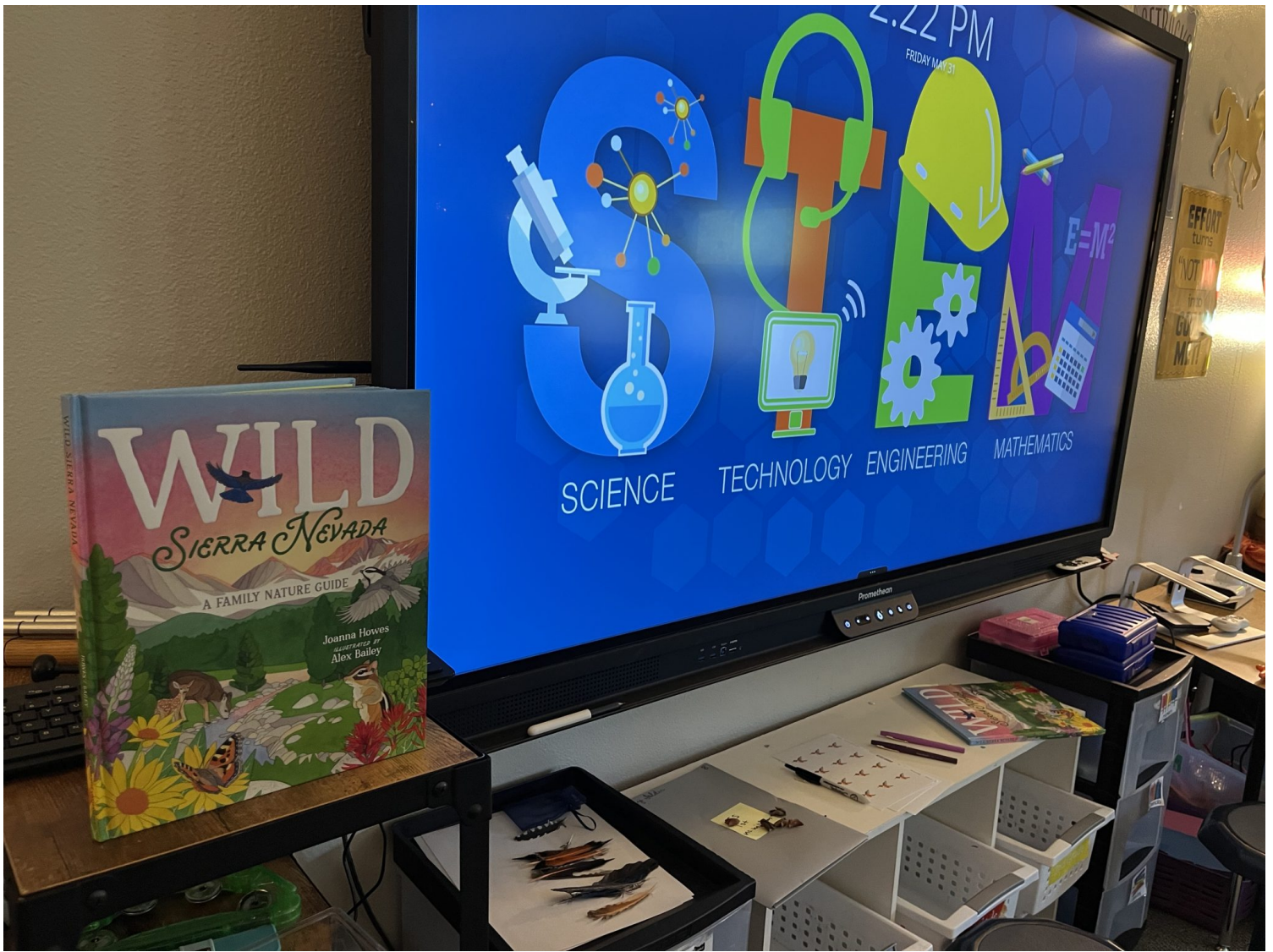
Published by the Yosemite Conservancy, the book came out officially on May 14 but has been for sale in Yosemite since February. They had a book signing at the Alibi Ale Works Truckee Public House on May 19, and around 100 people came out for it.

As Howes was working on the manuscript, she found Bailey's illustrations in a local magazine and liked her style.

"I pictured whimsical art with scientific drawings," Howes says about the early days of coming up the concept of Wild Sierra Nevada.

She found the Yosemite Conservancy and signed a contract with them in March 2022, and fortunately the publisher liked Bailey's scientific yet fun flora and fauna illustrations as well. Living in Reno, Bailey holds a bachelor's degree in geology and a master's degree in environmental geochemistry. This is Bailey's first book, and she spent one-and-a-half years doing rounds and rounds of sketches, which had to be approved by Yosemite's forest rangers and expert naturalists.

Incline Village (and North Lake Tahoe in general) is a small area, and there are a lot of mutual connections. Kleinhenz has been friends with Howes for a while and collaborated with her and Lake Tahoe School teacher Aly Nugent to integrate Wild Sierra Nevada into Incline schools.



Wild Sierra Nevada
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“We all sat down and talked about it, and then the Incline Education Fund found grants to be able to bring them in,” Kleinhenz says. “I saw the book and how well it was done. They did just such a great job with the illustrations; it appeals to both kids and adults,” she adds.

All year long, students at different grade levels have been studying environmental biomimicry and connection with nature.

When asked what their favorite part of working on Wild Sierra Nevada was, Howes replied, “My favorite part was to write about the trees—I had to dig deep and do a lot of research to find things about them that are interesting to kids.”

With the students, she read the page about the Incense Cedar, and then passed around some small cones to the kids that looked like a duck’s beak.

“Quack, quack,” the kindergartners said.

Bailey says she enjoyed illustrating the animals, figuring out their textures as well as defining textures of the trees. But the entire process was “a good excuse to go hiking,” she said.

As far as what the future holds for Wild Sierra Nevada, Howes hopes that this will be the first in a series of more kids’ field guides about different wild Western regions to come. She’s been hiking, drawing, and researching places like the Colorado Plateau, The Arches in Utah, and Zion for possible future editions.

Then, after the kids got out of school in Incline Village for the day, Lake Tahoe School student Nyelli Bauman (whose mom works at IES) came into the Makerspace holding a copy of Wild Sierra Nevada, thanking Howes for introducing her to the book.

“I saw it in the classroom and wanted to share it with my book reading club,” Bauman says. “I love the illustrations, especially the bear sleeping in the tree,” she shyly adds.

“People have been so supportive of this,” Howes says after Bauman left.

“And this has all been really fun with these school visits and the reactions the kids have,” Bailey adds, explaining how kids were smelling the tree bark in the earlier class.

“There aren’t really any books for this age group (4- 8-year-olds), so I think this is a niche that hasn’t been filled yet. And in this age group, all kids love to learn about nature,” says Howes.

For more information about Wild Sierra Nevada, visit <http://www.joannamhowes.com>.