

Nature Teaching Ideas

Nature area: Does your school property have any natural or forest area? Does it have a wild area or an area overgrown with trees? What kinds of animals live around your school? Use the area around your school to study with your children what lives in it and how it changes during the year.

Bird houses and bird feeders: Build some bird houses for your school. There are many plans online. Nature centers may also be able to give you plans. Put the houses near windows so your children can view them from class. My Spy Birdhouse mounts to a window so you can see inside the bird house. A retired person at your church / school could build you some. There are plans online for owl nests and bat nests. In spring, you could put out string or other items for birds to use to make their nests.

Trail Camera: A trail camera will help you learn what lives around you. They cost between \$60-150. They can take pictures or video. I chain and padlock my camera to a tree so that it does not get stolen. I looked for one with a black LED flash. It will not be noticeable to the animals or people (a good thing so that it won't get stolen).

Animal feeding station: Get a salt lick for deer to use. Loosen up patch of soil and rake it smooth. Put some corn or sunflower seeds in the middle. The loose soil will allow animals to make great footprints when they eat the food you put out. Using some strips of poster board form a circle, you can make plaster casts of them.

Things to learn about: Get a tree and a flower identification book to learn what is living around you. Nature centers might have classes for you and your staff to learn about your area. You can learn about birds and their songs from www.birdjam.com. In the early spring, let your students hear the song of robins, red winged blackbirds, cardinals and chickadees. They will be able to identify the songs of birds at recess.

Bird Watching Club: Make a contact with your local club. The club can be an valuable resource to you. They can help with bird identification, creation of habitat, and they can share with you the types of birds they are seeing in your area.

Maple syrup: In early March, tap some maple trees to collect the sap. Boil off the water and let the children try some maple syrup. The parts to do this are very inexpensive. The taste of the syrup is very good and it will have you looking forward to the end of February year after year.

Plant some bulbs in the fall. Crocuses can be planted in grassy areas and they will be done by the time the grass needs to be mowed.

Have a nearby pond, collect some tadpoles in the spring. They are vegetarian until they start to grow legs. They eat the green pond scum found in ponds or you can boil some bits of lettuce for them. Once they grow legs, give them a stick to crawl out of the water on. Cover the container so they don't wander away.

Digital Microscope: These can plug into a computer to allow the image to be viewed by the whole class. My class loves to watch pond water to see the little diatoms and other critters in the water.

Nature area activities: Digging (with kids sized shovels and rakes), snow man building, build a simple structure out of limbs or logs, take a picture of your nature area every 2 weeks to look for change, plant some raspberries, read books outside on log chairs, eat snack outside, build a home for a classroom toy using found bits, bark rubbing with charcoal and paper, collect bugs (note the time of year you found them), build an outdoor art easel using some Plexiglas and some cedar 2x4's, dramatic play is a lot of fun in nature, watch clouds blow by and the trees sway on a windy day, bring in a metal detector (this will captivate your students as you look for buried treasure outside), leaf pile jumping and leaf collecting, build an igloo, study a spider web (dew covered ones in the morning are awesome), feed a spider (I found a garden spider by our school door and I fed it bugs by throwing a bug into the web so the students could watch how it eats,

Things you will need: Good pair of waterproof boots, snack serving supplies (camping store), kids versions of shovels and rakes, snowshoes, trail camera, nature puppets (Folkmanis puppets are high quality and they are found in book stores or on Amazon.com).

Butterflies: Collect some common milkweed seed pods in the fall in a ditch or unmowed area and separate the seeds from the fluff outside. Put the seeds in the freezer to prepare them so they will sprout in the spring. Start the seeds in the spring. Plant other flowers that attract butterflies like asters, coneflowers, dahlias, gayfeather, butterfly weed (eastern milkweed), and Joe Pye weed. I would like to get my butterfly area registered as a Monarch Waystation. Look it up online.

In my research, 3-10% of Monarch caterpillars make it from egg to Butterfly in the wild. I collect the eggs and raise them inside. I hope to get a bunch started and give school families the opportunity to raise one at home.

It may take you a few years to find all the ways to use your nature area. I found it took me a few years of being aware of the seasonal changes that take place. After you know what to expect, you will better be able to plan for activities and know what to look for outside. A good goal of a nature area is for you and your students to become an expert of the area. Nature center workshops can help with this. Play is different in a natural setting. Dramatic play is very imaginative. A nature area can become a unique reason for parents to choose your school. If you teach at a religious school, the nature area is a great place to connect students with the story of Creation and God's care of the world.

To check out my school's latest findings, find us on facebook under Christ the Life Preschool or find my youtube channel: Scott Boris.