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Sisters students study woodpecker habitat

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Scott Everson and Marin Allen, with Blake Lowrey (center) of Wolftree, prepare to release a white-footed mouse. *photo by Jim Anderson*

Last week Wolftree, Sisters High School and the Forest Service culminated the year's partnership working together in the Forest Service's white-headed woodpecker study area near Camp Sherman.

This has been a long-term, on-going project that Wolftree, a local based outdoor education organization, put together with a biology class and the Forest Service at Sisters High School.

One phase found science students live-trapping golden mantled ground squirrels. Golden mantles are known to prey on eggs and nestlings of white-headed woodpeckers (a "species of concern"). Students are studying predation rates, population densities and collecting other data.

Lauri Turner, USFS biologist from the supervisor's office in Bend was out with a small group of students.

"This woodpecker study has been going since 2003, and it is wonderful to engage high school students in gathering data that Monty Gregg and Julie York, biologists with the Sisters (Range District, can apply to the project," she said.

"The students are laying out the study plots in four different areas," teacher Rima Givot said. "One where mowing and thinning is taking place, another where only mowing is done, one where thinning is carried out, and the last is a 'control plot where no action is taken on the ground."

There are four key elements in the internship on this phase of the study: One is to live-trap the ground squirrels that are sometimes predators on the woodpeckers' eggs and nestlings. Once captured, the students marked each ground squirrel with a dab of colored fingernail polish under the animal's chin and then released it. This technique will eventually provide researchers with an idea of how many ground squirrels are making a living in the study area.

Another focus was to spend a day identifying the variety of birds that utilize the woodpecker study area, looking at competition for food; and another was to set up and conduct plot studies and to gather data on small mammals found in the study area.

Identifying plants, measuring living trees and downed wood, and counting snags (dead trees) are all important data for gaining a better understanding of what makes up the white-headed woodpeckers' habitat.

Retired USFS biologist Terry Bryan headed up a small group of science students. He taught the technique of laying out study plots, measuring the height and breadth of trees and identifying shrubs and grasses.

"What I enjoy most about being out here studying," SHS science student Marin Allen said, while keeping track of mouse data "is that I have come to respect how things work in nature."

Rongi Yost, teacher's assistant, was out in the field with the students June 1 and had nothing but praise for the partnership that was providing students with a deeper understanding of the world around them.

"Each class has the opportunity to spend a full day in the field," she said, "a learning situation that is better than sitting in a classroom day after day."

Chloe Stein agrees.

"I like being out where we can gain insight and understand how things work in the forest, not by reading page five through 10 of a text book," she said. "Besides, people can better understand what kind of animals need this habitat. That way, we won't ruin the forest."

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