Bird Pals

Designed for the Educator's Science and Math Institute by Elizabeth Grenke August 8, 2000

Kids love nests. While previously teaching in a part-time Title I, part time general music assignment, my work included bringing hands on science activities into second grade classrooms each week.

One of our first activities included a nature hike which encouraged students to tune observation skills. During our exploration, one student spotted a nest. All scrambled to see it, and we brought it inside. A few minutes were left to enjoy our find, but soon I was headed to work with other students, and the afternoon adventure was over.

The day following the nest discovery, I found eight students lined up outside the music room. Each had some kind of nest in hand, bagged, or boxed. I had given no homework assignment for students to bring them, nor promised extra points or rewards. The students' own wonder had lead them to find and bring the nests.

We observed them, began to look at similarities and differences, and for two weeks the drums of the music room became nest holders. I celebrated the enthusiasm for learning which nature had given these students. It had become their best teacher.

As a rural elementary teacher in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, one of my goals has been to find ways in which students are able
to connect their lives to the world around them.

Although my young minds are surrounded by the rich heritage of the northern woods, it is often difficult for them to relate to happenings in other areas. They are tied to experiences near to them. This is a vital part of their development, both personal and academic. However, few receive opportunities to realize the importance of understanding relationships to experiences beyond their own backyard or neighborhood.

This summer I was privileged to attend an Educator’s Science and Math Institute, in conjunction with Michigan Technological University. The institute promoted active learning experiences in the Life Sciences and was made possible for teachers of all levels and disciplines by an Eisenhower Grant.

While in a birding session lead by Professor David Flasphohler, we learned about and listened for various songbirds of our region. As we walked, Dr. Flasphohler told a story of a trip he had taken to the rainforest of South America. He spoke of how remarkable it was to observe the tropical bird species within feet of various woodland songbirds we consider our own.

It is understandable we think of the birds which summer here as “our” birds. We hear them in our backyards or while hiking on a favorite trail. We wake and fall asleep to to their songs. We watch flocks migrate and say goodbye until the next year. Yet how often do we think about their journey or second home?

This question triggered my idea to create the unit, Bird Pals. To help students make connections to a world beyond their own, a migrating bird possesses a valuable link. Bird Pals
introduces students to birds and invites them to think globally. Young scientists explore a different culture and begin to weigh how human actions effect things close to them, although the actions seem far away.

General unit objectives include:

- Students identify basic bird parts, recognize the chosen red eyed vireo by sight, learn behaviors, and become familiar with its song

- Students explore bird's place in both summer and winter habitat

- Students take part in various bird related activities i.e. observing and building bird nests, creating their own bird house or feeder

- Students or class as whole become pen pals to class in region of bird's winter habitat

- Students read and participate in response activities to children's literature; covering the topic areas of birds, the rainforest, and South American culture as it relates to the chosen pen pal classroom

- Spanish language is integrated into daily activities, emphasizing basic greetings and counting

- Art, music, and ethnic foods from the pen pal classroom's culture are integrated throughout the unit

- Students are involved in rainforest activities, including beginning level concepts in geography, weather, and the study of other rainforest creatures

- Using The Great Kapok Tree, by Lynn Cherry, as a guide, students discuss the ecological impact of humans on the rainforest, and create editorials as written response

- Students plan and celebrate what they have learned with a class rainforest party, during which students make their own rainstick instrument and tape a video greeting to their "bird pals"

After considering various birds for the unit focal point, the
red eyed vireo has been chosen specifically for its connection to
the rainforest. Along with this, the vireo has a multitude of
interesting traits for students to discover.

The red eyed vireo is one of the most common birds of upland
woods and is known for its constant singing. Noble Proctor’s
book, Song Birds, is used as a reference. The song of the red
eyed vireo is reproduced on Proctor’s audiotape supplement.

The red eyed vireo has been listed as a world record holder
for the most number of songs in one day. (Proctor, 101.) For
students, this song is easily recognizable, as it carries a rhythm
and repetition in a question and response pattern. Students can
even get a bit silly mimicking its song using a call and response
format.

