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Project WHIRL students teach community about water quality, invasive species

By MARCUS WOLF

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Students from Indian River High School participating in the Indian River Lakes Conservancy's Protectors of Water and Habitat the Indian River Lakes program, also known as Project WHIRL, prepare to take their kayaks into Millsite Lake on Tuesday at an aquatic resources and invasive species orientation day in Theresa. Sydney Schaefer/Watertown Daily Times

THERESA — High school students showcased the knowledge about water quality and ecology they learned from a summer program through demonstrations held Tuesday at the Millsite Lake State Boat Launch.



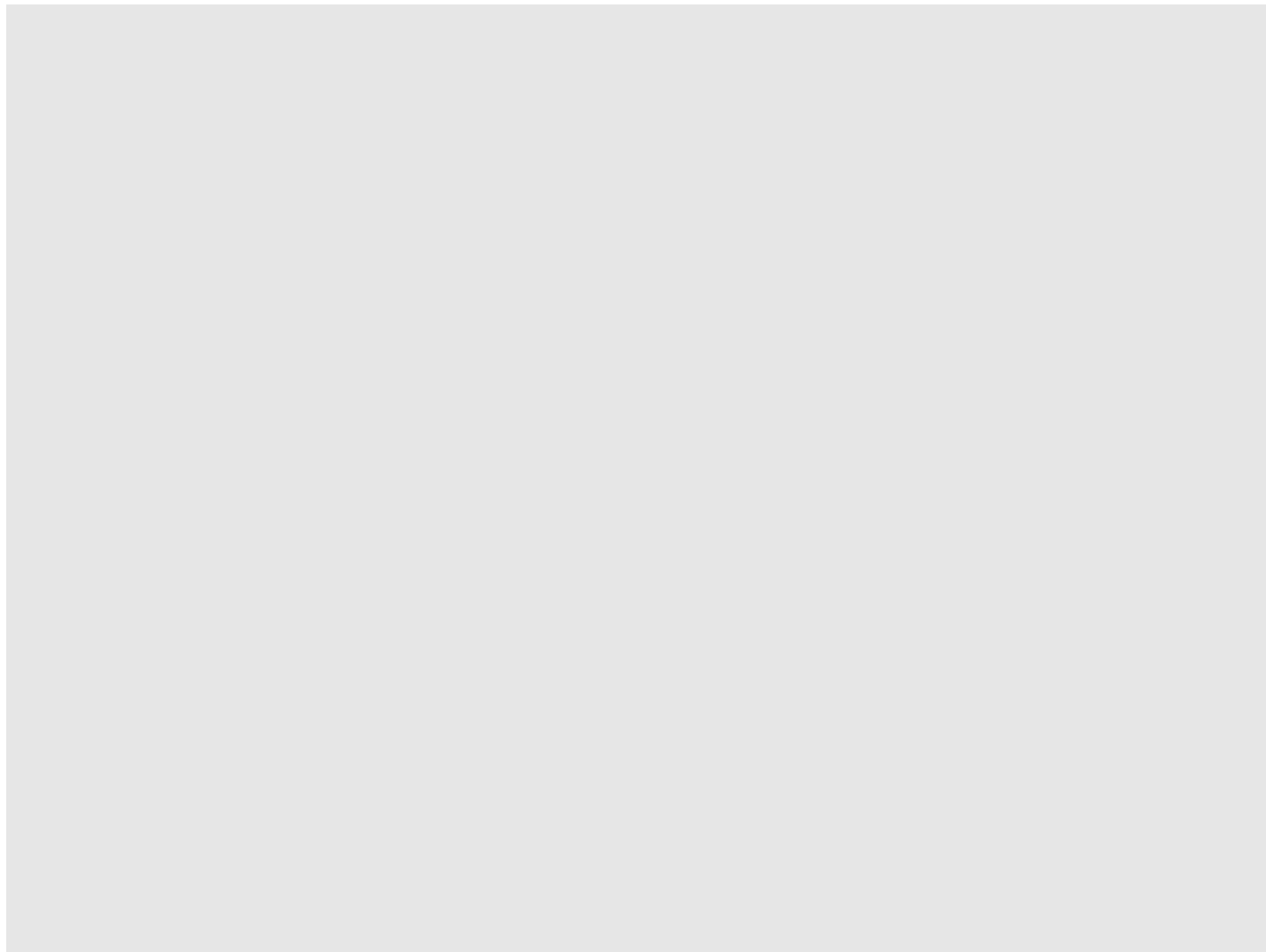
Students from Indian River High School participating in the Indian River Lakes Conservancy's Protectors of Water and Habitat on the Indian River Lakes program, also known as Project WHIRL, paddle their kayaks in Millsite Lake on Tuesday during an aquatic resources and invasive species orientation day in Theresa. Sydney Schaefer/Watertown Daily Times

