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GREEN MOUNTAIN

Useful fun: Erin Hayes-Pontius looks very, very closely at bugs

BY JOEL BANNER BAIRD, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2010

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Every hydropsychid tells a story.

Here's what a batch of them (more commonly known as net-spinning caddisfly larvae) told University of Vermont senior Erin Hayes-Pontius, 21, on Wednesday: The water in this stretch of Allen Brook is sufficiently clean for a delicate creature to thrive ---- no mean feat, considering its half-mile proximity to Taft Corners.

Hayes-Pontius, a zoology major, has an eye for macroinvertebrates -- creatures that do just fine without a spine. Within the space of 10 minutes, she also turned up stonefly nymphs and a water penny beetle larva.

She rattles off Latin taxonomies -- Ephemeroptera (mayflies), Plecoptera (stoneflies), Trichoptera (caddisflies) with an informality that persuades a visitor he's in the presence of a scientist.

She is.

For the past two years, the Colchester resident has been an intern with St. Michael's College biology professor Declan McCabe, working in the field and the lab to consolidate information about stream health in the Lake Champlain Basin -- as a part of the University of Vermont's EPSCoR Stream Project.

McCabe had high praise for Hayes-Pontius, calling her "a bug-ringer" of the highest order.

And indeed, the young woman's photo gallery of aquatic creatures on the project's Web site relish in details. These are close ups, almost alarmingly personal.

Consider the black-and-gold armor of the Order plecoptera; Family perlidae -- "a beautiful stonefly!" Hayes-Pontius writes by way of

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Erin Hayes-Pontius

Aquatic insects which the photographer says resemble Jack Skellington from the film, "Nightmare Before Christmas."



Erin Hayes-Pontius

A beautiful indicator of good stream health.

This aquatic insect spins silk nets to collect food particles.

explanation.

Or a group portrait of Mayfly nymphs' gaping eyes and scarecrow frames -- "individuals from my favorite family -- heptageniidae -- they look like Jack Skellington in (the film) 'Nightmare Before Christmas.'"

She comes by it honestly.

"It's been a life-long interest," she said. "Between kindergarten and third grade I had something of an obsession with woolly-bear caterpillars. I built houses for them and stuff."

Hayes-Pontius still delights in her work.

"It's fun," she said. "And it's useful."

This story appeared on page D6 of Sunday's Burlington Free Press

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Erin Hayes-Pontius



Erin Hayes-Pontius

The Glossomatids build cases resembling tortoise-shells, and feed by scraping algae off of rocks.



Erin Hayes-Pontius

A creature from the clean lagoon.



Erin Hayes-Pontius

An unsung hero from the Baetidae family.



Erin Hayes-Pontius, a senior at UVM, identifies aquatic insects June 2 in Allen Brook in Williston.

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