

Burlington County Times

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By **Steven Hart Staff Writer**

Despite bad weather, owl event turns out to be a hoot

WESTAMPTON — Who gives a hoot about owls?

Quite a few people, as it turns out. Enough to pack the room Sunday afternoon at the Rancocas Nature Center, despite the hammering rain and dicey driving conditions outside.

As explained by sanctuary director Susan Buffalino, owls are among the most helpful and yet hardest to find residents of the Rancocas Nature Center, the 210-acre piece of the Rancocas State Park off Rancocas Road.

“We’ve heard them calling at night, but during the day they are very hard to spot,” Buffalino said. She went on to deliver a veritable Who’s Hoot of the owl kingdom in New Jersey.

However, there are plenty of signs that owls are at work in the area. Some of the most memorable evidence could be seen in the “pellets” set out at the end of the room. Since the digestive systems of owls cannot handle bones or feathers, these predators have to disgorge compressed lumps of bones and hard matter to make room for their next meal.

The more adventurous among the crowd could set out a paper plate and used sticks and utensils to figure out what rodent, bird or small animal served as the main course for that particular owl.

Another interesting bit of owl lore revealed by Buffalino was that owls can turn their heads 270 degrees, or three-quarters of the way around.

Owls also are formidable hunters, with “fringed” feathers that muffle the sound of their wings flapping as they make their nighttime rounds. Their claws are exceptionally powerful for their size.

“The grasp of the great horned owl is stronger than the grasp of an alligator’s jaws,” Buffalino said.

Along with the great horned owl, the woods around the nature center host long-eared and short-eared owls, barred and barn owls, Eastern screech owls and the curiously named Northern saw-whet. Harry Potter fans will be pleased to know that snowy owls similar to Hedwig, the young magician's mail carrier, are found here and elsewhere in New Jersey.

The owl lecture was one of several community events hosted by the Rancocas Nature Center. The group will lay out its recent accomplishments and the coming year's goals during a community meeting Feb. 8 at 2:30 p.m. at the center, 794 Rancocas Road. (END) Pagination Content Wrapper

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Tracie Van Auken/Freelance

Carolyn Pratt, 13, of Hainesport, uses a snowy owl stuffed animal to demonstrate how an owl turns its head 270 degrees during a presentation about N.J. owls at the Rancocas Nature Center in Westampton Sunday afternoon.



