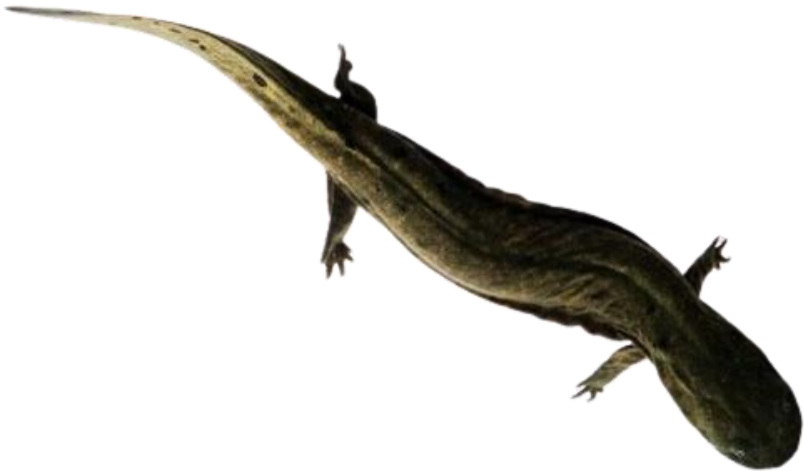


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FROM STAFF REPORTS

ICHS Students Are Raising Hellbenders





Indian Creek High School sophomore Maddox Simmons reviews one of the tanks of newly arrived juvenile hellbenders that the school will raise and eventually release back into the wild.

WINTERSVILLE — Indian Creek High School students are officially raising hellbenders after obtaining 20 young salamanders as part of an innovative pilot program.

ICHS is the fourth site and only high school in the state working with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Jefferson County Soil and Water Conservation District and Columbus Zoo to help rebuild the endangered species' population and release them back into the wild. The 1-year-old "*babies*" arrived in April and join Chief, a 3-year-old hellbender and school ambassador, while students are charting their growth and sharing data with natural resources officials and zoologists. Chief is maintained in an aquarium on the main floor of the Wintersville building while the juvenile hellbenders are being housed in a special bio-secure room near the science classes.

Science teacher Crystal Fluharty, who has coordinated efforts with Assistant Principal Keith Swearingen, said it was an exciting venture and gives students an opportunity to put science to work.

"(Assistant Superintendent) John Belt and Aaron Dodds of the soil and water district went to the Toledo Zoo and got 20 juvenile hellbenders," Fluharty said.

The school is assisting the effort to save the amphibians from extinction, particularly since Jefferson County is considered the epicenter of the hellbender habitat. ICHS began an aquatic education pathway as a result, while its involvement is quite fitting because the eggs used for the project were harvested at Cross Creek and the goal is to release the then-adult hellbenders back into the wild around 2026. The amphibian dates back more than 160 million years and can live for up to six decades. Additionally, the soil and water district has been part of the program for the past 15 years and has 500 acres of appropriated county land eyed for natural habitats, mostly within the school district.

It has been a united effort as technology, engineering and natural resources students were working together and cameras are being used for surveillance to watch Chief and the other creatures grow, plus the video could eventually be viewed by the public. Meanwhile, the engineering students were creating designs for the caves and Indian Creek Middle School students were raising crawfish to feed the salamanders. ODNR grant funding helped procure the food, tanks, educational supplies and marketing materials while Pet Supplies Plus donated tanks and equipment for the rearing room. Students helped install five 40-gallon tanks for the small hellbenders in the bio-secure room.

For now, four students conduct the daily reviews and record the juvenile hellbenders' progress, which is sent to the ODNR and Columbus Zoo. Sophomore Maddox Simmons, one of the budding researchers, said it has been enjoyable and educational.

"It's one of the favorite classes I've had in my entire life," Simmons said. "It's definitely outside of my comfort zone. I have a blast working with this group. We've become friends and the class is fantastic."

He explained that the students must ensure the water and room temperatures are regulated, tanks are cleaned and food is provided for the growing amphibians. The hellbenders receive crayfish, worms and other food and students keep track of their growth. Simmons said he spends about 20 minutes in his natural resources career-tech course and the extra time surveying the salamanders. About two students are permitted in the room at a time and must wear lab coats and protective gear to keep the environment safe. One person checks the parameters while another prepares the food for the juveniles.

"I also take care of Chief by taking her out of the tank to weigh, measure the length and take photos," Simmons added.

While Fluharty and the students refer to Chief as female, the hellbender will join Brannigan, the JCSWCD mascot, to undergo official testing and students will hold a *"gender reveal"* by donning pink or blue clothing. Fluharty said more students will be trained and it was an amazing opportunity for them and the school to be part of the process because it's a big responsibility.

She noted that hopefully officials will get a chance to view the program at ICHS.

"We keep the information we recorded and attend meetings in the fall and spring with a hellbender partnership and report to each of them on how they are doing," she concluded. "We had a meeting at the Penta Career Center near Toledo in March and the next one will be at the Columbus Zoo in the fall. We hope to have one at Indian Creek next spring."

