



## *Writing Field Notes for Kids*

### Objectives

Students will:

- ❖ Develop observation skills relating to the natural world
- ❖ Practice techniques for researching a scientific question
- ❖ Write a vivid, accurate description of a natural phenomenon

### Background

A trip outdoors, whether it's a walk during recess or a hike up a mountain, brings up questions for keen observers. Where do magpies nest? Why doesn't a spider stick to its own web? Why do bees visit some flowers and not others? Writing *Field Notes for Kids* is an opportunity for students in grades 4-8 to find out the answers to some of their questions, and then take the next step of explaining their findings to someone else.

*Field Notes for Kids* are short radio spots produced by the Montana Natural History Center (MNHC) that air on Montana Public Radio. The pieces highlight children's observations of the natural world, ranging from life in ponds and streams to the amazing tongue of the pileated woodpecker. The format and style of *Field Notes for Kids* is based on the successful *Field Notes* program that has been on the air since 1991.

As this assignment has different parts involving different locations, it could be spread over a week, or done in one extended class period.

NOTE: Depending on the age of the students and the teacher's inclination, this assignment can be adapted for work in groups.

### Materials

- ❖ Paper for student note taking and writing
- ❖ Pens and pencils
- ❖ *Field Notes for Kids* video (optional)

### Presenting the Assignment

Prepare your students for the field trip by asking them what they've wondered about as they've watched animals or plants in the wild. Tell them about *Field Notes for Kids* and what the assignment involves. Let them know they are going to be taking a field trip and writing about the experience later, so they should be sure to take lots of notes. You can also play the *Field Notes for Kids* video, which shows children demonstrating how to research, write and record their natural history essays. The *Field Notes for Kids* video can be borrowed from the MEEA/MNHC Ralph Lee Allen Environmental Education Library.

### **Observing the Natural World**

Once you've established the assignment, take your students outside. Begin in a group, sitting in a circle. Encourage them to write down what they observe about their surroundings, looking at both the big picture and the small, examining plants and rocks and insects up close. Have them make a record in their journal of what they experience with each of their senses. Then have them choose one animal or plant to watch for 10 minutes. They can choose anything: a dandelion, a grasshopper, a hawk soaring overhead. Ask them to describe it as clearly as they can, as if they are writing for someone who's never seen that phenomenon before. Have students watch how their subjects move and take note of any sounds made. They might want to draw where the subject lives or what it looks like to help them remember later. Then ask them to write five questions about it based on these observations. Lead your students back to the circle to share something that they observed that they'd never noticed before.

### **Visiting the Library**

Before going to the library, begin a discussion about how students might answer their questions. List some of the students' questions on the board. Where could they look for answers? The encyclopedia is a good start, but what about the Internet? What about asking a scientist or another kind of expert? At the library, each student chooses one question and uses library time to search for the answers. The students keep a running list of facts they discover. If they can't find the answer to their question, suggest they research another aspect of their chosen topic or move on to one of their other questions.

### **Writing the Field Note for Kids**

Back in the classroom, students write their *Field Note for Kids*. Topics covered might include a description of the place they made their observation, the question they wondered about and where they found the answer, and background information on the plant or animal. A good essay length is about 350 words.

Encourage your students to experiment with the format of *Field Notes for Kids*. They can write poems, songs or plays, as long as they focus on educating their audience. These formats are particularly good for groups. Since they are writing for radio broadcast, remind your students they have to describe their topic very clearly so the listener can see it. They may want to include student-generated sounds like rushing water or croaking frogs.

### **Taking the Final Step**

Collect your students' *Field Notes for Kids* and send them in to the Montana Natural History Center, 120 Hickory Street, Missoula, MT 59801, attn. Caroline Kurtz. Be sure each writer includes his or her name, address and phone number with his or her *Field Note*. MNHC will call each child who has been selected to read and arrange a recording date with KUFM. Another option, so that all the students get to present their discoveries, is to have each individual or group do a presentation in front of the class about the chosen natural history topic before submitting the pieces to MNHC.

# *Why Do Birds Chirp?*

*A Field Notes for Kids Sample*

It's Spring. I see birds all around chirping, singing, building nests and doing their thing. I began to wonder, why do birds chirp and sing in Spring?

No one in my house knew. So I got a pencil and pad of paper and went outside. I went up and down the street looking for birds. I finally found a few sitting in a tree, chirping. They were little black birds about six inches long with white on their stomachs. I drew a picture of them in my notebook. Their chirp had a high pitch and sounded like TWEE, TWEE. After one would chirp, several others would circle and peck at each other.

Then I saw three larger brown and white birds. I also drew them in my book. They made a low sound that was a CHURP, CHURP. They would fly at each other and hit each other with their feet.

When my mom got home, we went down to the cattails by the Mini-Mart. We saw some birds which we identified with our Audubon Field Book as being Redwing Blackbirds. They made a medium pitch rough sounding call. We tape-recorded a few of the calls these and some other birds were making.

I called my aunt, a zoologist. She said the birds might be chirping because they are hungry (if they are baby birds), or because the birds are showing off their mating call, or saying, "Get off my territory."

My Audubon guide books and the encyclopedia said mainly the same things as my aunt. I think most of the birds I saw were chirping to show off their mating calls and fighting for the same reason.

John A.

Grade and School Unknown