



Montana Natural History Center

Connecting People with Nature

120 Hickory Street
Missoula, MT 59801
406.327.0405
MontanaNaturalist.org



The Visiting Naturalist in the Schools Program 2025-2026

I. PURPOSE AND GOALS:

The purpose of the Visiting Naturalist in the Schools program is to engage student curiosity in the natural world through scientific inquiry, exploration, and multiple ways of knowing.

We work towards four broad goals in the program. To help students:

- develop the skills of an artist, writer and scientist to explore the natural world.
- become familiar with the process of scientific inquiry.
- understand how form relates to function in the natural world by studying the adaptations of Montana flora and fauna.
- develop a relationship with a Naturalist mentor.

II. HOW WE REACH THESE GOALS:

We commit to a full school year of monthly naturalist visits for each classroom. These visits enable us to reinforce and build on scientific inquiry and key concepts like the relationship between structure and function. Teaching Naturalists develop strong mentoring relationships with students in the process, central to the program.

Quality Field Trips: in October and May we meet students for school day field trips that run from 9:30am-1:30pm. These trips provide a meaningful naturalist experience for the students in an outdoor setting, including:

- A visit to a rich, diverse riparian/lake habitat close to the students' schools where they can 1. see abundant plant and animal life and 2. easily return later with their parents.
- Quality naturalist tools: students use binoculars, spotting scopes, field microscopes, insect nets and more to explore the natural world.
- Exploration in small groups (approximately 8-10 students/group) and in-depth stations (about 1 hour each) to promote meaningful engagement with nature.

Strong Classroom Instruction: during the remaining months of the school year, we provide rigorous science-based lessons in the classroom and in the schoolyard.

- VNS lessons are designed to meet the Montana State Science Standards and support the instruction teachers are already providing, particularly scientific inquiry and form and function standards.
- Through a partnership with the University of Montana Zoological Museum, we have access to many specimens (wings, beaks, skulls, etc.) that we use to bring the natural world into the classroom.



*Our mission is to promote and cultivate the appreciation, understanding,
and stewardship of nature through education*



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Meeting Science Standards through Nature Education

The Montana Natural History Center’s Visiting Naturalist in the Schools (VNS) program supports the 4th and 5th grade science curriculum through the study and exploration of natural history. Through hands-on, inquiry-based experiences, VNS addresses numerous curriculum targets in the NGSS and Montana Science Standards for the fourth and fifth grades.

VNS lessons give students hands-on opportunities to participate in a variety of science and engineering practices including:

- Asking questions and defining problems
- Planning and carrying out investigations
- Using models
- Analyzing and interpreting data
- Constructing explanations
- Engaging in argument from evidence
- Obtaining, evaluating, and communicating information

Each VNS lesson uses the relationship of *Structure and Function*, one of the **Crosscutting Concepts** in NGSS and the Montana Science Standards, as a lens for students to examine the natural world. Students learn to look closely at the varied structures of plants and animals and explain how these structures relate to specific functions that help organisms survive. Additional crosscutting concepts addressed in VNS lessons include *Patterns* and *Cause and Effect*.

Demonstration of standards for engineering design practices for 4th+5th grades are also supported with lessons that **focus on scientific inquiry**. Through these participatory experiments and discussions, students understand that a “**fair test**” is one that involves the careful planning of experiments with **identified variables and controls**.

Finally, relating to all aspects of science standards, students learn how to **use and understand the vocabulary of scientific language** as well as **practice making scientific arguments based on evidence** throughout their participation in the year-long VNS curriculum.

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Year at a glance

Month	Lesson	Location	Goals/Activities
September	Notice like a Naturalist	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn what it means to be a great observer and naturalist Hands on experience with naturalist tools and specimens
October	Fall Field Trip (9:30-am 1:30pm)	Field Site chosen in collaboration with classroom teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature Walk To Each Its Own Solo Stroll
November	Animal Superpowers	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure and function organisms Nature Journaling Argue from evidence
December	Skull Detective	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure and function of teeth (incisors, canines, molars) Classifying carnivore, herbivore, and omnivore by tooth patterns Nature Journaling
January	Feather Structure and Function	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure and function of feather types Nature Journaling
February	Fill the Bill	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scientific method – experiment on beak shape Structure and function of bird beaks Nature Journaling
March	What Are Flowers For?	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure and function of flowers (sepals, petals, stamens, pistil) Nature Journaling
April	Plants on the Move	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure and function of fruits (berries, burrs, winged fruits) Nature Journaling
May	Spring Field Trip (9:30am-1:30pm)	Field Site chosen in collaboration with classroom teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature Walk Amazing Arthropods Discovery Trail

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