

## Oklahoma Higher Education E-Clips

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### Forensic Wildlife at Northeastern State University



Parents acted as jurors while students and teachers played out roles as prosecutors and defense attorneys in the trial of an alleged killer of a grey wolf, protected under federal law by the Endangered Species Act. The mock-trial was the culmination of a two-week Forensic Wildlife summer academy conducted on the campus of Northeastern State University which trained area high school students and teachers to use math and science to solve real-life crime scenarios in the wild.

Under the direction of NSU faculty members Dr. Kathi McDowell, Dr. Erik Terdal, and Dr. Mike Wilds, participants were challenged to investigate the vicious killing of a grey wolf by using math and science skills. They search for clues, process DNA, and analyze wolf morphology to determine guilt or innocence of

the 'suspect,' Wilds said.

"The trial was just like the students have seen on TV," he noted. And, with so many television shows and movies centered around crime scene investigation and DNA analysis, the topic was of particular interest to students who are beginning to decide on potential careers.

The objective of the academy, which includes 20 high school students and 10 high school teachers from throughout northeastern Oklahoma, is to promote ecological awareness, teach hands-on research skills, and entice participants to become teachers, wildlife biologists, crime scene analysts, or game wardens.

"Students took on different roles, as prosecutors, defense attorneys, and witnesses," Wilds said. And in the end, the panel of jurors – made up of students' parents who attended the final day's event – acquitted the suspect. After intense debate between jurors, they were surprised to find out that the accused actually did commit the crime," he said. "The defense attorney was able to convince them there was a reasonable doubt."

Students are required to follow-up during the regular school year by presenting a demonstration on wildlife forensics at their schools. Several teachers are working to acquire grants that will allow them to conduct workshops for students at their own schools.

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