



helping kids connect with nature

Kids learn about habitats in science class but how many of them spend time in their own natural habitat? The leather interior of your SUV is not a natural habitat. Your air-conditioned, carpeted home complete with wireless technology? Nope. A human's natural habitat is the outside world and studies are indicating that kids need to spend more time there.

by Gail Cochrane • photos by Billy Kidd

Discovering the magic of nature is one way to coax children outside. Since 2001, more than 6,000 Valley fourth graders have thrilled to Sonoran Desert magic through a Scottsdale Community College program called Center for Native and Urban Wildlife.

At CNUW, kids come eye to eye with some of the most charismatic creatures that share our desert. At Toad Hall, students step inside a softly lit portable and inhale the earthy scent of aquariums and soils. Breeding crickets chirp an incessant chorus, unaware that their sole purpose in being is to serve as food for the reptiles and amphibians. Several Sonoran Desert toads, each the size of a salad plate, crouch inscrutably in the first large terrarium, blinking periodically. In the next terrarium, a gopher snake slithers slowly from a cactus boot partially buried in the sand.

A docent explains to the children that each fascinating animal they see relies on a support system of food, water and nesting sites. Kids giggle at two chuckwallas, one lying lazily on top of the other. They crowd excitedly before the pink and gray Gila monster, motionless under heat lamps. They line up to touch the surprisingly silky, smooth skin of the collared lizard, known for sprinting on its hind legs. As they walk away, they are still exclaiming over the feel of the animal.

Next door, the kids sit on the floor in front of presenters from the wildlife rehabilitation facility Liberty Wildlife. A gloved handler brings a great horned owl the size of a small cat from a carrying crate. The powerful raptor blinks golden eyes and swivels its head, mesmerizing the kids. Hands shoot into the air and one youngster gets to ask, "Can owls really turn their heads all the way around?"

"Feel the bones in your spine," says presenter Mona Berrier, and 20 small hands go to the backs of their necks. "You have seven bones in your neck. All mammals do, even giraffes. But birds have 14 bones in their necks, so bird necks move like a slinky. The owl can turn its head 270 degrees, not quite all the way around."

She blows gently on the owl's feathered ear tufts. "See, they don't really have horns either, just feathers."

When it is time for questions, nearly every hand is raised. The kids ask good questions and tell stories of birds they have encountered. At the end of the session, they file out reluctantly.

Next, the children visit the Wildlife Demonstration Garden, where they see the rarest of Sonoran Desert habitats: a wetland. Around the pond, which looks like a small oasis on the busy grounds of the college, they observe the dramatic increase in biodiversity that comes with water. Squatting at the pond's edge, several children point excitedly at tadpoles darting in the sunlit water. They tour

the greenhouse and learn that every desert plant has a unique relationship with the area's birds, reptiles, mammals and insects. The kids are taught that planting native species provides homes and food for desert animals.



Above: Stacy Pratt, assistant director at CNUW, gives Brian Lambert (9) of Phoenix a chance to hold a snake and feel the smooth silkiness of its scales. Left: Stacy teaches Brian and Ben Davis (9) of Phoenix about desert tortoises.

SCC biology professor Roy Barnes runs the nature center and he is passionate about its mission.

"People are not aware of the loss and importance of biodiversity," he says. "When I was a child, wild animals, birds, bugs, snakes, lizards and worms were a big part of my life. They enriched my life and I want to make sure all children have that chance."

The program is a partnership between the SCC biology department, the McDowell Sonoran Land Trust and the City of Scottsdale. It was designed to meet the curriculum standards for fourth grade science and was originally funded by a Nina Mason Pulliam Trust Grant.

Vicki Martel, a teacher at Pueblo Elementary in Scottsdale and a recent winner of the Scottsdale Charros Outstanding Teacher Award, took her third grade class to CNUW last fall. "It makes a wonderful connection between the classroom and the place we live, the desert," she says. "It was one of our best field trips. We have continued to talk about what we learned and use activities built around it in class."

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Gail Cochrane, of Phoenix, is the mother of Megan (18) and Will (16).



To book a field trip

The Center for Native and Urban Wildlife begins taking reservations for field trips in mid-August. The half day field trips are free. For more information, call Jean Rigden at 480-423-6058.