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Dexter Students Dissected Owl Pellets and Learned About Food Chains

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Naturalists and an education consultants with the Missouri Department of Conservation's (MDC) Cape Girardeau Conservation Nature Center visited third and fifth grade classrooms in Dexter and Oran recently to give nature programs. These visits are part of a large effort to take nature programs to students who might not otherwise get to visit the center.

"We taught the students about food chains while exploring owl adaptations and pellets," said Sara Bradshaw, a MDC education consultant. "All of our nature programs teach about animal conservation, habitats, nature appreciation and connect to classroom science studies."

Bradshaw said the lessons are part of MDC's Discover Nature Schools (DNS) program. DNS emphasizes hands-on learning, teaches problem-solving, and provides authentic and local contexts for learning. Its lessons teach students from pre-K through high school about Missouri's native plants, animals, and habitats and connects them with nature. This particular DNS lesson is Nature Unleashed, featuring information about animal adaptations, food chains, and owl pellet dissection activity.

"Many people don't know what owl pellets are," Bradshaw said. "But they actually teach us a lot about these fascinating raptors and provide a perfect exploration of the food chain."

Bradshaw said an owl pellet is a tight little ball of items that an owl cannot digest. When an owl eats small rodents, birds and bugs each night, its stomach can't digest things like fur, teeth, feathers and bones, so the owl will regurgitate these items in the form of a pellet. She said the pellets are heat sterilized before the dissection activity, which kills any living organisms that might still be present in the pellets.

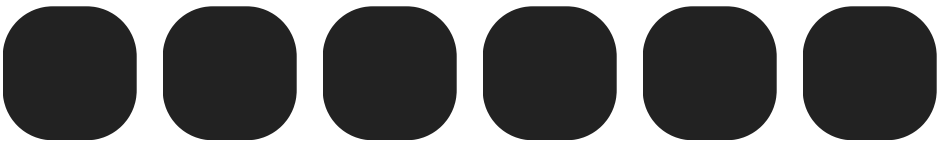
“These extra parts tell us what the owl has been eating,” Bradshaw said. “It’s a very fun, educational activity the kids really get excited about.”

Bradshaw said the schools get excited about saved costs when naturalists visit. DNS lessons provide a field experience without the costs of a field trip. She hopes the programs help teachers see how they can tie nature as a theme into their current teaching strategies using DNS curriculum as the lesson or supplement to their lessons. Schools that participate in DNS are provided free curriculum and become eligible for field trip grants.

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