

Hanging with the Night Owls

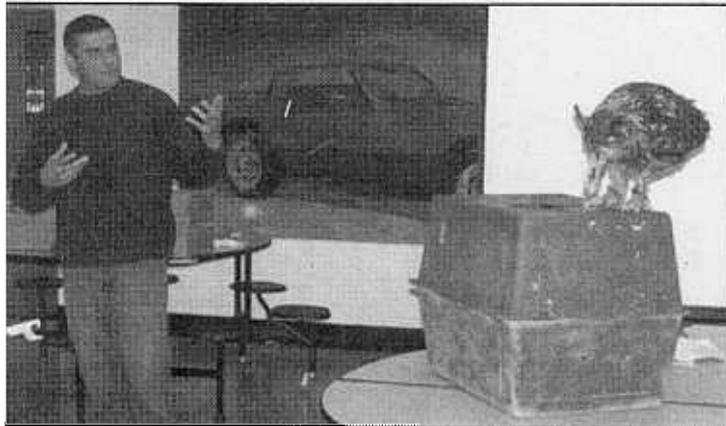
By Melanie Lekocevic

COXSACKIE – They may live in Coxsackie and surrounding areas, but you're not likely to see them unless you make a concerted effort – owls are largely nocturnal, and only come out when the sun goes down.

To get a better view of these creatures of the night, dozens of kids and adults were at Coxsackie-Athens High School for a Family Owl Night Hike, led by representatives from the Greene Land Trust, the Audubon Society and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

After a presentation indoors – including a visit from a real eagle owl and several stuffed specimens – participants headed into the great outdoors for a gander at owls in their natural habitat.

“In our area, we have ten species of owls and ten species of hawks that can be found at different times of the year and in different habitats,” said Richard Guthrie from Greene Land Trust, which has preserved several areas that are home to owls as ‘forever wild’ land. “Most are nocturnal and they come out to feed at night, but some do feed during the daytime.”



Wildlife educator Brian Robinson brought a live eagle owl to Family Owl Night Hike, including a feeding demonstration and flight around the cafeteria.

Owls are finely-tuned predators that feed largely on small rodents like mice, shrews and voles, but can also go after larger prey like skunks. And with no sense of smell, the protective odors released by skunks don't bother them at all.

That's not the only way owls have adapted to be superior predators.

“Their eyes are very large and they can see very well at night, and they have excellent hearing – they can hear much better than we can and they can locate things by sound alone,” Guthrie said. “Most owls can also fly silently at night, so they can swoop down on their prey.”

Here's a bit of owl trivia for you – while owls feed on small animals, they don't

digest the fur and bones. They eat them, but then cough them up afterward, spitting up small pellets. And that's a good way for you to locate owls if you want to observe them.

“If you are looking for owls, don't look up,” Guthrie said. “Rather, you should look down and look for the pellets that they cough up.”

There are many kinds of owls native to Coxsackie, like the screech owl, which lives in the Sleepy Hollow Lake area, and the sawwhet owl, which is one of the smallest species of owl and has a unique cry. “They are very tame and approachable, but they are difficult to find,” Guthrie said. “They tuck themselves into the sides of dense trees. The sound they make is similar to the tooting of a tugboat.”