

“A Paradigm Shift in Teaching Children Results in More Adult Activists”

by Alexandra Forsythe

It was a night I will never forget. Walking through an unfamiliar forest, I had nothing to light my way but a small flashlight. The skies were clear but there was no moonlight. In the distance, I could hear a loud, screaming call, and I moved swiftly toward the unearthly sound. My heart beat faster as I thought about the creature I would soon encounter. After what seemed like hours, I saw the glow of the creature’s eyes and I squealed with delight. It was my first face-to-face encounter with an owl!

The owl was hanging upside-down in the net, and she was looking rather perplexed. She had thoroughly entangled herself and I had the honor of extracting her. She was the first owl I ever held, and I fell in love immediately.

That night was four years ago and I was 12-years old. Since then I’ve become very active in helping owls and other wildlife. I’ve given over 50 presentations across the Midwest for several organizations including the Department of Natural Resources, state and local Audubon Societies, state conferences and more (Forsythe). I write monthly “Bird of the Month” articles for the state Audubon Society (IAS) and I created websites dedicated to teaching young people about the many ways they can help wildlife (Young Conservationists) and the beneficial nature of our feathered friends (Midwest Bird Watching).

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Needless to say, that hike into the forest four years ago completely changed my life! The interaction I had with that owl provided a deeper connection with the natural world and instilled within me a strong sense of responsibility. Based on the impact it had on my life, I believe that a positive, personal encounter with an animal can mean the difference between a child who simply admires an animal and a child who becomes an impassioned activist who spends a lifetime helping to save that species. The future of every species on this planet rests in the hands of young people. In an age in which children spend so much time away from nature and in front of their phones and video games, it is imperative that we reconnect them with the natural world. The most powerful, effective way to do that is to bring nature into their lives and their classrooms. We need to introduce them to animals face-to-face and teach them about the wonders of those animals.

With the funds I received from a conservation grant, I began a school outreach program in cooperation with the Limberlost State Historic Site (Limberlost). Our mission is to educate students in public, private and Amish schools about owls and the simple ways young people can help them survive. Alexandra's Outreach has touched the lives of hundreds of students, and the program is highly interactive with live owls, hands-on activities, take-home projects and several ideas that children can share with their families to benefit the owls. As a licensed bird handler working with a wildlife rehabilitator, I have the unique opportunity to introduce live rehab birds to the children. The children have the chance to look into the bird's eyes and connect with it the way I connected with an owl four years

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ago. It is a powerful and moving moment, one that I feel privileged to share. Photos of the program are available here: <http://limberlost.weebly.com/alexandra-forsythes-outreach-program.html>.

The primary spokesperson for our program is Sherman, a state-endangered Short-eared Owl (Indiana Fish and Wildlife). The Short-eared Owl is unusual in its behavior and territory preferences, so it is at greater risk than many other owls. It nests on the ground and requires large areas of grasslands to survive (Cornell Lab of Ornithology). It's no secret that Indiana is a farming state, so grasslands are coveted for their tillable acreage. Few grasslands remain; most are now farmlands leaving Short-eared Owls without suitable habitat (DNR).

While farmers desire the same lands as the Short-eared Owls, they (and the rest of us) need these owls to help keep the rodent populations under control. Rat poisons may destroy some mice, but any mouse that has ingested rat poison becomes easy prey for an owl. If an owl ingests that mouse, the poison will kill the owl. The loss of that owl means that the lives of hundreds of mice have now been spared; an owl family can consume 3,000 mice in just one breeding season (Hungry Owl Project). It is easy to see that owls are a more effective and safe pest control than any chemical we can manufacture.

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During our program we teach children several easy ways to help these owls. One is to stop throwing food products out of vehicle windows. For example, we toss out apple cores as we drive along thinking apples are a natural food and therefore healthy for the wildlife to eat. There are many reasons why that is not the correct course of action, but one reason often overlooked is this: food found alongside roads is often fatal to owls. How can this be? Owls are carnivores, not herbivores. It is true that owls do not eat apples. However, mice do feast upon the food tossed out of vehicles. Alongside the road, the mice are clearly visible and in the open. Focused on their prey, the owls dive silently at full speed, completely oblivious to the oncoming cars. Young, inexperienced owls often fall victim to fast-moving vehicles while learning to hunt. In my job assisting wildlife rehabilitators, I see dozens of owls per year injured this way. By simply using a compost bin rather than littering, the children can help save those owls and the owl's offspring.

As children, we often feel that problems are too big; we don't have the resources to save habitats or change land use. In Alexandra's Outreach, we empower children with actions that make a difference. We reconnect them with the natural world so that they'll become lifelong activists with the knowledge and power to change the world and help save a species, beginning with the Short-eared Owl.

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