

Students in tune with raptors

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Research across areas of study offers insights into lives of kestrels

Ask any fifth-grader at Cedar Grove-Belgium Middle School about the American kestrel, and you will be given a wealth of information, including the fact the small falcon is about half the size of a peregrine, likes to nest in rock hollows and tree cavities and that its numbers are declining but no one knows why.

The bird's population decline prompted the students to seek permission from the School Board to become involved in the international American Kestrel Partnership based at Boise State University in Idaho and erect two nesting boxes on school property. The board gave its blessing on March 13.

Students recently found nesting materials in one of the boxes. That's not a good sign, student Kirsten Oszuscik said.

"Kestrels don't use nesting materials," she said. "They use sawdust and wood chips."



The students had put four inches of wood chips in both boxes, but all the chips were gone in that box, they said.

They removed the nesting material, but the next week not only was the nest rebuilt, but they found two starling eggs. After much debate and research, they decided to remove the eggs because starlings are not a native species or endangered.

The other nesting box hasn't been touched yet, but students are hoping to see a kestrel soon.

The kestrel project is the way language arts teacher Mary Anderson, who is adept at using technology in her classroom, has incorporated science into her reading and writing curriculum, as required by the state common core standards.

She knew students would get excited about the project, but even she is amazed at how much they have accomplished.

In addition to participating in the American Kestrel Partnership, each student also chose a Wisconsin bird — other than a kestrel or peregrine — to research and write a report that will be

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included in a book that will be published online.

The project includes lots of research, most of it online, evaluating sources, monitoring the nesting boxes, reporting their findings, identifying birds or animals that use the box and blogging with scientists at Boise State University. The project could extend into June if a late migrating kestrel decides to nest in Cedar Grove.

Most American kestrels are expected to return to the area in mid-May, students said, although Anderson saw two of the birds recently in Belgium and Kirsten thought she saw one in her back yard.

Anderson enlisted help from her daughter Allie — a Cedar Grove-Belgium graduate who is a biologist at Boise State and involved in the university's Peregrine Fund and American Kestrel Partnership — and her husband Greg, a plant manager at WE Energies.

When only a few volunteers were needed to present their case for the scientific study to the School Board, students wrote a paragraph explaining why they would be good for the project and how they could help the team. Allie chose the team based on the essays.

Allie also asked fellow Boise State biologists to blog with the fifth-graders. Each scientist is paired with 11 to 12 students who ask questions about kestrels and peregrines, the bird they're researching, why the biologists chose their careers and other scientific-based questions.

"Allie said in seventh grade she saved a cedar waxwing," student Anna Claerbaut said. "She wanted to be a marine biologist, but decided to be a bird biologist instead. She's been studying kestrels for two years."

The biologists were impressed with the students' questions and knowledge.

"They were so impressed with the students' questions that they asked if they could send them to the National Science Foundation to show that when science projects are funded, they reach further than expected," Anderson said.

Greg Anderson helped students build the kestrel nesting boxes from instructions they found online. High-school students cut the boards for the boxes in their woodworking class.

The boxes are in trees eight feet off the ground and as far apart as possible in the field north of the high school. The students obtained permission from a farmer to cross his field to check one of the boxes.

Volunteers check them after school once a week, taking turns to peek inside. Each has a job to do, from recording what they observe to holding the ladder.

Students also monitor a live webcam of American kestrels that have laid eggs in a nest box at the World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise. During their social studies class, they monitor a Department of Natural Resources eagle webcam with teacher Tracy Gerlach.

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The students' blogs will be used by guidance counselor Beth Smittkamp to explore scientific careers with the students. The school's Spirit Club plans to hold a game night to raise money for the Peregrine Fund and American Kestrel Partnership.

Greg Anderson also arranged for WE Energies biologist Greg Septon to speak to the students about the utility's successful Peregrine Recovery Project. Students will go to the utility's River Valley Power Plant to band and name the nestlings.

If those eggs don't hatch, they will go to the Port Washington power plant where four peregrines have hatched. The Valley Power Plant has a larger room for students.

The students' embrace of the kestrel project shows "they want to reach out and help," Anderson said.

"Even kids can make a difference."

Image Information: CHECKING A KESTREL nesting box, fifth-grader Nadia Dries (on the ladder) found nesting material, something that is not used by kestrels. On the ground were (from left) Joe Wilsnack, Alyssa Geib, Kirsten Oszuscik, Jaeven Vandebloom, Anna Claerbaut, Hannah Dekker and Jake Weyker.

Photo by Sam Arendt