



# Beaverhill Bird Observatory's BirdSmart Education Program Report 2020-2021

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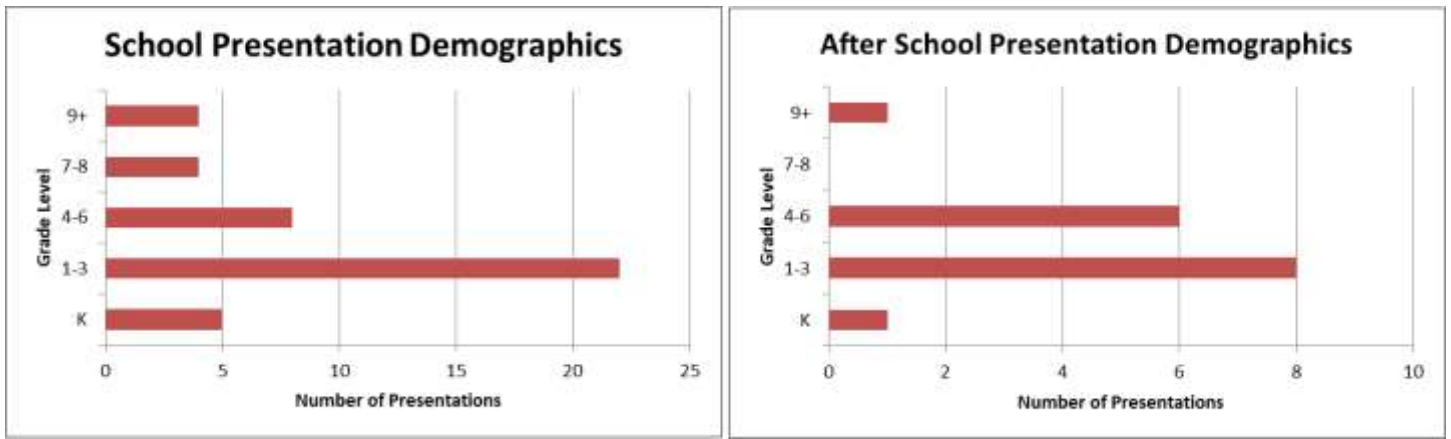
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*Abstract: BBO's BirdSmart program experienced a tumultuous year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff rose to the challenge, transitioned to an entirely digital setting, and gave 63 presentations to 1,529 people from November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 to May 29, 2021. Feedback from teachers on SurveyMonkey indicated very high satisfaction: 100% indicated they would participate again and 97% would recommend the program to other teachers.*

BBO's BirdSmart education program officially began in late September, when field staff began contacting schools and after-school groups to arrange bookings. Presentations were held between November 16, 2020 and April 29, 2021. To comply with provincial and federal health restrictions in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this year's presentations were held in an entirely digital setting, similarly to the end of the 2019/20 year. However, this year it would not have been sustainable to continue offering presentations for free, and so we offered them for a 50% discount relative to in-person presentations. Teachers were highly uncertain of rapidly changing conditions and experiencing multiple budget shortfalls, and this had a major effect on interest in presentations despite the steep discount. Overall, BBO staff were able to deliver 63 presentations, reaching 1,230 students and 299 adults. This is a drop of over 75% from last year, but we have every reason to believe it was a lull driven entirely by pandemic conditions. We expect numbers to return to normal next year, and possibly even grow beyond that as a result of pent-up demand.



**Figure 1. Rickie getting ready for an Owls of Alberta digital presentation**



**Figure 2: Grade level breakdown of student presentations**

42 (67%) of these presentations were in schools, predominantly for younger grades (Figure 2), and the majority of the rest were to after school groups, mostly Girl Guides. We presented to 25 unique schools, with an average of 1.5 presentations per school. Only 17% of the schools requested more than one presentation, which is unsurprising given the financial worries many teachers cited. However, despite everything, we were able to take advantage of the digital platform to expand our geographic scope. Although we delivered some free presentations to Ontario in the 2019/20 academic year, this year marked the first paid presentations to Ontario schools, specifically schools in Toronto, Ottawa, Scarborough and Hampton, as well as our first presentation in Fort McMurray, which we had been previously unable to arrange because of travel costs. Reception from these schools was highly positive, and continuing digital presentations going forward will allow us to continue expanding our geographic impact once conditions in schools normalize. The vast majority of Alberta-based presentations were to schools and organizations in the Greater Edmonton Area, as well as Sherwood Park, St Albert, Spruce Grove, Camrose, Calgary, and Medicine Hat.

In early 2021, BBO attended the digital Greater Edmonton Teacher’s Conference, which was being held in a highly stripped down virtual format. During the two-day conference, BBO staff sat in open Google Meets rooms to engage with teachers that stopped by the page. However, traffic to the page was limited, and the conference only netted us another two presentations.

