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Jessica Heitt (right) tells the crowd gathered for Oxbow After Dark about beavers, using "Cornelius," the study area's stuffed and mounted beaver mascot.
PHOTO/JERI DAVIS

Night out

Oxbow After Dark

During the day, people flock to Oxbow Nature

Study Area to walk its trails and catch glimpses of the myriad species of wildlife that live there. But when Oxbow closes at dusk and the people leave, the animals take over this little wooded haven between Dickerson Road and the Truckee River. However, on some evenings, a small group of people remains as the sun sets below the horizon. They're there to join biologist Jessica Heitt, a wildlife educator for the Nevada Department of Wildlife, on a nighttime trek through the study area to find the nocturnal creatures that call it home.

Heitt leads a team of NDOW and AmeriCorps biologists that works within the study area and the broader community, leading programs that include nighttime walks to see a bat colony in Sparks and classroom projects that allow school kids to raise and eventually release trout into the Truckee River. "Oxbow After Dark" is among the newest of these programs.

"The park typically closes at sunset, so it was kind of a fun experience to be able to get people in here after hours and hopefully get to see some animals," Heitt said. "But wildlife isn't super predictable, so I can't guarantee them anything."

So far, though, the three or four groups Heitt has led through the nature study area after dark have succeeded in spotting various animals.

"We've been pretty lucky," Heitt said. "Between a couple of different walks, we've seen lots of ducklings and goslings. We saw deer once. And

we've seen the beaver twice. He'll come out of the pond and flap his tail at us a little bit."

To increase the odds that participants will see animals, Heitt tries to keep the number of people on any given walk to no more than 30.

"Just to keep the numbers down so we don't scare off anything that we might get to see, or we don't want to be changing the wildlife behavior by having too many people here ... we do try to cap it about 30 people," she said. "I get emails all the time—and if I can try to squeeze a few more in, I will. ... And if there's a group that's interested in it—like a Girl Scout or Boy Scout group or some kind of civic group like a Rotary club—we can do private tours for it."

"Oxbow After Dark" starts with an educational talk about some of the study area's animals. Heitt sets up a table outside with stuffed and mounted animals as well as pelts and skulls. She explains the ways in which animals ranging from deer to raccoons and bats to beavers live within the little ecosystem. One of her favorites to discuss is a stuffed and mounted beaver called Cornelius, a sort of Oxbow mascot.

After that, the actual walk begins.

"The walk itself, when we do the full loop, is about a mile long," Heitt said. "And then we have the pond, and we'll all go gather on the pond deck and sit quietly wait and hope to see the beaver or have somebody come out. And there's typically bats flying all over when we do that. ... It's kind of just a nice time to be serene and quiet and connect with nature."

Learn more about Oxbow After Dark and upcoming dates here: bit.ly/2J4jotv or email Jessica Heitt to schedule a private tour at jheitt@ndow.org.