NHMU: Bird Watching 101

Summary

Students will learn the basics of bird watching, finding and interpreting bird clues and attracting birds to a particular location or habitat.

Group Size

Individual

Materials

- Checklist (pdf)
  Pencil or Pen

Background for Teachers

Attracting Birds:
Besides building birdhouses and making bird feeders, birds can be attracted to a certain location by adding other features. Providing food, water, shelter from predators and weather and sites for safe nesting can be attractive to birds. Consider placing a bird feeder or water dish outside your classroom window. Birds will be skittish of movement in your room at first but will become accustomed to it quickly and make your feeder a regular stop. Your class may then begin to study some of the behaviors of individual birds that they are familiar with!

Instructional Procedures

Getting Started:
Ask students how they would describe themselves so someone else would recognize them. Have students practice by listing special features they have on a piece of paper or list them on the board as a class -- freckles, hair color, height, eye color, etc. Knowing a bird's name is not essential. There are many ways to classify and identify birds on a bird watching hike.

By color: 3 brown birds, 1 blue, 4 black and white, etc.
By size: 1 crow-sized bird, 2 sparrow-sized, etc.
By actions: 5 birds flying, 2 sitting on nests, 1 hopping on the ground, etc.
By habitat: 1 bird on the roadside, 2 on tree branches, 4 under a shrub, etc.
Students' own criteria for classifying.

Pack a notebook and pencil to record all observations and clues from your hike.
Listen for birds:

If you hear a bird close by, but can't see it, make a "spishing" noise. This is a noise that many birds will respond to and it is the sound you make when saying "psst" in a friend's ear.
Rustling in bushes, shrubs or undergrowth might be the sound of busy birds.
Banging or loud tapping noises can indicate a woodpecker nearby.
Listen for different songs, calls or other noises and try to decipher their meanings.

Notice clues:

Nests are an obvious clue that a bird is nearby or has been at some time during the year. They can be found in all sorts of places from trees to bridges to roadsides.
Never remove a nest from the wild. Many birds return to their nests each year and other birds use abandoned nests to lay their eggs.
Finding feathers can alert you to the presence of birds. A few worn out feathers might indicate a bird that is molting, a lot of feathers or bird parts might indicate a bird that has been killed and eaten.

Owl pellets can be seen at the base of a tree or ledge where an owl is nesting.
Woodpecker holes are a good way to locate hard-to-find woodpeckers.

Once students have gotten used to looking for birds, and recording their observations, they can start to be more specific in identification.

Shape: is it plump, slender, etc.
Body parts: long or short legs, short or skinny beak, crested head, forked tail.
Markings: bands of color, eyestripes, speckled breast, etc.
Movement: does it glide, swoop, run, hop, bob its tail, etc.
Location: habitat and geographical location, etc.

Use an appropriate field guide to identify the birds you have seen. You may want to start a class checklist to keep track of the birds you see.

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Bibliography

This lesson plan was developed by the Utah Museum of Natural History.

Authors

Utah LessonPlans