

Nearly 60 Experience Creepy Crawlers on Preserve

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CENTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The turnout was so great for the Creepy Crawly Walk in September that the Catawba Center for the Environment had to schedule two reptile-and-amphibian searches on the college's ecological preserve.

Nearly 60 people, both children and adults, found everything from mole salamanders and red spotted newts to a rat snake and a red-bellied turtle. Instructors Dave Burman and Jill Varkas led the groups onto the preserve, which is located at the back door of the Center for the Environment building. Burman, an environmental science teacher at Salisbury High School and a graduate of Catawba's Environmental Science Program, and Varkas, a current Catawba student, helped the groups understand the differences between reptiles and amphibians, snakes and lizards, toads and frogs.

"It surprised me how much some of the children already knew about reptiles and amphibians," Burman says. "Some knew a vast amount. Others didn't know as much but enjoyed being outside and searching through leaf litter for the specimens. It was also a great opportunity for fathers to spend time with sons and mothers with daughters. It was great family interaction."

The participants learned that Rowan County is one of only four areas in North Carolina where mole salamanders can be found. They also learned that red-eared sliders are not native to the area. People often purchase them as pets and then let them go in the wild.

The children were able to hold a mole salamander as well as dusky, spotted, slimy and marbled salamanders. They also held a red spotted newt, a yellow-bellied turtle and a red-eared slider.

"The look on their faces when they get to hold an organism that was found in its natural habitat is priceless," Burman says. "I always let them do that because it gives them a greater connection to those organisms. It increases their awareness and the need for conservation, so next time they see a turtle on the road or a salamander, instead of wanting to kill it because they don't know about it, they'll appreci-



Dave Burman helps increase children's awareness of reptiles & amphibians.

ate its role in our ecosystem."

Burman delights in opportunities to share his knowledge of reptiles and amphibians with others. "I can gain all the knowledge in the world about the environment by taking more and more classes," he says, "but if I do not share that knowledge with everyone else, I am doing the environment an injustice. I agree with Dr. Seuss that we all need to be loraxes and 'speak up for the trees, for the trees have no tongues' -- the trees along with all other flora, fauna and ecosystems."

Burman hopes to lead a study of toads and frogs on the preserve in the spring. "We'll determine the population based on the decibel of the call as we walk through the preserve," he says.

Anyone who is interested in attending other reptiles and amphibian events or in joining conservation efforts may contact Burman at dlburman18@yahoo.com or 443-802-5277 or the Center for the Environment at JohnWear@catawba.edu or 704-637-4294. ■