

Nature always calls in the Meadows

BY COREY KLEIN
Staff Writer

It's a short trip down Route 3 from the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission headquarters in Lyndhurst to the Secaucus

MEADOWLANDS

High School marsh. Footsteps can be heard trudging through the thick marsh and, suddenly, two faces appear. Meadowlands Natural Resource specialists Gabrielle Bennett-Meany and Michael Newhouse have a canoe in a six foot wide channel deep in the swamp and are decked out in big, waterproof boots. Today, they are monitoring the progress made on the site, where Meadowlands scientists began pre-introducing native plants that had all but disappeared.

Bennett-Meany is taking a survey of the plants while Newhouse is taking notes on the wildlife. "Last year's vegetation was still a bit sparse because it was in its early stages," says Bennett-Meany.

This year, she notes, the plant life has really taken hold. "It's unbelievable," she says.

Bennett-Meany and Newhouse are taking photographs and notes all while navigating a canoe and constantly applying bug spray. "I've been bit three times already. I've got big welts," said Bennett-Meany.

The canoe winds its way through channels, sometimes only a few feet wide, to find the next marker. The markers are two-by-two wooden stakes. Not all of them are still where they belong. Many have sunk into the swamp or were carried away with the tide. This is why they are using a GPS device to find the exact locations they are monitoring. The GPS begins to beep loudly, so Newhouse pulls out a digital camera and Bennett-Meany begins taking notes.

She spots a reed called phragmites, an invasive species that has taken over large portions of the Meadowlands. These are the plants they are hoping to get rid of. Most of the area is full of spartina, which



STAFF PHOTO/JAIMIE WINTERS

Thursday 11 a.m. - Elise Backman, a high school student from High Technology High School in Lincroft, is spending her summer collecting data on spiders in the Meadowlands. Her studies have earned her the nickname "the spider lady" among her peers, which include some of New Jersey's most talented environmental scientists.

supports a diversity of wildlife and helps soak up flood waters like a sponge, a benefit for everyone who has ever seen a flooded basement in the Meadowlands area.

In the middle of the monitoring, Bennett-Meany's cell phone rings. She is sitting in a canoe surrounded by thick brush and has a clipboard in her lap. Still, she answers. It's a woman interested in bringing a corporate party out on the Hackensack River later this afternoon. She is concerned about inclement weather and is contemplating rescheduling. Bennett-Meany assures her that she can cancel up to the last possible minute.

"That's how important a cell phone can be these days. The only times I don't pick up are when my hands are full of mud or when I'm soaking in the water," she says.

Bennett-Meany and Newhouse crack jokes to break the tedium. "By about our 30th pole, it gets a little boring," said Newhouse.

The duo parks the canoe in the thick brush and climbs ashore to find another spot, this one on the "high marsh," where it is dry enough to walk on. "Vegetation is good. Growing well. Nice and lush," says Bennett-Meany as she and Newhouse snap photos, take notes and move on to the next

marker.

The next day at the laboratory in Lyndhurst, director and senior scientist of the Meadowlands Environmental Research Group Francisco Artigas asks environmental chemist Danielle Cioce the status of a soil testing project. The soil comes from the Secaucus High School marsh as well and Cioce is testing to find out if the clean soil trucked into the site in 2007 becomes contaminated after being exposed to the tides from the heavily polluted Hackensack River.

While Artigas said there has been no dramatic increase in contamination, the monitoring will take five years before any patterns are recognized. "We didn't detect any change, but we don't know," he says. "It's not finished. So far, we don't have any patterns."

Elise Backman, a high school student from High Technology High School in Lincroft, is spending her summer collecting data on spiders in the Meadowlands. Berry's Creek in Carlstadt and East Rutherford, one of the most polluted sites for mercury in the world, has an abundance of spiders. The spiders, she found, are unaffected. For a teenaged girl, her bravery among such large, creepy spiders is surprising. "I used to think I had arachnophobia, but now I think, 'Oh! They're pretty!'" she says as she holds an impaled araneus.

Her spider study, which is one of very few done in the United States, has earned her the nickname "the spider lady" among her fellow lab workers. For her last day, she says she will bake a cake decorated to look like a spider. "They're amazing organisms. They're really cool."

Scientist Joe Gryzb and intern Andrea Lopez are performing a study on corn and cantaloupe grown on the 1-E landfill to compare their chemical composition with corn and cantaloupe bought from a store. The edible plants grew on their own, but workers made sure not to infringe on them so they could flourish. "I can't wait to see the results," says Gryzb.

