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Educating inmates

Lectures 'bring science and nature' into prison

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Corrine Coffman, with the Bureau of Land Management operated Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, holds Great Horned Owl, Archimedes, as inmates from Snake River Correctional Institution look on.

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ONTARIO — More than 20 inmates at the Snake River Correctional Institution minimum-security facility were given the chance to take part in some community education when two presenters from local wildlife and ecology groups visited to educate them about owls within the state of Oregon.

http://www.argusobserver.com/news/educating-inmates/article_387dfba6-95c9-11e7-ae3d-93db8cbe41d0.html

Nancy DeWitt, from the Institute of Applied Ecology, along with Corrine Coffman, from the Bureau of Land Management operated Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, were on hand to offer information about the number of species of owls within Oregon. They also discussed distinguishing traits and characteristics, along with interesting facts about the different species.

The presentation is part of a lecture series by the Institute of Applied Ecology that DeWitt, specifically, has been bringing to SRCI since March this year. The educational lectures have been happening every month since then. Topics have covered sagebrush, invasive plants, and even bees.

“The idea is to bring science and nature into the prisons,” she said.

There are 19 species of owls that are native to North America. Of those, 15 species find habitat in Oregon, DeWitt told to the inmates.

From the small Northern Saw-whet and Flammulated owls, to the medium-sized Northern Hawk and Barn Owls and, even, the large Great Horned and Great Gray owls, DeWitt took the inmates through their physical characteristics, behavior and habitat.

When talking about the Spotted Owl, for example, DeWitt mentioned the controversy surrounding the loss of its population in relation to the loss of its habitat within Oregon. The owl is known to thrive in old growth forests — forests that the logging industry had used for its timber.

Another was the Great Gray Owl. For this, DeWitt described how the distinctive disc-shaped face helps them, and other owls, with drawing sound to their ears. The ears are asymmetrical, to help owls like the Great Gray Owl triangulate their prey. In fact, according to DeWitt, these owls are able to hear small rodents up to 30 feet away under 2 feet of snow.

Coffman came in to describe a special adaptation that owls have, allowing near silent flight when hunting their prey. The feathers of these birds of prey are covered in small structures that break up the air into small turbulences. These turbulences roll to the edge of the owl’s wing, which has

a flexible fringe, further break up the air and reduce noise, almost all of which is absorbed by the velvety down of the feathers.

Coffman demonstrated this by grabbing owl feathers and flapping them as hard as she could, comparing the noise made to that of hawks.

Then Archimedes, the education owl, made an appearance.

The male Great Horned Owl is approximately 2 and a-half years old and serves in its teaching role because it is missing an eye, a surgery required after being hit by a car.

The inmates who were present for the presentation watched with interest and asked plenty of questions as Archimedes sat perched atop a glove worn by Coffman.

“They are so hungry for education,” DeWitt said after the presentation. “They’re so grateful to have volunteers come in and speak to them.”

When asked what their favorite tidbit of information they learned was, inmates shouted out interesting owl adaptations, such as silent flight, asymmetrical ears and one artery that allows owls to spin their heads 270 degrees.

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Nancy DeWitt Sep 11, 2017 7:54am

This lecture was organized as part of the Great Basin Sagebrush Project, an environmental partnership between the Institute for Applied Ecology, Oregon Department of Corrections, Sustainability in Prisons Project, and the Bureau of Land Management. The program provides unique and meaningful ecological activities to incarcerated men and women with the goal of restoring native habitat for the greater sage-grouse in the great basin region. This year inmates at SRCI and ten other prisons are growing 390,000 sagebrush and other plants for restoring habitat for sage-grouse and other wildlife. The monthly lectures educate inmates about the ecology and geology of the region where their sagebrush and bitterbrush will be planted. The programs also provide inmates with skills and information about career, volunteer, and citizen science opportunities available to them following their release from prison.