

# Wild

# in the City

## Urban Wildlife Swims and Soars with Amoskeag Fishways Programs



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HELEN DALBECK/AMOSKEAG FISHWAYS

*Manchester students discover the many kinds of wildlife that populate the urban landscape in a program presented by Amoskeag Fishways.*

BY WENDY SCHORR

**A**rlene O'Connor has a class full of skunks. Her students are down on the floor on all fours, backs arched, clicking their teeth. Unlike their real-life counterparts, though, they all have big grins on their faces as the visiting naturalist leads them through a series of warnings that a nervous skunk might give before it sprays.

During the course of this Urban Wildlife program, these students will examine skull replicas and pelts of common city animals, and engage in activities that allow them to see a bit of the world from an animal's

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*Children and adults participate in the release of Atlantic salmon “fry” into the Merrimack watershed as part of Atlantic salmon restoration efforts.*

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perspective. The children will ponder why a raccoon can live in downtown Manchester, but a moose can't... they'll consider the purpose of an opossum's hind-foot thumbs... and they'll be that much closer to understanding the wildlife that shares their own neighborhood.

The Urban Wildlife program is designed to help Manchester residents, especially those who might not have many outdoor experiences, understand and appreciate their local fish and wildlife. Under a grant from the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, the staff of Amoskeag Fishways brings these programs to youth and adult groups within the Manchester community. The Fishways, which is a partnership of Public Service of New Hampshire, New Hampshire Audubon, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and



*State-endangered peregrine falcons nesting on the Brady-Sullivan Tower (formerly the New Hampshire Tower) in Manchester make for exciting urban wildlife watching.*

Fish and Game, maintains a visitor center on the Merrimack River, where groups and individuals come to learn about the river and the wildlife around it. For a decade, the Amoskeag Fishways Partnership's goal of promoting conservation education and wise stewardship of our natural resources has brought the magic of the Merrimack to the people of New Hampshire. And the success of the visitor center, where thousands come each year to view migrating fish and learn about the Merrimack watershed, draws attention to the partnership as a model of how a public-private conservation venture can thrive. With the Urban Wildlife grant, Fishways staff have an opportunity to move beyond the walls of the visitor center, carrying the organization's mission out into the community.

## **City Critters to Meet**

As pelts and skulls, feathers, wings and mounts appear from the traveling bin, the enthusiasm in the room is palpable. Fishways naturalists carefully blend discussion and direct experience for three Urban Wildlife programs: city mammals, city birds, and reptiles and amphibians. The educators arrive at the school with an exciting variety of materials — animal parts and, sometimes, live reptiles. The students learn about physical and behavioral adaptations, how habitat requirements dictate where an animal can live, and the role that wildlife managers play in keeping animal populations healthy. Students love the program and usually brim with questions and stories of their own experiences with wild animals.

In one exercise called Bat and Moth, students play the roles of a predator species and a prey species. The blindfolded “bat” uses hearing, smell and touch to try to find the blindfolded “moth,” who attempts to evade its predator with silence, speed and sheer instinct. “It's the kind of activity that makes wildlife behavior real to the kids,” says Judy Silverberg, wildlife education coordinator for Fish and Game. “They can start to realize that life processes go on for city wildlife. The wildlife in Manchester do the same things as wildlife anywhere in the world — they have to find something to feed on, find shelter, find ways to survive and raise their young.”

Teachers value the links that the programs make with their curriculum and the opportunity the sessions offer for students to interact with materials that would otherwise be unavailable to them. As one teacher from Beech Street School commented, her kids “couldn't stop talking about it!” for days afterward.

## Outside School Walls

Urban Wildlife programs don't take a rest once school lets out for the day. Youth organizations conducting after-school programs are also a focus under the grant. In these venues, the Fishways staff works with a group of kids over a period of time, which allows them to build on what they've learned in previous sessions.

Field trips help kids see areas of their city in a new way. A favorite destination is Valley Cemetery, a *de facto* wildlife haven in downtown Manchester. Any creepiness the kids might initially feel from being in a cemetery quickly disappears as the naturalist points out animal tracks and signs. And somehow the wildlife always obliges. Red-tailed hawks perch in the large trees, woodchucks scurry to their dens and an occasional bat clings inexplicably to the side of a tree.

Trips to a well-known office building in spring often produce sightings of peregrine falcons, which nest there. During one trip, a group had waited a long time to see some action from a perching peregrine. Just when everyone had given up, a child spotted a second peregrine flying in. As everyone scrambled to grab the binoculars, a third peregrine appeared and the group was treated to the rare sight of the nesting pair chasing off an intruder. Sightings like this one offer a perfect opportunity to tell kids about how these birds were once near extinction, but are now gradually returning to New England.

At nearby Maxwell Pond, children discover the delights of both the pond and Black Brook which feeds it. On one outing, a boy who raced ahead was caught by surprise at the sight of a small waterfall pouring into the pond. "This is beautiful!" he declared, instantly making up for any frustration the naturalist might have felt while trying to keep the group together.

## Reaching Adults

Children make up the majority of people served by the Urban Wildlife program, but Fishways naturalists also seek out adult audiences. In these settings — presentations to service groups or groups of employees in the city, for example — the emphasis is on living with wildlife and preventing any potential wildlife "problems" before they start.

These workshops are also ideal forums to call attention to the more remarkable wildlife that finds a niche in Manchester. In winter, Manchester is host to an influx of bald eagles that gather near the river to take advantage of the open water

*Celebrating the Magic of the Merrimack*



10 YEARS • AMOSKEAG PARTNERSHIP



## Happy Birthday, Fishways!

Amoskeag Fishways is celebrating the 10th anniversary of the four-way partnership that brought it to life. Thanks to the partners — Public Service of New Hampshire, New Hampshire Audubon, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and N.H. Fish and Game — for supporting a decade of conservation education through Fishways programs.

Fun activities are scheduled at the Fishways during the 2005 fish season, May 2 through June 17, 2005. Come to the Amoskeag Fishways Learning and Visitor Center for a face-to-face look at migratory

fish; the center's underwater viewing windows let you watch fish like river herring, American shad and sea lamprey "climb" a 54-step ladder to bypass the Amoskeag Hydroelectric Dam. Special events this month include the Fishways Children's Festival on May 7 and "Get Outside!" on May 21. For information, visit [www.amoskeagfishways.org](http://www.amoskeagfishways.org).

The Fishways is located in Manchester, N.H., at the west end of the Amoskeag Bridge — on Exit 6 off Interstate 293. The visitor center and exhibit hall are open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 7 days a week during fish season. Walk-in visitors and groups are welcome. Adult groups in Manchester interested in the Urban Wildlife program should call the Fishways at (603) 626-FISH.

to fish. Making people aware of key elements in the urban habitat, such as particular eagle roosting trees along the Merrimack shoreline, is a first step in protecting the habitat and the wildlife that depends on it. Adults are just as eager to share stories of wildlife encounters as children are, and often come away with a new understanding of the animals living around them.

And that, says Fishways Director Helen Dalbeck, is the whole point. "Our mission includes 'environmental education for all people,'" she notes. "The children we reach in Manchester are a diverse and underserved group; their enthusiastic reception affirms the importance of these outreach programs." They and their grownup counterparts leave the Urban Wildlife program armed with both the knowledge and the desire to help conserve wildlife and habitat.

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