

THE NATURE HIKE

Activity 12

AGE LEVEL = 5 and up
DURATION = 30-60 min.
LEARNING STATION = Outdoors
RELATED ACTIVITIES = All

WHEN =



UNDERSTANDING: The Nature Hike is an excellent way to introduce children to the sights, sounds, textures and wonder of nature. Depending on the objectives you choose, the understandings conveyed will be many and varied.

MATERIALS:

- Leader's knapsack
- Bug boxes or magnifying lens
- Field guides

PREPARATION: If possible, visit the site beforehand. Remain flexible enough in your hike for teachable moments. It's a good idea to locate items along the trail that will reinforce the hike theme you choose, but remain spontaneous, and let your creative juices flow.

LESSON:

Warm-up: Set expectations by clarifying your goals for the nature hike. Tell them what to look for. Set down some simple rules before your hike.

Activity: choose one of the following nature hike themes, or create your own:

1. **Wildflower Hike:** This is a good spring nature hike to introduce the value of wildflowers to children. Often, only the showiest flowers are seen or known. Recognize these, but in addition, get on your hands and knees to find the less obvious ones. Remember, it's not important to know the names of the wildflowers. Instead have them search for different shapes, colors, sizes and smells. Ask them why they think there is so much variety. Have them guess whether the flower is self, wind, insect or bird pollinated. Stick around to see if any insects visit the wildflowers while the children search. Ask them why wildflowers are important to care about (aesthetics, photography, food sources for insects, birds, wildlife, medicines for people, dyes for making fabric).
2. **Bird Hike:** These hikes should be taken during the early morning or late afternoon, as this is when birds are most active. As with wildflowers, knowing names is not half as important as searching for and observing bird life. These hikes can be anywhere, but good birding spots might be identified in advance. Look for behaviors. Are the birds feeding, singing, arguing, fighting, courting, preening? Compare these behaviors with human behaviors. There are many topics to explore further, such as migration, insect control, raptors, courting, song interpretation, nest building, flying, habitat preference.
3. **Parallels in Nature:** This hike theme introduces the concept that many modern inventions are taken directly from what "nature" has taught us. With good eyes and sharp imaginations, enough can be found along any nature trail to make this an interesting hike. Begin by introducing several natural items that exhibit natural laws used by people. Camouflage: Weasels and snowshoe hare are white during the winter and brown during the summer to match their surrounding environment. Flight: Birds (explain the lightness of feathers, hollow bones and physical structure needed for flight) and bats. Perfume: Skunks, skunk cabbage,

mink, beaver and others. Drilling: Woodpecker beaks. Insulation: Animal fur and feathers, beavers, lodges, and so on.

After the children catch on to the parallels, have them choose objects along the trail (stress the importance of leaving the objects in place) and discover their own connections.

Wrap-up: Review the findings made along the trail. Try quizzing the children with the game Owls and Crows:

Divide the children into two equal groups — one representing wise old owls and the other crafty crows. Designate a playing area (100 to 150 feet) and a “safe” area for each group. Have the owls and crows face each other in the center of the playing area. Begin by stating a fact related to the nature hike. If the statement is false, the crows chase owls towards their “safe” area. If the statement is true, then owls chase crows towards their “safe” area. If an owl or crow is tagged before reaching its “safe” area, it becomes the opposite creature for the next round. Repeat the process several times, fluctuating between true and false statements.

OPTIONS AND FURTHER EXPLORATIONS:

Activities to do between stops on the nature hike:

1. **Object Pass:** The child at the front of the line chooses an object and passes it down the line from the front to the back. Each child should look at the object and then pass it on. When it gets to the last child, that person moves to the front of the line, chooses another object and passes it down the line. The process is repeated until arriving at the next stop.
2. **Flash Flood:** Explain to the group that sometimes a rainstorm can sneak up on you and, in a flash, you could be swept away in a flood. So when you call out “flash flood” and count backwards from five, everyone must get off the trail and get their feet off the ground. When you reach one, turn around and look at the group. If someone is unable to do it, suggest standing on a rock or wrapping themselves around a tree. Next time, give them four seconds, then three, then two and then one.
3. **The Wild Turkey Walk:** Explain to the group that to better understand animals they might see, it’s best to imitate them. Begin with your most outlandish turkey walk and invite the children to follow-the-leader. For other nature like ideas, see the activities listed under “Trail Activities” in the Index by Subject.