By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader Local youth will finish the school year later this month, but just because school's out does not mean the education has to stop.

This summer, Mid-America Air Museum will once again offer Camp Falcon for children ages 8 to 12, and this year, there will also be a camp for younger children.

For the first time, kids age 4 to 7 can also learn about the history and science of flight with a new program at MAAM – Camp Sparrow.

With both camps, instructor Michelle Stoddard said campers will not only learn about the history and science, but each week will feature an activity based on the topic for that session.

"With the kites, the second day, we'll go out and fly our kites," she said as an example. "It gives the kids the opportunity to use what we've learned in the classroom."

Both Camp Sparrow and Camp Falcon will feature rockets, which Stoddard said are always a favorite.

"They paint their own rocket, design their own rocket and launch their own rocket," she said.

Stoddard said Camp Sparrow is similar to Camp Falcon, but it is scaled down to the younger age group.

"We're only doing four weeks as a trial to see what kind of response we get," she said. "We've had a lot of parents in the past ask if we had anything for the younger kids. This was our opportunity to show that we did listen to them."

Stoddard said MAAM received a grant that has allowed the museum to try the Sparrow program out with the younger kids.

"We're really excited about it," she said. "This grant did give us two new computers to be able to use upstairs, which we're really excited about."

Stoddard said the museum's current computers are a little out of date, and the new ones could allow for new programs for the camps.

"We do like Power Flight," she said. "We've got some flying in there where they can kind of work as we start talking. They're able to go in and pretend they are flying a plane and see how they lift, which is a lot of fun because kids normally find out it's not as easy as they thought it was."

Stoddard said she had received several requests to have something for younger kids, and during last year's session, she did allow some of them to participate to see how well it would work.

“The kids did really well with the ones that came into the program,” she said. “They had a lot of fun with it, and I just really felt like it was an opportunity that we can do another way the air museum could be utilized with the younger kids and let them realize how great a museum we really have.”

Stoddard said in the long run, she believes Camp Sparrow will be just as big as, if not bigger than, Camp Falcon.

“We’ve already had two people come and sign up for Camp Sparrow that’s already paid for all four weeks,” she said. “It’s a $7 fee for a week. They’re there twice a week for two hours.”

Stoddard said her goal in future years is to be able to scale everything down for the 4 to 7 year olds so both camps can have six weeks.

“I’d like to do Camp Falcon and Camp Sparrow both as six weeks,” she said. “We went with the four weeks to test the waters, to figure out where we’re at, how many are there and be able to take notes to do what we need to in order to fix things, but I really expect it to be very successful.”

Camp Falcon and Camp Sparrow will be offered in two-day increments with classes in the mornings and afternoons on Tuesdays and Thursdays for Camp Falcon and Mondays and Wednesdays for Camp Sparrow.

“I tried some of them I thought the kids would enjoy the most out of the four weeks,” Stoddard said. “They can make kites. They can make rockets. You don’t have to attend every week. You pick and choose.”

That includes a choice of the morning session from 10 a.m. to noon or the afternoon session from 2 to 4 p.m., and campers may choose which is most convenient.

Stoddard said she is also looking for volunteers for the camps, and if businesses want to help sponsor kids, they are welcome to do so with a fee.

One of the Camp Falcon sessions will focus on space, and Stoddard said children will meet former Liberal resident Joyce Schultz, who now works for NASA.

“She came in last year and was able to educate the kids about some of the stuff we never got to see,” she said. “It’s always neat to have somebody that’s around NASA every day.”

An officer from the Liberal Police Department will talk to youth in both camps about gliders.

“The kids really enjoyed it last year. It’s the first time we’ve had him,” Stoddard said. “He’s already asked to come back. It teaches a lot about history we didn’t know.”

Stoddard said the goal of the camps is to teach the kids about flight and show them how the technology has changed over the years, while at the same time having fun.

“We want them to come out and enjoy themselves and be able to feel free to go experiment a little bit,” she said. “Some of the science classrooms in schools are not able to do a lot of hands-on activities. This is a great opportunity to give us the opportunity for the kids to have fun and experiment in the process.”

This is Stoddard’s fourth year with Camp Falcon, and she said numbers have increased every year.

“Last year, we had 36 different kids and 130 in overall attendance,” she said. “The first year I did it, I had 32 different kids. There was 70 in attendance. They’d never had even 33 people overall attending. They were just really impressed that we’ve increased every year with more kids and more overall attendance.”

Stoddard said she sees significant growth in the camps in the future.

“With the way it’s growing, we’re going to have a second person and going to have a bigger room,” she said. Classes for both camps are $7 each or $28 for all of Camp Sparrow and $49 for all of Camp Falcon. This covers the costs of materials.

Campers can register at MAAM or call 624-5263 for more information. Advance registration is requested but not required. Participants may enroll on the first day of class.