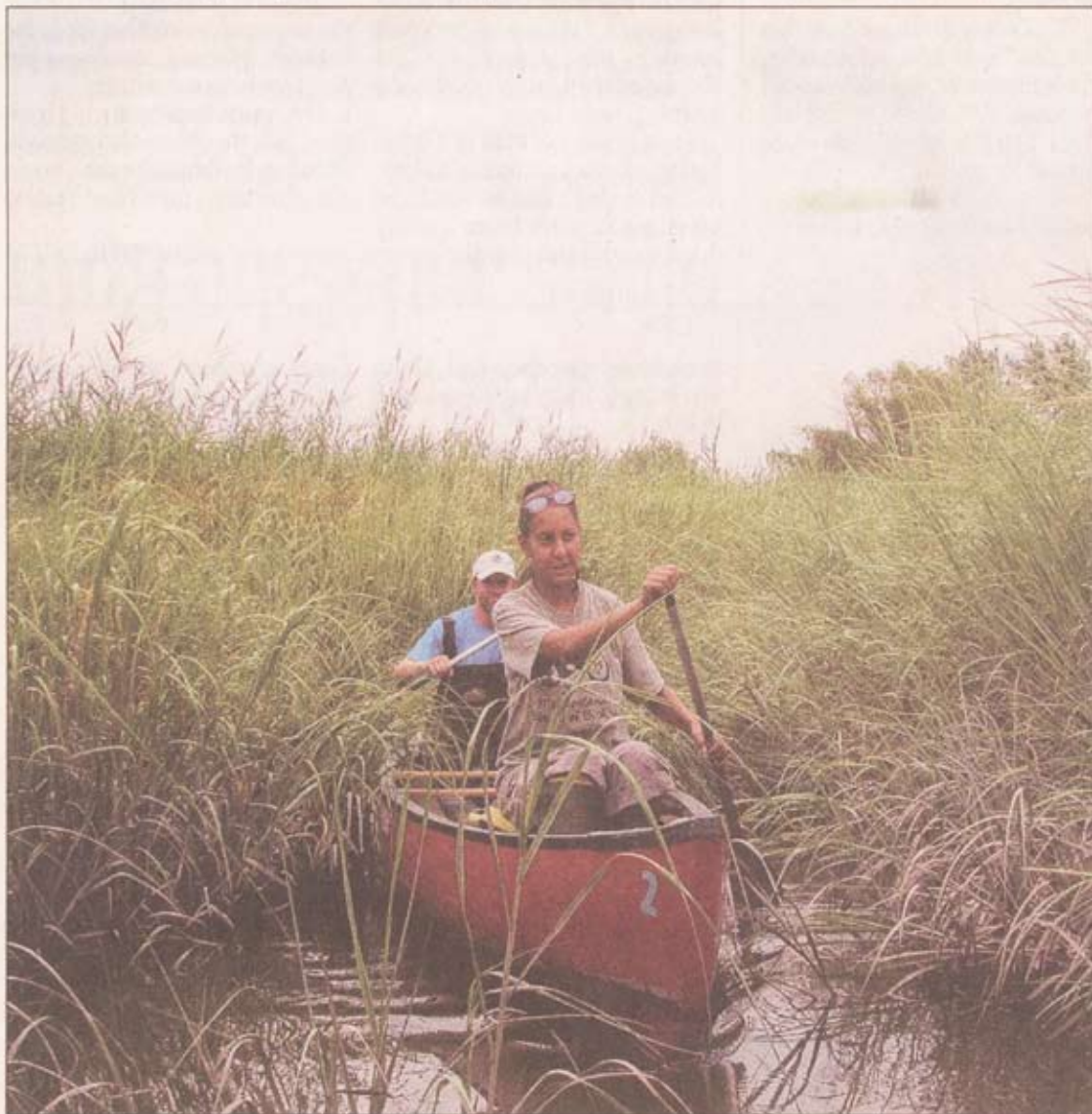


PHOTO COURTESY/NJMC

Wednesday 10 a.m. - Gabrielle Bennett-Meany and Michael Newhouse take a canoe through the Secaucus High School marsh to see what wildlife and plant life have made their home in the manmade swamp as part of an annual survey.

E-mail: klein@northjersey.com