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Youngsters take to the woods in search of critters

By [Frank DeLoache](#)

Salisbury Post

After leaving Catawba College's Center for the Environment Saturday morning, the entourage descended the path through the trees to the base of the hill, led by eager youngsters ready to pounce on just about anything that moved.

Then guide Jill Varkas stopped her guests in their tracks.

"Does anyone know how you properly roll over a log?"

Silence from the youngsters.

"You roll the log toward you," she explained, so that anything unexpected sheltering underneath the log has a chance to get away — and not ruin your day.

With that simple warning, she released the youngsters to explore.

And 6-year-old Ava Holtzman made the first discovery of the day. A spotted salamander. A baby, about 3 inches long, with a line of yellow spots painted along its back.

"I want to hold it!" one boy exclaimed.

But Varkas stopped him. You shouldn't hold salamanders in your hand because their skin is covered with a mucous film. And a human's touch "burns" a salamander's skin.

You should keep the salamander in a net or handle it with a leaf, Varkas said, to avoid harming it.

As she placed the juvenile salamander back under its log,



Netting for critters: A group of 17 children went on a 'Creepy Crawly' tour of the nature preserve at Catawba College in search of anything that moved. Photo by [Jon C. Lakey](#), Salisbury Post.

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Varkas saw another child stand on a log nearby.

"Don't step on the log," she cautioned. "That's somebody's home."

And so it went Saturday morning at another Creepy Crawly Walk co-sponsored by Catawba's Environmental Studies Department and the LandTrust for Central North Carolina.

The two-hour excursion into Catawba's environmental preserve is meant to be part fun and part educational.

About 18 children, a variety of ages, and about an equal number of adults first gathered in a classroom at the Center for the Environment, surrounded by bird nests and other examples from nature.

Varkas tried to gauge the interest and knowledge of her young guests.

"Who know the difference between poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes?" she asked.

Thirteen-year-old Tyler Miller was the first to speak, explaining that poisonous snakes' heads have a triangular shape, while other snakes' heads are rounded or oval.

Tom Murph added that poisonous snakes' eyes are shaped like "slits" — Varkas called them "diamond pupils" — and other snakes have regular, or rounded, pupils.

Varkas told them about the hog-nosed snake, which rolls over and plays dead when threatened, and the black snake, which is an excellent tree climber.

"People used to say they could fly," Varkas said. One must have fallen out of a tree and that made people think they flew up there, she added.

Though most of the kids wanted to know if they'd see snakes — their favorite reptile — on the trail, Varkas was most excited about amphibians, especially salamanders. Amphibians and reptiles are different, partly because amphibians have to spend part of their lives in the water.

They also "breathe through



Anyone down there? Amateur herpetologist Jill Varkas helps children look under a john boat for toads and other critters. Photo by Jon C. Lakey; Salisbury Post.



Jill Varkas leads the group of children through the nature preserve. Photo by Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post.

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their skin," Varkas said. Salamanders and other amphibians are the first animals affected by pollution — and the first to die out.

North Carolina is "the best place in the United States to find salamanders," she explained. The best geography, the best weather and climate.

Later, while walking on the trail, she said she came to Salisbury from Massachusetts to study salamanders — and for the advantages of attending a smaller college with smaller classes.



A spotted salamander was one of the 'finds' on the tour. Photo by [Jon C. Lakey](#), Salisbury Post.

As the group tromped along the trail into Catawba's environmental preserve, Willa Mays, assistant director of the Environmental Studies Program, and Connor Coleman and Michele D'Hemecourt, on the staff of the LandTrust of Central North Carolina, kept to the back, providing support for Varkas.

When two boys noticed a grasshopper caught in a spider's web, D'Hemecourt pointed out how the "writing spider" stung the grasshopper with venom that immobilizes but doesn't kill the insect. The spider wants the grasshopper to be alive and fresh when it returns for its meal.

The boys took the information in stride and moved on down the trail.

Asked about the name of the spider, D'Hemecourt said she's always thought the spiders got its name because it spins the center of its web in such a way that it looks like scribbling or writing.

At one point, as a number of boys dipped nets of varying sizes in a pond, Varkas noted the group's noise practically guaranteed that all snakes would have headed for the hills.



Connor Coleman works with kids on the tour. Photo by [Jon C. Lakey](#), Salisbury Post.

On the way to the rear of the preserve, where families of beavers have moved back in, Varkas picked up the shell of a mud turtle, and one of the youngsters brought her the husk of a cicada.

Varkas can only hope that her young students absorb a knowledge and caring for the environment like the local salamanders absorb — and test — our air.

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