

Nature Hikes

Nature hikes can lead children toward wonderful sensory challenges, such as trekking through lush grass, balancing on fallen logs, or feeling the hot sun against their faces. When activities engage children in novel ways, they learn to focus and better express their ideas. Promote the development of sensory awareness and an assortment of other skills through nature hikes. Take time to discuss and evaluate with students what they are experiencing as they hike. Let students use a digital camera and place the photos in their nature journals. Give children individual “goodie” bags, so as they hike along a path they can search and collect many different nature specimens to sort and label at a later time. Possible nature-hike ideas include the following:

Theme Hike: On a theme hike have children focus on a particular theme, such as nature colors, shadows, seeds, insects, signs of the season, or types of trees or birds. Connect theme hikes to art projects. After a “color” hike, have students mix paint to match the colors they recall having observed. Have them paint objects with these distinct colors.



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While on sensory hikes, let children look for acorns, fallen bark chunks, pinecones and pine needles, and leaves of all shapes and sizes. Have children run their fingers over the top of a tree stump or feel cold mud. Bring magnifying glasses, binoculars, sunglasses, kaleidoscopes, butterfly nets, and prisms to enhance a sensory hike. Encourage children to listen for sounds, such as a bird chirping, the wind whooshing, a dog barking, or dry leaves crunching as you walk in them. When you return to class, use collected items to make a nature mobile with yarn and a hanger. A nature collage is another resourceful idea for items collected on a hike.



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Pita bread that is halved and filled with sliced ham, cheese, and an assortment of veggies makes a great hiking snack for children.



Alphabet Hike: Divide students into teams, each with a captain.

Any player from either team who sees something beginning with the letter *A* and pertaining to nature names it. The captain writes down the word. Members from that team then look for something beginning with *B*. The team that gets the furthest through the alphabet before the hike ends wins!

Sensory Hike: While hiking, focus children’s attention on what they hear or feel. For example, ask, “Do you hear birds chirping? Wind whistling? Woodpeckers pecking? Crickets chirping?” Even locusts make notable noises. Have children feel bark, leaves, grass, and rocks. If possible, purposely have students trudge through thick mud or wade in a cool river to catch crawdads, minnows, or tadpoles that will captivate their senses and heighten their sensory awareness. Children will enjoy gathering flower heads, such as dandelions. Discuss and examine the sensory differences between dandelion heads and dandelion seed puffs.

Search Hike: While on a search hike, have children focus on discovering wildlife in the air, on the ground, or in a stream. Search for nests, animal tracks, droppings, tree holes, burrows, and other signs of life. Students can draw discoveries in their nature journals or compare them on large chart paper. Take a pocket-sized *Golden Guide* along. Use it to look up questions children might have about discovered items or unknown flowers and plants.

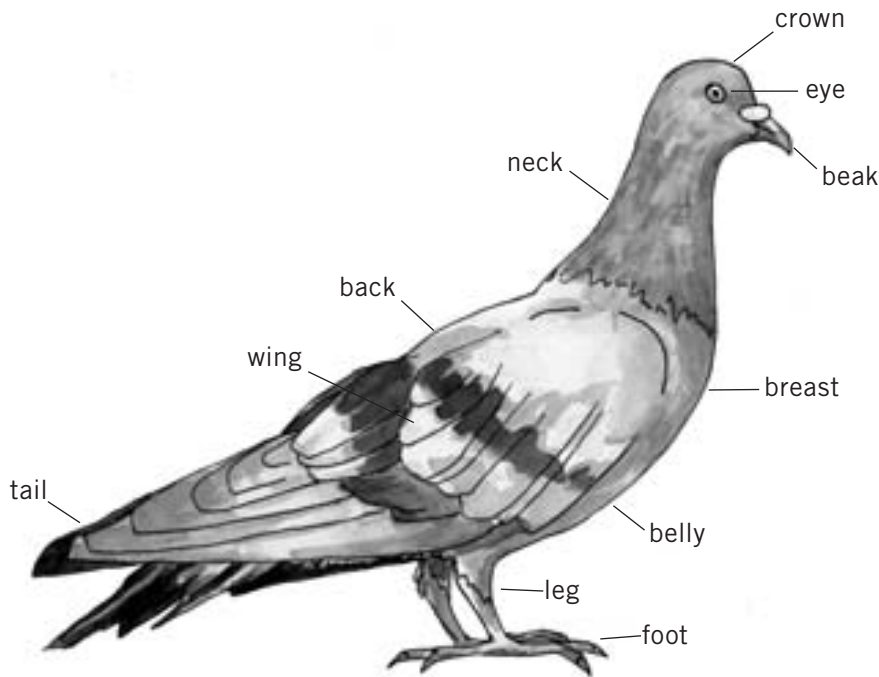
Cleanup Hike: Organize a hike to clean up surrounding natural environments, such as a local park, nature trail, or school playground. Take along trash bags and nonlatex gloves for each child. Connect recycling projects to a cleanup hike.


