

Nature Awareness

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Wildlife Watching and Setting the Tone on Field Trips

Teachers are in charge of their field trips but may not be experienced outdoor educators, and may not realize that human behavior influences what can be observed on a field trip. Many might be very grateful for extra support in helping their students learn appropriate outdoor behavior.

Setting the tone at the very beginning of the field trip is key. Having opening and closing circles can enhance the overall quality of the field trip. Also incorporating quiet listening moments at the end of each activity can increase the opportunity for wildlife viewing. After students have been quietly absorbed in data collection a return to “baseline” can occur, which can be described as when wildlife becomes less aware or more comfortable with our presence, thus enabling their movement back into an area.

Teachers may cover the wildlife watching techniques with the students before they arrive at the site. Setting the tone can start with the transition from the bus to the field study site by encouraging students not to talk as they move from the bus to the opening circle location. Salmon Watch staff can suggest appropriate locations for opening circles for each site.

The teacher or volunteer can help to lead the nature awareness activities during the opening circle. The closing circle is usually led by the teacher and is where students share what they have discovered on the field trip. Also this is an opportunity to thank the volunteers and other adults who supported the field trip.

How can you tell if Wildlife Watching Techniques are working on your field trip?

Answer these questions to find out. (Note- any birds or animals that have been trained to beg for food do not count as animal encounters.)

1. How many mammals and birds did your group observe, collectively?
2. How close? Or, from what distance?
3. Was your group able to observe mammals or birds in their normal setting and with undisturbed behavior? (singing, feeding, resting, etc.) For how long?
4. Did you see birds or mammals that others in the group did not see? Why didn't the others see them?
5. What is the best “animal experience” story you have to tell about today?

Advanced training for interested volunteers is available through the Metro Parks Greenspaces Program.

Wildlife Watching

Stop **Stop talking** – become a tree, a rock, an animal...

Stop – when there is an alarm call.

Stop – when an animal looks at you.

Stop – learn to **freeze**.

Look Look – with splatter vision to see movement

Look – at edges of fields and near water.

Look – for tracks and signs.

Look – at **dawn and dusk**.

Listen Listen – what are the birds saying?

Listen – for **alarms** or **concentric** rings.

Listen – for a rustle, snuffle, swish, crunch...

Listen – can you hear your breathing?

Move Move - with the **foxwalk**.

Move – in **slow motion**

Move – when an animal looks away from you.

Move – with the wind



(a) The Freeze Game

Would you like to know how it feels to be invisible?

At the word **freeze!** – stay perfectly still. You can breathe and you can blink – but that is all.

Stay “frozen” for a moment...Pretend that you have become a statue, a rock or a tree. If a rabbit or a deer is scared, this is what they do. Their colors blend in with the forest and allow them to disappear (camouflage).

If you are looking at a deer who has “frozen”, you should try to stay still as long as the deer can. You may have to stay still for a long time! Finally, the deer will forget that you are there. It will look away from you. Now is your chance to move closer to it! Any time the deer looks at you – **freeze!**

Use the freeze game when you are watching wildlife and also when you hear an **alarm call**. This is short, choppy call given by a bird or squirrel to let the other animals know there is danger nearby. Even a hummingbird has an alarm call! Is the alarm call nearby? Wait for it to stop before you move. Is it far away? Perhaps another animal or person is moving in the woods and birds have spotted them. Soon you can learn to understand the birds.

Invent a hand signal for **freeze!** to use on your walks. You don't want to shout, “freeze!” and scare everything away!

If you have an hour or two, try finding a nice spot in a park, forest or your backyard. Then sit down, get comfortable and **freeze!** After a while, the birds begin to sing and come closer to you. Soon you will be in a new world full of surprises – animals walking, eating, playing or hunting. That's the way the forest is when there are no people around!

You have become invisible!

(b) Splatter Vision

Would you like to see twice as much – even in your own back yard?

Most people have learned to focus on one small area at a time. We look at a person's face, a book or a television and blot out the surrounding areas. It is like looking through a little tube all the time.

