Background
Learning to respect a place as home to the plants and animals who live there is an important step for students to make as they learn their role as stewards and community members of the natural world. This activity (and the 2 that follow) will help students appreciate the habitat needs of wildlife and how to support a wildlife community. Students may need to be prompted about what they should be looking for in their woodland. Brainstorming is usually the best way to accomplish this because everyone is actively engaged. First brainstorm the basic needs that are met in a human home: food, water, shelter, and companionship of family. Food sources and foods to look for in a woods include trees, shrubs, brambles, flowers, sedges, mushrooms, fungi, leaves, seeds, nuts, nectar, insects, grubs, and prey creatures. Shelters include holes in the ground or logs, holes up in trees, nests in trees, and human-made shelters such as brush piles, and/or nest boxes. Signs of animal life could include tracks, scat, owl pellets, bits of fur, feathers, bones, gnawed bones, as well as actual sightings or vocalizations, insect holes in old logs, and woodpecker grubbing holes.

Many foods are seasonal. Students should look for food sources as well as actual food. (For example, maple trees provide seeds in May and June, bare fall brambles provided berries in July, etc.) One main feature of a healthy woods is its forest floor plants. Most woodland flowers will be dormant in Fall. How does this important plant group get counted? It can be done by doing a flower inventory in May with the students who will be doing the Habitat Detectives activity next fall. This works extremely well if it can be scheduled. Something else to consider is the space needed for wildlife. Some tiny creatures might spend their lifetime within a 1-square-foot space. Birds and squirrels occupy vertical space as well as forest floor space. What about larger mammals like raccoons or deer? What kinds of wildlife could live within the actual space of the woodland (or schoolyard, etc.)?

This activity works more smoothly and accurately if the teacher knows the place well and can identify its trees, shrubs, and plants. If the species can be listed on the Habitat Detectives sheet before the activity begins, then the species can be simply tallied during the activity. Student familiarity with the place is also helpful. (Our grade 3 students have three years of experiences with the woods before they do this activity.)

This all implies a good working knowledge of wood’s lore on the teacher’s part. If this level of knowledge is not available, it’s time to find a resource person who can help with this activity. Local birders, gardeners, and sportsmen are often knowledgeable and willing to help.

Activity Description
Begin with all the prompting and brainstorming at the wood’s edge, before actually entering the woods. This session sets the stage for careful exploration and accurate observations, crucial to the success of this activity.
The children can spread out, exploring slowly, calling observations out to the
teacher, who has the worksheet on a clipboard and is busy tallying. Some-
times discoveries of special interest (a track, an owl pellet) demand a pause
so everyone can see and discuss. Older students (grades 6-12) could work in
teams, taking turns identifying and recording in assigned quadrants.

A large, rich habitat will require adequate time for accurate data collection
and joyful exploration. This is not an activity that should be hurried. A
schoolyard with some trees, shrubs, and perhaps a garden area may require
less actual exploring/observing time, but may need extra time to reflect and
evaluate the place for its habitat value.

This activity concludes with a reflection about what has been observed. What
sorts of animal life could live in this habitat? (Don't forget insects, earth-
worms, amphibians, and reptiles!) Does this habitat provide all their needs,
or just some? Is this habitat more of a real home, or really a hotel with food
service?

This activity can stand alone, or it can be part 1 of a 3 part series (Habi-
tat Detectives, Habitat Assessors, and Habitat Enhancers). If a stand alone
activity, the concluding reflection is especially important.

Assessments

* Collect and record data on the habitat value of your specific woodland
  site (food, water, shelter).
* Show an understanding of the woodlands as a habitat (home) for the
  plants and animals that live there.
* Identify signs of woodland creatures (tracks, scat, cracked nuts).

Source
Georgia Gómez-Ibáñez,
Cambridge Elementary School, WI
Habitat Detectives: Investigating the Site and Collecting Data Worksheet

Habitat Detectives observe what's going on in our woods on.

- in the canopy
- in the understory
- in the shrub layer

Area of woods in this inventory:

N
W

And on the forest floor:

Brush \& Piles

Fruits:
- Black Cherry
- Dogwood
- Serviceberry
- Hickory
- Gooseberry
- Raspberry

Berry Thickets:
- Blackberry

Nut Trees:
- Hickory
- Oak

Seed Trees:
- Red Maple
- Sugar Maple
- Box Elder
- Elm
- Hornbeam

Seed in old logs:

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