“I Spy” Hike: Children gain knowledge and create theories about nature when they use observational skills to answer questions about how things within it work. Use an “I Spy” hike to focus on the small details of nature. Have students examine a spiderweb or a dandelion poking its head through a sidewalk crack. Have students spy something beginning with the letter *B*. Use a puppet prop, such as Bertha Beetle, to enforce the connection between nature and literacy.

Plant Hike: While hiking, have children try to find as many different plants as possible. Be sure to address any toxic plants they might encounter. Students can use their senses on a plant hike to learn more about the plant world. Have children smell various flowers or pinch a leaf, stem, or root and smell it. Feel the texture of bark and leaves. Lie on the ground and look up at the tree to see the patterns in its branches and leaves.

Color-Match Hike: Gather a variety of paint chips from a local paint store. Have students match paint samples to natural outdoor colors while hiking. Draw and write connections in nature journals.

Bird-Watching Hike: While on a bird-watching hike, have children observe and draw birds. Look for nesting birds in eaves and trees or on utility lines. Introduce words such as *migration*, *plumage*, and *perch* for nature journals or word walls. Discuss the basic parts of a bird and have students label its parts. Students will benefit from learning to use proper terminology when describing birds. Refer to the following illustration. Discuss local species. Have students listen for birds chirping;



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Encourage students to use as many adjectives as possible when describing what they see on nature walks, whether verbally or in a nature journal. For example, a child may express, "Mrs. Cross, I saw a spider!" You could prompt a lengthier response: "Wow, TJ! Did it look like the eight-legged hairy spider we saw last week on the playground?"

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Children will enjoy observing and learning about birds in their area, as well as learning the secrets of turning their school yard into a home for wild birds. Visit www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com for wonderful information on bird watching. Make and hang milk-jug bird feeders, suet feeders, and platform and soda-bottle bird feeders. Discuss the state bird with students or why it is that female birds often do not sing while male birds have beautiful voices. In their nature journals, have students section off a few pages to paste pictures of local birds.

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Invite further exploration on hikes by asking questions. For example, a bird-watching hike might spark questions, such as “What does this particular bird eat?” “What color are its eggs?” “What nesting materials does the bird use?” “What are the differences between a female and male bird?” Use a Venn diagram for comparison purposes.

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pigeons are common in urban areas. As a creative twist, have students walk and bob their heads and flap their wings (arms) like a pigeon as a prehike focusing activity.

Seed-Discovery Hike: A seed-discovery hike can be easily implemented in the autumn months when plants, weeds, and trees are shedding. Have students look for seeds in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and textures. Discuss with students how seeds need water, warmth, food, and air to sprout. With an abundance of seeds, students can make collages and seed shakers for the music area, as well as add seeds to their fingerprint.

Fragrance Hike: Take children on a fragrance hike around the school playground or neighborhood and see how many smells of the season they can identify. A few possibilities include the smell of wet soil, the smell of fresh air after a rain shower, or the smell of flowers.