The Indian River Lakes Conservancy kicked off the inaugural year of its Protectors of Water and Habitat on the Indian River Lakes program, also known as Project WHIRL, this summer to increase student interest in environmental stewardship. Eight students from the Indian River Central School District signed up for the program, said Andrea Inserra, a biology teacher from Indian River High School who helped facilitate it.

The students, with help from conservancy members and local experts, held demonstrations and set up booths on invasive species, fish ecology, aquatic macroinvertebrates and water quality testing during its aquatic resources and invasive species community awareness day. The students had to share what they learned from Project WHIRL to community members of all ages.

"It's cross-generational in the fact that we're trying to invite community members, retired folk and cottage association members to presentations," said James "Wylie" Huffman III, executive director of the conservancy.

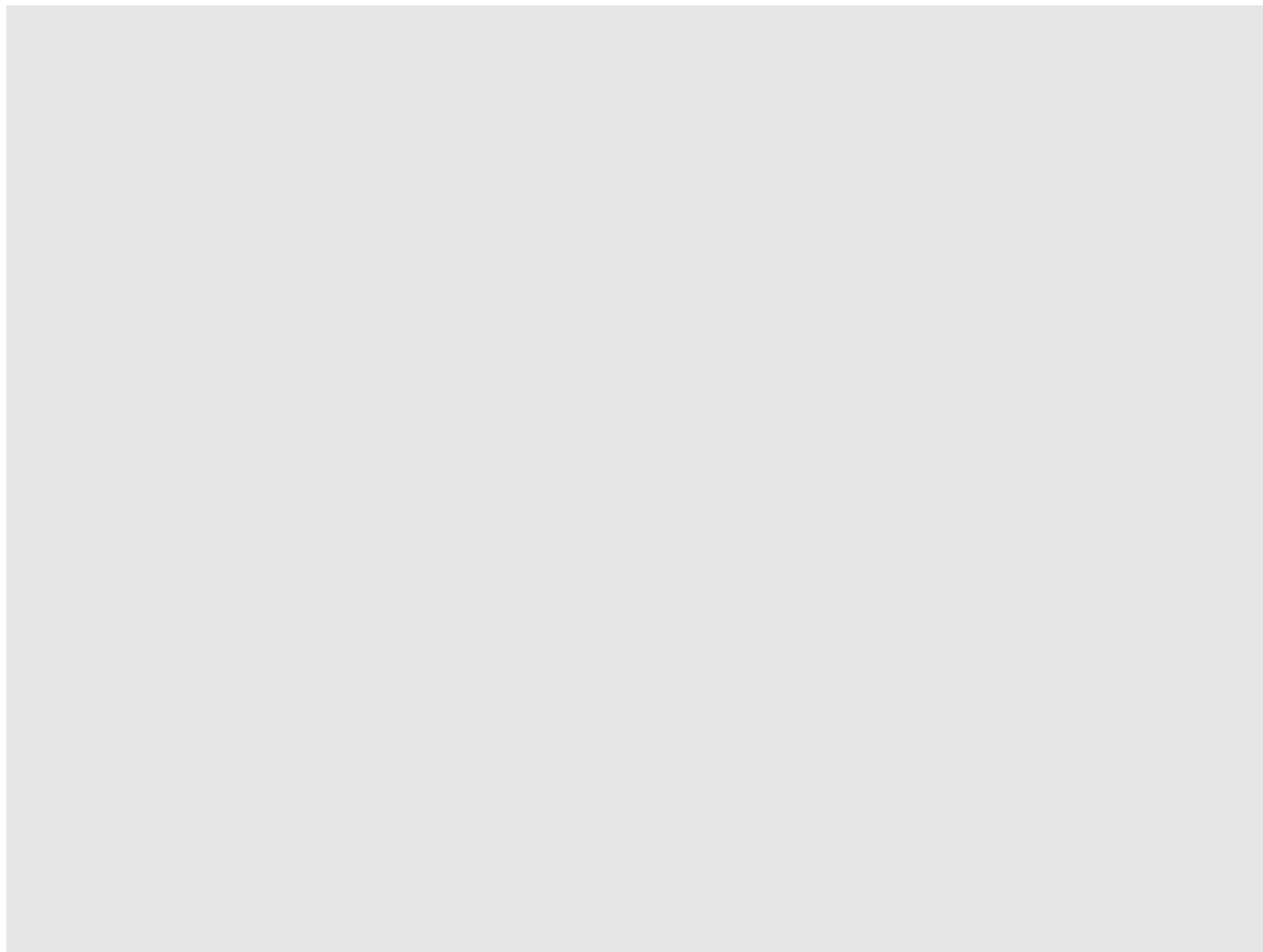
Lucus VanTassel, 17, and three other students showcased how they scouted for and removed invasive species from water bodies by paddling out to Millsite Lake and snatching invasive European frogbit.



