INDOOR NATURE WALK

—Herkimer County Community College's Natural History Museum

By Ronald P. Carvin
photos provided by author

I wake up this clear, winter morning, only to be greeted by an outside temperature of -12°F.

In spite of the cold, I get ready and head into work at Herkimer County Community College (HCCC), where I have been teaching biology for 33 years. Considering the day's weather, one of the last things most people would want to do is go on a nature walk, but that is exactly what is on the Biology lab schedule for the afternoon.

The purpose of this particular lab activity is to observe and learn about the organisms that the students and I may encounter during our journey. As we discover different creatures, I will talk about the way to identify them, the type of habitat they live in, and maybe something about their natural history including their behavior, or their interrelationships with other organisms.

Now, I know what you are thinking… Can I really expect to find a large number

HCCC students take an up-close look at an osprey mount.

of organisms outside while the temperature is below zero and there's a foot of snow on the ground? How many insects, amphibians, reptiles and ground-inhabiting plants can we hope to find?

Well, the answers may surprise you. I expect to see hundreds, maybe thousands of specimens. Because rather than leading students on a tour of the college's Interpretive Trail through our 55-acre outdoor Nature Center, I plan to take them to visit our natural history museum.

The HCCC Natural History Museum is currently tucked away in a quiet corner of the science building, Johnson Hall. We've been adding to the museum's collections since its creation almost 35 years ago so now our current inventory includes more than 10,000 specimens. In addition to taxidermy mounts of birds and mammals, we also have an extensive collection of properly prepared plant presses, a modest fungal fruiting-body collection, woody plant cones and fruits, a geology collection, and an amazing insect collection. We also have an extensive inventory of photographs including everything from mosses to mushrooms; from nuts to nuthatches. The vast majority of the specimens are indigenous to New York State either as residents or migrants, so visiting the museum will give the students a good representative sampling of what's out there.

Most taxidermy mounts in the museum represent wildlife species currently found in NY. Other specimens, like the mountain lion (top) are indicative of species that have disappeared from the state. Although the snow leopard (bottom) is native to Central Asia, the mount represents a rare species and is an important part of the collection.

After meeting the students in the lab, we proceed to the museum. As soon as we pass through the door and begin our "nature walk," the students are greeted by the very intimidating glare of a cougar (also called mountain lion, painter, panther and catamount). However, the students are not frightened; in fact they all get an uncontrollable urge to…pet him. Not only did the cougar not send them running to the hills, but neither did our black bear, bobcat, coyote or even the beautiful and majestic full-body mount of a snow leopard. In fact, most of the students, who come from cities, are actually overwhelmed with curiosity. To them, this is the highlight of a natural experience—quite the opposite of feeding pigeons in a small park with just a few trees and trampled grass.

As the students explore the museum, it's interesting to see their faces while, at the same time, listening to their comments: "Wow, I thought a red fox was bigger than that!"; "That's what a muskrat looks like?"; "I never realized gray squirrels can also be black and even pure white!"; "I have seen these things on TV but never in real life."

I quickly get overwhelmed with questions, the most common being, "What's this?" My answers have to be fast and furious just to keep up: "fisher, woodcock, ermine, osprey, turkey eggs, giant puffball, porcupine scat, redwood cone, male monarch butterfly," and so on. Sometimes I will have enough time to talk about something more interesting than just a name: "Take a look at how intricate this oriole nest is."; "This is a morel (Morchella)—simple to identify, and delicious to eat."; "Look at the way this osprey carries the fish it just caught."

The students are especially interested in the prepared skull collection. Here I have the opportunity to point out interesting bone and dental characteristics, and how they have been adapted to specific feeding habits. The students are always amazed at the number of teeth an opossum has, along with such a tiny brain. Opossums are literally (what I call) "dumb eating machines," unlike river otters which are considered more intelligent due to their larger brains. This may be a reason why the animal has a seemingly playful and carefree attitude. (Editor's note: For more information about river otters, see page 8.)

Moving around the museum, the students discover the plant herbarium. Over the past forty years, HCCC ecology, dendrology, conservation and environmental science students have collected, identified, and preserved hundreds of plant specimens—all properly labeled and mounted on herbarium paper. The specimens come from a multitude of natural communities and ecosystems found in New York State.

It doesn't take long before the students ask another common question: "How did you get all these specimens?" The answer is as diverse as the specimens themselves. A few, like the mountain lion and black bear, were confiscated by Environmental Conservation Officers because private individuals were trying to illegally sell them on the internet, or because they were killed out of the regulated hunting season. Other specimens were donated by private organizations or individuals. For example, the owl and hawk collections were provided by the George Cogar Foundation. (A Herkimer businessman, Cogar was an inventor of an early precursor to modern personal computers.) Our beautiful insect collection was contributed by Professor Leroy Stegeman, retired from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. We have also acquired a large number of specimens from wildlife rehabilitators like Cindy Page of the Page Wildlife Center in Manlius. (By the way, Cindy has thrilled us several times by presenting her live raptors program—always standing room only.)

By far, most of the individual specimens have come from the general public who know about the museum and think of us when they find something

If the large mountain lion taxidermy mount somehow hasn't piqued students' interest by this part of the museum tour, it is by the time students reach the skull and insect collections!

The owl collection is popular with the students, as they get to see these largely nocturnal birds up-close.

that we don't have. I announce to my students that if they find something interesting, they should put it in a plastic bag in the freezer, and contact us as quickly as possible. Some of the birds that we don't have, but hope to someday acquire by donation or on loan from another collection, include a bald eagle and many species of waterfowl, shorebirds and wading birds.

The lab class is almost over and our nature walk must come to an end; the students have to get to other classes. But, before they leave there are always a few final comments and questions: "I never knew this was here." and "Is this open all the time?" The answer is "yes" but mostly by appointment. In fact tomorrow, Bill Newman from Poland Central School is making his annual visit with a bus full of his conservation students.

As we leave the museum, I feel a warming sense of satisfaction because I was able to teach the students a great deal about natural history during a relatively short visit. They understand more about many of the organisms that can be found in our Nature Center as well as the rest of the state, and it was accomplished without getting frostbite!

The museum is a fantastic educational experience which makes long-lasting impressions on my students. Unfortunately, its rapid growth over the past few years has brought us to the point of almost bursting through our walls. But that's not going to hinder us from our ongoing collecting because with continued support from the college, as well as the community, someday we should be able to provide enough space where the specimens—and students—can spread their wings.

Professor **Ronald P. Carvin** graduated from HCCC in 1976 and returned as a teacher after completing his degrees at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in1980. He has always been committed to maintaining HCCC's Nature Center and the Natural History Museum.