An interesting study point of the red eyed vireo is its nest
making. Most young students are familiar with, or have seen a
heavier nests made of mud and sticks. The vireo’s make nests of
grasses, fibers, and cobwebs, which hang like a small basket.
(Klein, 220.)

Familiarizing students with different types of nests allows
them to formulate questions as to why birds chose the materials
they chose, and why bird’s place their nests where they do.
Comparing and contrasting nest types encourage students to
verbalize the concept of same or different. During the unit,
students also collect materials and build their own bird nest.
(See attached nest building lesson.)

The red eyed vireo winters in both Central and South America
where it seeks the protection of the tropical rainforest. With
continued forest destruction, their home is at risk. (Proctor, 101.) Helping young students of today understand this devastation and its outcome on the rainforest is a vital solution to encouraging environmental protection.

I believe as students gain information which ties rainforest destruction to endangering an animal they know as one of their own, they then gain a sense of concern and care for our world as a whole.

The link of the red eyed vireo to the rainforest is moved to a deeper level as the unit expands and students begin to connect themselves not only to the bird, but with young people who live in a region where the bird lives in winter months. A bird is shared by both groups of students. Just as students compare nest types, students now begin to appreciate similarities and differences in cultures.

Through networking with our high school Spanish Teacher and other Spanish educators, I am currently in the process of finding a school that wishes to have our students correspond with students of both primary and secondary grades. My colleague has shown an enthusiastic interest in joining some of her higher level Spanish students with the Bird Pals unit plan.

High school students may be recruited to teach primary level language lessons to younger students and share cultural traditions, such as music or ethnic foods. The high schoolers can be of great help in writing letters dictated by young partners and/or classroom letters composed by students and teacher. Spanish language picture books may be read to shape cultural
response activities.

Assessment takes place on a daily basis with open ended questioning and evaluation of response projects from unit activities and trade literature. New things learned are continually added to a K-W-L Board. As listed in the unit objectives, one of the culminating activities of the unit involves students writing an editorial letter on Why we need to preserve the rainforest. Whether done individually, with high school partners, or as a class letter with each member sharing, this activity gives the teacher a strong sense of what students have learned. It also speaks to how what they have learned has impacted their understanding that they can make something important known.

The Bird Pals unit includes many goals of the Michigan Curriculum Framework. Using scientific knowledge from the Life Sciences, students develop an awareness of and sensitivity to the natural world, including effects humans have on the environment. They classify familiar organisms by observing physical characteristics, and observe and construct scientific knowledge by generating questions. Students apply their own prior knowledge and reasoning to what is presented to them, and reflect on new information in relation to the world around them.

South America is a long way from my students’ neighborhoods. Many of my students will never travel outside Upper Michigan. However, through learning about the red eyed vireo and its two homes, and by creating a bridge of correspondence between them, students are given an example for understanding the relationships between all creatures and their habitats.
It is my hope the *Bird Pal* Unit will challenge students not only to apply knowledge learned to experiences in their own backyard, but to their home, planet earth, in its entirety.
Build Your Own Nest Activity

Overview: After observing various nests and their materials, students collect materials they feel would make a good nest and build a nest of their own.

Purpose/ Objectives: Students take part in a hands on experience during which they use problem solving skills and critical thinking.

Student’s and teacher discuss why bird’s chose materials they chose.

Resources: Paper bags for collecting materials
dish tubs with water.(for mud mixing)
Twigs, leaves, string etc. collected by students
Bird Books/Posters
Wax paper for covering desks

Procedure: Class takes nature hike on school grounds to collect materials.

Using pre-collected nests as models, students work in pairs and build nests.

Partners share nests, and building strategies with class as a hole. What was easy in making it? What was difficult?

Class sorts homemade nests by looking for similar traits.

Closure: Using bird books/ posters, partners and class decide which bird species would most likely have made a nest like like theirs.

Nests are displayed for other classes and parents to observe.

Assessment: Students each write one step in how to make a nest. A class direction sheet for nest making is written from ideas and posted in room.
References