Indian River High School student Lucas VanTassel pulls his kayak out of Millsite Lake on Tuesday, during an aquatic resources and invasive species orientation day hosted by Project WHIRL in Theresa. Sydney Schaefer/Watertown Daily Times

His interest in biology and instruction from Ms. Inserra drew him into the program, Lucas said. While he plans to pursue a career as a lineman, he said he hopes to remain involved in environmental science in some capacity.

Gaby Ames, 14, showcased how to use a seine, or type of net scientists use to capture fish and collect information about them, by scooping up dozens of little fish from the lake and placing them in a bucket with help from Ms. Inserra. The demonstration drew other students and local children, eager to see what they caught. Gaby said she enjoyed biology lab classes at school, and Ms. Inserra convinced her to join Project WHIRL.



Andrea Inserra, left, biology teacher at Indian River High School, and Indian River High School student Gaby Ames, right, pull a net through a shallow end of Millsite Lake in search of fish on Tuesday, July 30 during an aquatic resources and invasive species orientation day hosted by Project WHIRL in Theresa. Sydney Schaefer/Watertown Daily Times

“My best grades are in biology usually,” she said.

Prior to hosting their awareness day demonstrations Tuesday, students for weeks participated in several other activities under the tutelage of field professionals from various environmental groups. Their lessons included releasing root weevil to combat the invasive purple loosestrife plant, evaluating the water quality of Jewett Creek, capturing fish with the state Department of Environmental Conservation to collect data and using kits from Cornell University to obtain DNA of invasive species for tracking.

“Cornell didn’t have any of the (Indian) Lakes on their (fish tracking) maps, so the kids collected data as citizen scientists,” Ms. Inserra said.

The conservancy plans to add another component, watershed management; usher students from other nearby school districts and recruit college students studying environmental science or related fields to work as interns by mentoring local students for Project WHIRL next year.

“We want to create cross-generational stewards,” Mr. Huffman said. “Environmental education is a cornerstone of what the Indian River Lakes Conservancy does outside of protecting land.”

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