

Biologist shares osprey secrets with Lawn Avenue students

Dr. Rob Bierregaard has been tracking Jamestown's Conanicus

By Sam Bari

Dr. Rob Bierregaard, a professor of biology at the University of North Carolina and raptor expert, captured the attention of students in grades 5 through 8 last Friday at the Lawn Avenue School.

His slide show presentation on raptors and the osprey migration was well received by all who attended the long-anticipated event.

State Department of Environmental Management wildlife biologist Chris Powell and Audubon Society of Rhode Island ornithologist Sam Fox assisted in the presentation.

Bierregaard began the program by asking the students questions to find out what they knew about raptors. He was pleasantly surprised when he found them to be quite knowledgeable, as they answered most of his questions correctly. He commended them for doing their homework.

He added to their knowledge of adaptations of raptors when he told them about the exceptional eyesight and acute hearing of owls and how they use those adaptations to stalk their prey at night. He also noted the owls' weak sense of smell and how their adaptations compensated for that shortcoming.

"They can actually hear a field mouse scurrying through the

underbrush in the woods, and then with their keen eyesight, they can see their prey as it moves through the grass and under leaves," Bierregaard said. "They can turn their heads 180 degrees in both directions so they can watch silently without having to turn their bodies when they hear movement," he pointed out. He then went on to talk about hawks, eagles, and other raptors, noting that the osprey is the only raptor that dines exclusively on fish.

The students listened attentively and were eager to participate in the interactive program. When talking about the great horned owl, Powell held up a stuffed owl for all to see. He did the same with an osprey as Bierregaard pointed to the talons, beak, and other features indigenous to each species.

One of the highlights of the afternoon was the presentation of a live adult, male great horned owl by ornithologist Sam Fox. He took the owl out of its box and allowed it to perch on his arm. Then he walked around the gymnasium so students could get a close view of the magnificent bird. As he walked, he told the story of the owl's rescue in Alaska after suffering a gunshot wound in his right wing. "The wing had to be removed," Fox said. "Consequently, he can't fly



Dr. Rob Bierregaard



Lawn Avenue School students listen to the story of Conanicus' migration to Cuba.

because he only has one wing. Without the ability to fly, he can't hunt and we have to provide him with his food. So we gave him a job helping us give presentations like we're doing today," Fox added.

Bierregaard talked about how osprey migrate, and how Conanicus, the fledgling osprey from Jamestown that he fitted with a satellite transmitter, found his way to Cuba when he was little more than a few months old. With a map on the screen, Bierregaard pointed to each area where Conanicus and Homer, a juvenile released from Martha's Vineyard equipped with a similar tracking device, stopped on their southern migration.

Bierregaard treated the raptors' journey as if it were a race and asked the students which osprey they thought would win. As it happened, Conanicus arrived at the Zapata swamps in Cuba first, which delighted the audience. Conanicus is expected to spend two seasons in Cuba before returning to Jamestown, where he will find a mate, the raptor expert noted.

Bierregaard gave a similar program that was open to the public

that evening at the Jamestown library. He also gave an additional speech on Saturday, April 1, at the R.I. Audubon Society Birdfest. His lectures were made

possible through a \$500 grant from the Jamestown Education Foundation and a \$100 donation from the Audubon Society of Rhode Island.



Sam Fox of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island shows the students a captive great horned owl.

Photos by Jeff McDonough

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