

Large or small, wildlife captures attention at North Idaho Fair

Becky Kramer/SR

Under a microscope at the North Idaho Fair & Rodeo, a drop of water from Lake Coeur d'Alene teemed with life.

A *Daphnia galeata*, one of the zooplankton in the lake, scooted across the water, sweeping algae into its mouth. The creature is no bigger than a grain of sand, but it functions as a high-calorie snack for westslope cutthroat trout.

"They're like M&Ms for the fish," said Jamie Brunner, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality's lake management plan coordinator.

Schools won't open for more than a week, but there are plenty of science lessons to be had at the North Idaho Fair in Coeur d'Alene, which runs through Sunday. Kids and their parents, and sometimes grandparents, took advantage of the hands-on exhibits Wednesday morning.

"These are creatures in our lake. If you swallow the water, you swallow them," one teenage boy told his friend after looking through the microscope at the *Daphnia galeata*.

Laura Laumatia, who works for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, set up the lake exhibit with Brunner. Their goal is to help people appreciate the complexity of Lake Coeur d'Alene's food web.

"When we study how pollution is affecting the lake, it's not just fish and people that are affected," Laumatia said. "These little critters are key for understanding the whole system."

Cecil Shirts, a recreational fisherman from Bonners Ferry, came away impressed. "I thought fish just ate flies and worms," he said.

At the fair's Wildlife Center, Beth Paragamian was an instant hit when she brought out three rubber boa snakes.

"Can I touch it? Is it real?" said Alana Thomas, 7, who was at the fair with her grandparents.

"They're the nicest animals on the planet. They don't bite," Paragamian, a wildlife educator for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, assured her.

Rubber boas are nocturnal, creeping under logs to look for baby mice, their prey. The three snakes twining around Paragamian's hands were a mother and two offspring. The snakes get their name from their smooth scales, which appear rubbery, and are soft to the touch.

Kids also crawled into a bear's den at the Wildlife Center and visited a bat cave. Taxidermy exhibits helped them compare a wolf and a coyote for size.

Four-year-old Laura Burton stopped her mother, Annie, in front of a selection of furs and hides.

"Look, Mother. Feel how soft," said Laura, as she stroked a mountain goat's fur.

Pat Ayres used her spot at the Inland Empire Beekeeper Association's booth to teach families about the life cycle of bees and their importance to food production. The bees under the glass frame were hard at work, some making honey; others cleaning out old cells for new larva.

"Do you see the queen?" said Ayres, an apprentice beekeeper from Spokane.

The queen, marked with a blue dot, was in the middle of a huddle of other bees, who were feeding her.

Paragamian caused a minor stir as she carried a great horned owl on her wrist from the Wildlife Center to a cage in one of the nearby barns. Parents and kids moved in to get a closer look at the owl's yellow eyes and tufted ears.

"That's one thing about working with wildlife," she said. "Animals always attract people."