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Leschper: Childress teacher breaks the mold

Agriscience students learning about wildlife conservation in non-traditional approach

By **Will Leschper**
Column

CHILDRESS - Most high school classrooms have a certain drab, insipid aura that falls somewhere between that of a doctor's office and the DMV. It's the kind of taupe-colored homogeny that tends to make things run together as the day oozes from period to period.

Though many students must face this reality on a daily basis, one Panhandle teacher isn't afraid to roll up his sleeves and get dirty - the same approach he expects from those under his tutelage.

And his classroom is far from ordinary.

Russell Graves, who began his 15th year at Childress High School in August, is the only three-time winner of the Texas Agriscience Teacher of the Year award, being honored in 2001, 2003 and 2006.

Graves, who also is one of the top wildlife photographers in the nation, deviates from the norm when it comes to his teaching methods, but his hands-on approach has undoubtedly captivated numerous graduating classes.

"What we're doing is using the whitetail as a vehicle for teaching wildlife conservation."

Russell Graves

Wildlife is the medium Graves has chosen to work with, and he has had no shortage of broad brush strokes. From working with students on tracking quail marked with radio collars or monitoring prairie dog populations, Graves has helped his students develop a deeper enthusiasm and understanding for wildlife.

"In Childress County, the vast majority of the people live in the urban area, so it's a little different from other counties in Texas or in the Panhandle," Graves said. "I don't take a conventional approach. For ag classes, it's unconventional because most of the teachers will take the traditional approach of working with animals for stock shows and other things like that."

This semester, Graves started "deer school" as part of his advance wildlife conservation curriculum. Listening to Graves beam about his plans for the year, the students are in for intensive, hands-on study that will rival or top anything they will see in any college wildlife program.

The crown jewel of the Childress agriscience program is an 88-acre tract of land just outside town that was bought with a grant given to the school district by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The land is a mixture of thick native grasses, sunflowers, mesquites and open prairie, a perfect representation of the varied terrain in the Panhandle.

There are also 22 acres under high fence that house six whitetails and provide Graves' students with a host of learning opportunities. There will be time spent doing everything from looking at footage from a trail camera set up on a deer feeder and examining antler growth to learning about deer reproduction and forage habits.

"What we're doing is using the whitetail as a vehicle for teaching wildlife conservation," Graves said. "It's all things whitetail all year. This isn't anything we're doing in a day. We work on stuff throughout the year as weather permits."

On Wednesday, Graves' students were working on preparing food plots that will be a measure of what deer will or won't eat, and how much. Using an Apple MacBook laptop computer that every student in grades six through 12 received this year in the Childress ISD, the students

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Will Leschper / Amarillo Globe-News
Childress High School agriscience teacher Russell Graves goes over food plot data with some of his students Wednesday. Graves has been named Texas Agriscience Teacher of the Year three times, a feat no one else has achieved.



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were able to break down the size and scope of their plots.

"The kids may seem aloof sometimes, but they do the work when they're asked to and see it through," Graves said.

"A lot of the kids will be graduated and then a year or two later they'll come back or call me and say, 'Wow we really had a lot going for us.'

"We're probably the only school with opportunities like this in the nation, much less Texas. It's kind of cool we're the only people who have this going for us."

Though the advanced agriscience classes are the ones that seem to get all the publicity, Graves teaches a variety of disciplines. In his ag communications class, students are currently working on video production, photography and copy writing, while in his wildlife management class students are learning about hunter safety and wildlife conservation. In Graves' range management course, his students are putting in electrical fence on a piece of land to control grazing.

Childress ISD has a valuable resource in Graves, someone who is helping enrich his students' lives no matter what career path they decide to traverse.

He has shown that his teaching methods have and will continue to work and hopefully have an influence on future generations who will be making important decisions when it comes to wildlife.

And he's done it all in one of the coolest classrooms imaginable.

Amarillo Globe-News outdoor editor Will Leschper is a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and the Texas Outdoor Writers Association. Write to him at william.leschper@amarillo.com.

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