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Schoolchildren get first-hand experience with Young Naturalist

By Ben Orcutt -- Daily Staff Writer

BOYCE -- Elementary school children from throughout the region enjoyed learning about wildlife Saturday at the University of Virginia's Blandy Experimental Farm.

Located nine miles east of Winchester on U.S. 50, Blandy is home to the State Arboretum of Virginia. On Saturday, Blandy was host to 24 pupils in grades 1 through 5 as part of its Young Naturalist Program. The children were divided into two groups: grades 1 and 2, and grades 3 through 5.

The theme was "Critters of Virginia," and representatives of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center from nearby Millwood were on hand to talk about what kind of animals could be in area backyards.

"A lot of times you're not even gonna see them because they're so well-camouflaged," said Vicki Windham, a wildlife rehabilitator at Blue Ridge.

Windham told the older group of children in Saturday's afternoon session there are about 111 species of mammals, 275 bird species, 76 species of reptiles and about 90 species of amphibians in Virginia.

The opossum is the only marsupial -- an animal that nourishes its young in a pouch -- in North America, Windham said, adding that the opossum can be found in Virginia.



Dr. Belinda Burwell, from the blue Ridge Wildlife Center, holds Baron, a screech owl, as she tells the class of Young Naturalists about native Virginia animals at the Blandy Experimental Farm near Boyce of Saturday. Andrew Thayer/Daily

Virginia is also home to squirrels, birds of prey, white-tailed deer, foxes, bats, frogs, toads and many other animals, Windham added.

Windham showed the children photographs of the two venomous snakes found in Virginia, the northern copperhead and the timber rattlesnake, noting that venomous snakes have triangular-shaped heads.

"The rule of thumb is, if it's a snake, let it alone," Windham said.

The children got to see a black rat snake named Matilda that lives in a cage at Blandy's Parkfield Learning Center, where Saturday's program was held.

If the children ever discover a young animal that appears to be without its mother, it's better not to feed the animal, Windham said, but rather call the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center for advice.

The youngsters got excited when Dr. Belinda Burwell, the veterinarian who founded the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center, brought out Baron, a screech owl. Burwell explained that because Baron has a broken wing and cannot fly, he is an "animal ambassador" the center uses for programs Saturday's.



Vicki Windham, with the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center, shows skin shed by a snake to the class. Andrew Thayer/Daily

When Burwell brought out Lamont, a barred owl, one of the children asked her how she knew Lamont was a boy.

"I don't know for sure, but he hasn't laid any eggs," Burwell said.

Following Blue Ridge's presentation, Burwell said that she enjoyed the group of children because they were knowledgeable about nature. The idea is to further instill in them a sense of "respect" for wildlife, she said.

Lauren Ingram, 8, of Winchester, enjoyed the presentation, as did 9-year-old Ethan Reinitz, of Woodstock, who said he liked "seeing the owls because they're my favorite animal. The screech really cute."



Blue Ridge Wildlife Center's Dr. Belinda Burwell talks to the class about Lamont, a barred owl. The Center takes care of wounded animals and is funded by donations and grants. Andrew Thayer/Daily

Steven B. Carroll, director of public programs at Blandy, was impressed with how the children took in the Blue Ridge presentation.

"That's the real payoff," said Carroll, an ecologist. "They really paid close attention for quite a long time."

Carroll and Blandy volunteers passed out binoculars and magnifying glasses to the children before they embarked on a short field trip. Volunteer Karen Troxell, a third-grade teacher at Redbud Run Elementary School in Frederick County who accompanied the children, said "kids need their head out of the textbook."

Mariana Axelson, 8, of Winchester, discovered a bird feather during the field trip.

"I think that's actually kind of neat, but I'm wondering what kind of bird it is," she said.

Kelli Violetta, 10, of Berryville, was admiring Axelson's find and the Blandy grounds.

"I really like how beautiful everything is, especially at this time of season," Violetta said.

Blue Ridge Wildlife Center is a nonprofit supported entirely by private donations. For more information, call 837-9000. For more information on programs offered at Blandy, visit its Web site at www.virginia.edu/blandy.

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Blue Ridge Wildlife Center's Vicki Windham answers questions from the class of Young Naturalists about Lucy, a red-shouldered hawk, at the Blandy Experimental Farm on Saturday near Boyce. Andrew Thayer/Daily

