

Stockton's Pinelands Campus Serves 450 Learners During Pinelands Short Course

Participants View Live Raptors and Sea Life, Go Birding, Listen to Music and Learn About the Pinelands Environment, Cultural and History

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Galloway, NJ – Ed Clarke, of Mullica Township, N.J., looked through his binoculars to closely observe a diving grebe across Lake Fred while his wife, Jennifer, learned about the ecology of pinelands lichens in the Unified Science Center.

There was something for everyone who attended the 27th Annual Pinelands Short Course at Stockton University today. The New Jersey Pinelands Commission organized the event, which offered 32 presentations featuring New Jersey's wild spaces, tales from the past, music of the pines and environmental issues such as climate change. About 450 people attended.

This month, Stockton's mascot, the osprey, will be returning to South Jersey. Males typically arrive before the females, explained John Rokita, principal lab technician in the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. Rokita presented "Birding the Pinelands," which began inside a laboratory with an overview of the species that can be observed on and near the campus.

He went on to explain how to distinguish between juvenile and adult ospreys. Juveniles have orange eyes and pale-colored scalloping along the edges of their wings, while adults have yellow eyes and no scalloping. He pointed out the rough spicules on their feet that help them to grasp fish, which they align aerodynamically, head in the direction of their flight.

Study skins, which are preserved specimens, were on display for the bird enthusiasts to see the detail in each species' feathers and talons as well as their unique patterns and colors.

"Who cooks for you," is the call of the barred owl, but when they stealthily swoop in on prey, their flight is nearly silent, Rokita explained. Outer barbs on their feathers aid in muffling the sound.

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Pinelands Short Course/ page 2

A bird that is heard more than seen is the whip-poor-will, named after its unique call. These insect-eaters have specialized feathers near the bill that form a net to corral insects, said Rokita as he held up the study skin.

He discussed common backyard birds such as the blue jay, a species clever enough to mimic the call of the red-tailed hawk to clear out the competition at the feeders. Ed Clarke shared that he has observed ruby-throated hummingbirds hovering over the sprinklers in his yard to get water.

Also among the group was Caitlin Morrison, of Collingswood, N.J., who said she developed a greater appreciation for birding, which has become her hobby, after taking an ornithology course. This year was her fourth Pinelands Short Course.

After the overview, the group walked outside with a spotting scope and binoculars to identify birds in the wild, but not without stopping to see the aquaria housing poison dart frogs, a boa constrictor, green anoles and other critters.

Fred Strang, an environmental officer for the Coast Guard Auxiliary in Manahawkin, N.J., attended sessions to learn about local sea life, osprey monitoring and climate change. "New Jersey is a very unique place," he said, adding that we need to protect it. He is studying how runoff creates environmental impacts in the Barnegat Bay ecosystem and how the loss of eel grass takes away fish habitat by eliminating food, shelter and protection for juvenile fish. "No pollution should go on the ground. It eventually ends up in the bay," he said.

Kathy Prasicky, of Chatsworth, N.J., attended last year, and brought her husband, Oleg, this year because they live in the Pinelands and hope to learn more about the nature in their backyard. "It's been 26 years and there is still a lot we don't know," they said together.

Two Stockton alums were among the vendors distributing information in the Campus Center throughout the day. Robin Riley-Wright, a 1978 graduate and former member of Stockton Action Volunteers for the Environment (SAVE), is now a board member for the Atlantic Audubon Society, which originally started as a Stockton birding club. Her table displayed taxidermy mounts of bird species and a grey fox. Michele Bellinger, a Marine Science graduate who was a member of Stockton's first graduating class, is now a public education and outreach assistant for the Atlantic County Utilities Authority (ACUA). She was sharing information about the upcoming ACUA Earth Day celebration, the community gardens in the ACUA environmental park in Egg Harbor Township, N.J. and tours of the facilities including the wind farm and wastewater treatment plant.

Inside the Campus Center Event Room, Kaitlin Gannon, of Mays Landing, N.J., the outreach coordinator at The Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor, N.J., held up her favorite animal in the world, the horseshoe crab. "They've been on this planet for 450 million years and were here before dinosaurs," she said. They're actually more closely related to spiders than crabs, and "are vital for the environment and us."

Horseshoe crab eggs are a food source for migrating birds and an important resource for the medical industry. Their blue blood has a unique compound that is used to test antibiotics, vaccines, contact lenses and other types of medical instruments for bacteria and impurities.

Brennan Geraci and his mother, Audrey Geddesi, of Atco, N.J., came up to the touch tank at the end of Gannon's session, "Sea Creatures with Amazing Features," to see the horseshoe crab up close. His favorite parts of the day were "learning so much stuff" and touching a starfish.