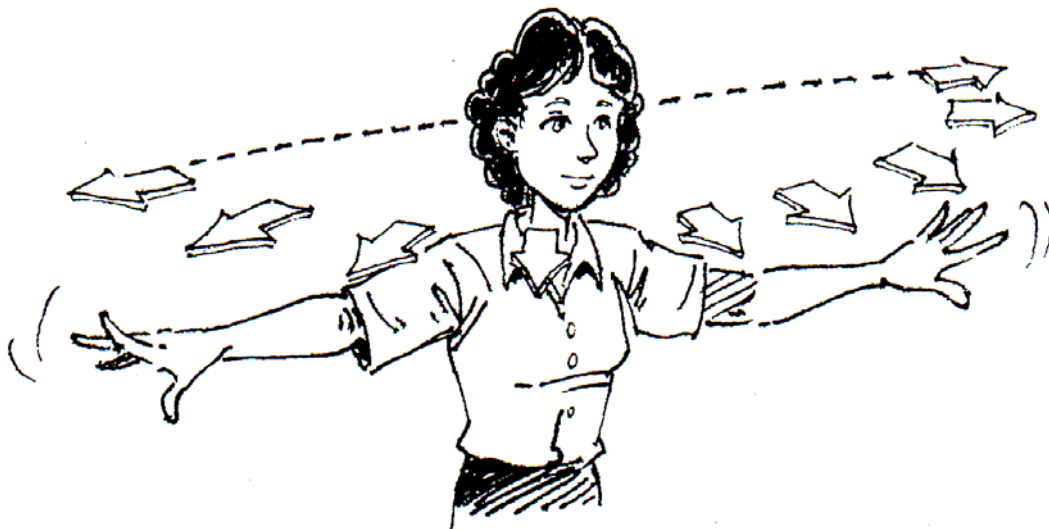
Most animals see in a different way. They have to be aware of what is moving in the forest – is it food or will it eat me? They need to see and hear in all directions – not just in front of them. Their lives depend on this.

We can learn from our animal friends how to see much more – try **splatter vision**.

First put your arms straight out to the sides at shoulder level.

Then point your fingers forward and wiggle them.

By looking straight ahead – get so that you can see both hands:



Think of seeing out of the corners of your eyes.

Everything may seem a little blurry – but you will now be able to catch the slightest *movement* around you –even at your sides. If a bird blinks, you'll see it. A blade of grass moving differently than the other – is there a mouse there? Every bug in the vicinity will be seen too? If you spot something you want to look at – then you can focus as you normally do.

After a few tries **splatter vision** becomes automatic and easy for anyone to do.

The next step is to sit down in your back yard, field or forest and try **splatter vision**. Welcome to a new world!

(c) Focused Hearing

How much can you hear? As much as a deer, a fox or an owl?
Close your eyes, take a deep breath, relax and listen.
Take your time and focus:

What is the most distant sound you hear?

What is the nearest sound you can pick out?

How about all the sounds in between the near and far?

Can you hear your own breathing?

Can you hear your heart beating?



Listen closely to what the birds are saying.

Are they making long and musical sounds? If they are – *singing* and all is well with them.

Are they making a short, choppy and hard to locate sound? That is called an *alarm call*. Birds use alarm calls to warn other birds and animals of approaching danger. Some alarm calls are loud and easy to hear – like a jay or a crow. But even very small birds have alarm calls – it may be tiny chirp that is hard to hear. Even the smallest alarm call is the birds' way of shouting, "There is danger coming! Hide! Run away!" to all other animals in the forest.

If you hear an alarm call near you, chances are that the bird is warning other animals in the forest that *you* are approaching! If you hear an alarm call not in your immediate area, it could mean that there is another animal moving. Or it could be that there is a disturbance being made even further away...

You see, if a loud, scary, dangerous animal moves through the forest (like a *human* for example), the alarm calls will move outward from the source of the danger. It is like dropping a rock in a pond – the concentric rings of disturbance move out in larger and larger circles.

Can you detect any **concentric rings**?

Birds will make different types of alarm calls for different dangers – people, deer, fox, snake, etc. You can learn to understand them!

Another type of **concentric ring** is a bird flying rapidly. Or if the forest is very quiet it means that some danger is near, passed through recently, or that you are creating a disturbance.

Try putting on **deer ears**. Just cup your ears with your elbows pointed *forward*. This will let you focus and amplify the slightest rustle, swish or sound in the forest.



(d) The Fox Walk

We can learn from our four-legged friends how to walk silently and unseen. The fox is especially good at sneaking softly through the forest.

First – **stop talking!**

Then – try the **Fox Walk**:

1. Try taking a short slow step and place only the outside edge of your foot on the ground.
2. Gently roll your foot down flat.
3. Then slowly move your weight forward.
4. Repeat with the other foot...

With this walk you can **freeze** easily (if an animal looks towards you or you hear an alarm call). If you feel a twig that might break – just pick up your foot and place it in a new spot. You don't need to look down – just feel the way.

It is best to use **slow motion**.

Try the **Rabbit Game**: Have your group form a circle with one person in the center pretending to be a rabbit. When the rabbit looks at you **freeze!** When the rabbit is not looking at you, **Fox Walk** toward it. See who can reach the rabbit first. Try two rabbits. This is the same way to sneak up on a real animal.

Try the **Fox Walk** at home. See if you can sneak up on a cat or dog. Don't scare them. Just try to get near them, and then let them know that you are there and just practicing.

Then go outside and try the **Fox Walk** on beetles, bugs, birds, frogs, chipmunks, squirrels, deer or anything else. With care you can get close to lots of different animals. Remember just get near and enjoy watching them, don't touch them or startle them. This is part of becoming invisible and enjoying the world of the four-legged and winged creatures!

Resource List:

For more information, see books and field guides by Tom Brown Jr.
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