

FIELD STUDIES: Students connect with natural world through class

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used these early outdoor areas as springboards into carrying on environmental studies and exploring careers in science. One graduate, Zander Albertson, follow his curiosity of the natural world all the way through his studies and graduated with a master’s degree in environmental studies from the University of Birmingham.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Peck’s penstemon.

It was with a certain amount of satisfaction that Givot was able to gather her students around her and show them the colorful stems of last summer’s Peck’s penstemon hidden in the grasses, preparing for winter. The area within the TCCA is one of the few places where this rare penstemon can be found in all the Earth, and is a living testimony to the care with which this place is treated by students and visitors.

The 160-acre TCCA is owned by the Sisters School District and has 36 study plots, each a 10th of an acre of plant and animal life that is a living example of life in a healthy ponderosa pine ecosystem. The entire area is also protected by a conservation easement.

During the outdoor season, Givot shared the knowledge that Oregon is covered by a little over 48 percent forest, and asked her students, “What is that forest?” They are learning how to answer that main equation by using the study plots to answer other questions:

- What trees live in the TCCA, and how many are there?
- What size are the trees in height and DBH? (a standard method of expressing the diameter of the trunk, aka bole) of a standing tree, and one of the most common methods to obtain the amount of board feet of lumber in a tree).
- What plant species live

there, and what is their role within the forest ecosystem?

- What habitats does the TCCA provide for what species of animals?

Over the years thousands of students have learned how to answer those questions and what that means to the forest around them. One outstanding fact became all too clear as the students discovered how vital it is to have snags in a forest community: there are not enough dead trees (snags) in the TCCA to maintain a healthy forest community.

Woodpeckers must have dead trees in which to pound out their tree-cavity homes. Not only do the various woodpecker species keep forest insect pests population in check, but all the other cavity nesters using the old woodpecker homes for their nests also contribute their share of involvement within the ecosystem.

The main woodpecker for the Sisters area is the white-headed, which is a huge attractant for birders from all over the world coming here to study and place them on their Bird Life List. And among the small owls who

also use old woodpecker cavities is the screech owl look-alike, the rare, insect-eating flammulated owl.

When the students have been investigating the plots for a while, the population count of plants and animals becomes so large and involved in the biological interaction many of the students become overwhelmed. But they continue to enjoy studying the relationships of animals and plants to nonliving things, and then go into looking at how the overwhelming numbers of insect species interact with the hundreds of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians and other varied life that requires a microscope to study.

When asked what they thought of their day in the TCCA, several of Givot’s students responded:

Paige Wentzel had plants in her journal. She also said, “It was fun to be outside and helped me wake up.”

Lala Debari said, “It was peaceful to be outside. Observing a plant and the surrounding forest made me look around and see things I don’t normally notice when I am walking since I often



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Freshman Paige Wentzel and Rima Givot working on Paige’s field journal.

watch the ground. I liked looking up at the sky and forest around me.”

“It felt like I was detached

from myself because I was present in the moment and aware of my surroundings,” said Sahara Lucas.

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