

'Sally' is newest fourth-grader

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REBECCA BRIA PHOTOS / THE DALLAS POST

"Sally," a spotted salamander, is temporarily living in a plastic container in Nicole Valkenburg's fourth-grade class at Wycallis Elementary School. Fourth-grader Mitchell Winters noticed the salamander on Tuesday, Oct. 28, outside the doors of the school. Teachers caught the salamander, which was out in the winter weather, and brought it indoors.

It was sleeting and the wind was whipping during the afternoon of Tuesday, Oct. 28, as Wycallis Elementary School reading specialist Caitlin Cooper read a book to a group of fourth-graders on the floor near double doors. Although the children's attention kept diverting to the elements, Cooper never anticipated what would happen next.

Mitchell Winters, a boy in the group, spotted what he thought was a rat outside the door.

Cooper redirected the students to the book and minutes later, Winters once again said he saw an animal. Cooper said it was probably a leaf, but the boy insisted it was an animal.

Finally, Cooper allowed the students to look outside. There in the freezing weather was a 10-inch long black reptile with yellow spots that appeared to be a small lizard.

The fourth-graders, along with Cooper, rounded up several teachers who went outside and caught the reptile.

"I just saw something moving," Winters said. "It freaked me out. He turned and was coming toward me. I'm like, 'You should bring it in,' but they didn't know what to do with it."

Wycallis fifth-graders went on a field trip in September to Frances Slocum State Park to explore and learn about wetland life. The fifth-grade classrooms are located next to the double doors and the students soon heard about the creature.

Fifth-grader Steven Darling grabbed a book, "Salamander Rain," that the fifth-grade classes read and quickly discovered the reptile was a spotted salamander. He also learned the salamander eats insects, spiders and earthworms and typically lives in wetland areas.

The students named the salamander "Sally"



Fourth-grader Mitchell Winters holds a plastic bin containing the salamander he noticed outside the doors of Wycallis Elementary School.



Steven Darling, a fifth-grader at Wycallis Elementary School, identified the salamander, that was lingering in winter weather outside doors to the school.

even though they are unable to distinguish whether it is a male or female.

"They looked up the habitat, food, etc. and decided to begin to take care of this animal," Cooper said. "Word spread quickly and many other classes came to visit and see Sally, our new pet. It was definitely a great hands-on science lesson and a perfect example of how sometimes you have to drop the 'planned' lesson and go with what is happening in the moment."

Darling and his classmates in teacher Linda Joseph's class fed beetles to Sally. The class previously did an experiment with the beetles to learn about their habitat.

"Our teacher doesn't like the beetles so she said, 'Let's feed it the beetles,'" Darling said.

Sally is temporarily staying in a plastic container in teacher Nicole Valkenburg's fourth-grade

classroom and Valkenburg has integrated the salamander into her fourth-grade science lessons. Her class recently finished a chapter on life cycles and is beginning a unit on adaptations, making Sally's appearance very timely.

Through her own research, Valkenburg learned that Sally could live from 20 to 30 years. Valkenburg says spotted salamanders usually hide under rocks in wetlands and only come out in the spring to lay their eggs.

The students gathered dirt and leaves and added water to Sally's living quarters. Valkenburg contacted the Fish and Boat Commission to inquire about what to do with Sally.

"I'm afraid if we send it back out when it's too cold, it'll die," Valkenburg said. "I don't want to keep it here because it's not its natural habitat."

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