

Wildlife Preservation Fund Grant Takes Adams Sanctuary "On the Road"

By Susan Shaw, Director of Adams Wildlife Sanctuary

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Not every school class is able to visit the Illinois Audubon Society's Adams Wildlife Sanctuary for an environmental education program. But, thanks to a grant from the Wildlife Preservation Fund, programs go to Springfield schools. Over 1800 students participated in off-site programs during the 2000-01 school year.

Off-site programs take place in classrooms, during the school district's after school child care, at community programs such as Kids Cafe and St. John's Breadline, and at events such as Earth Stewardship Day. What kind of programs "go on the road"? Making a pine cone and peanut butter bird feeder is a great way to involve children in helping birds in the winter. It is also a way to get families started in bird watching. A slide program on backyard birds is popular, especially for classes participating in the Illinois Audubon Society's Junior Bird Feeder Challenge. Preschool children enjoy nature story hours.

Owl pellets are a BIG HIT with older elementary school classes. After a few protests, kids are enthralled with finding the tiny bones of an owl's prey. Dissecting the owl pellet is only half of the program -- students reconstruct the skeleton they've found. Several fourth grade teachers used the owl pellet program at the end of their science unit on the human skeleton. Students made comparisons between the pelvis of a vole and that of a person, talked about why no soft tissue was found in the owl pellets, and marveled at the tiny bones.

It is a challenge to present new programs at the school district's after school child care sites. This is the second year Adams Sanctuary has been doing programs at the same schools, and the students remembered the previous year's activities. Intern Kimberly Krepel and I used activities from Project Wild, Project Learning Tree and NatureScope to develop programs. Students learned why leaves turn color in the fall, compared animal tracks, played Illinois mammal bingo, and planted seeds.

Working with students from Springfield College in Illinois, 250 or more grade school students can participate in hands-on learning activities in one or two afternoons. Two classes taught by professor David Holland participated in this collaboration. In October, Pleasant Hill elementary school students made "bird nests", played the web of life game, learned about protective coloration, and other hands-on activities. In April, McClelland elementary school students planted seeds, made 3-d trees, played the web of life game, learned about protective coloration, and several other activities. Not only did the elementary school students learn through the activities, the college students felt that they learned a great deal about teaching. David and I are already planning what we'll do next year.

Spring and summer are filled with visits by classes and day camps. Intern Richard Kohlrus was an able assistant. A student at Springfield College, Richard participated in the McClelland school event. In addition to working with groups, he completed several projects to enhance the educational programs at the Sanctuary. Having an assistant is particularly important when the groups are large. Some day camps bring 40 children for a field trip.

This year's grant from the Wildlife Preservation Fund paid for Adams Sanctuary interns and purchased supplies for programs. Lots of owl pellets and peanut butter were used during the year. Oh yes, it also bought soda for the SCI students to drink during the "debriefing" sessions following each activity afternoon. For the record, Mountain Dew is popular with the college crowd.