All presentations were specifically designed to be in line with the Alberta School Curriculum’s Program of Studies for each grade (<https://education.alberta.ca>). BirdSmart’s presentations focused on birds, conservation and climate change. As the season progressed, we adapted more presentation topics to webinar format, and updated existing ones to make them more cohesive. In addition, we removed mention of negative topics from presentations for Grade 4 and under, following recent research that negativity can affect young students’ psychological development and lead to depression or anxiety.

The BirdSmart program continued to use SurveyMonkey to monitor presentation quality and gauge responses, and to collect follow-up opinions for further improvement. Our surveys received 30 responses, a response rate of just under 50%, which is much higher than previous years. Responses were overwhelmingly positive: 97% would recommend BirdSmart to another teacher, and 100% said they would book a presentation in the future.

	Poor	Below Expectations	Average	Good	Excellent	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
Topic	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	100% 29	0.00% 0	29	5.00
Quality of PowerPoint	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	16.67% 5	83.33% 25	0.00% 0	30	4.83
Pricing	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	3.33% 1	3.33% 1	90.00% 27	3.33% 1	30	4.90
Presenter	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	6.67% 2	93.33% 28	0.00% 0	30	4.93
Interactions with the educational owl (if applicable)	0.00% 0	3.33% 1	3.33% 1	20.00% 3	46.67% 14	26.67% 8	30	4.50

**Table 1. Teacher response to their impression of different presentation aspects**

Teachers were generally quite satisfied with the presentations, rating most aspects of the presentation as good or higher (Table 1). A minor sticking point appears to be interactions with the owl; some hosts were disappointed the owl wasn't on camera for longer. This was, unfortunately, an unavoidable consequence of technical limitations associated with digital presentations: some platforms don't allow a webcam and presenter feed simultaneously, limiting the bird's on-screen presence. Not shown is feedback for additional activities due to a very high rate (66.67%) of Not Applicable answers. Adapting to a fully digital environment was not without its challenges, but teacher feedback shows we successfully delivered high-quality talks despite them.

Additionally, teachers overwhelmingly believed climate change was introduced and its impact on birds explained in an effective manner. Not a single respondent answered no when asked as such, and over 80% of the respondents that answered "yes" or "maybe". It is likely that the majority of "maybe" and "not applicable" answers were as a result of our attempts to skate around negative issues for Grade 3 and under.

Some highlight comments included in this year's online responses are as follows:

*"Both Shane and Sara did a fabulous job presenting their topics. Both provided an informative session. Both answered all of our questions. The feedback from the groups was very positive. Everyone said they would love another presentation. Thank you so much."*

*"Thank you for the wonderful presentation. Although it was through an online modality, my learners were very excited, interested, and happy to participate. They had picked up a lot of new information about owls and birds"*

*from Shane and were delighted to engage in further discussion after Shane was finished. I would book this presentation again.”*

*“Sara has the perfect personality for an educator! She was so bubbly, personable and friendly, and made you want to listen to what she was saying. She taught my class (and myself!) countless facts about birds, and more specifically owls of Alberta and Canada [...] The presentation moved at a perfect pace and was just the right amount of interacting between Sara and my students. Sara is clearly an expert in her field as she was able to answer all of my students’ questions during the Q and A time at the end (and trust me, they had so many questions!) Sara’s passion for her job was evident the entire time and it was so enjoyable to learn from her. I will be making this a yearly booking as a Science teacher. Thanks again for all you do in educating our future generations and taking care of the birds!”*

Despite the numerous and significant challenges we faced this past year, we are confident that our program can continue to grow and improve. Where we were able to secure bookings, teachers were overwhelmingly pleased with our performance. We fully intend to continue offering webinars going forward, allowing us to continue expanding our geographic reach without concern about travel costs.

This BirdSmart program was funded by the Community Environment Action Grant from the Alberta Climate Change Office, the Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Commission, and TD Friends of the Environment, for which we are thankful. BBO also wishes to thank Sara Pearce Meijerink, Shane Abernethy and Geoff Holroyd for delivering presentations, as well as our ambassador birds Rickie and Maple for their tireless work in those same presentations. We also extend a special thanks to Rod and Caitlin Strong and Bill and Inger Paulsen for their assistance in transporting our raptors in and out of Edmonton. And finally, thank you to Phil and Helen Trefry for all they do housing and taking care of our ambassador birds on their days off.



**Figure 3. Maple teaching students about Climate Change and Energy**



**Figure 4. Sara and Shane fresh from fall migration monitoring, still sharing a social bubble and beginning the 2020/2021 digital BirdSmart Program season from Sara’s living room. Rickie is supervising from the back of the chair, waiting to make her appearance on camera!**