

Getting Kids Hooked on Birds

-by Kelly Preheim

After playing a “bird riddle game” at lunch, one of the kindergarten boys came over to me and sighed, “I told them it was a bird that starts with “L” and they said Lyre bird, but it was a Lesser Yellowlegs!” Yes, I really have 5 and 6 year olds in my class that talk of Lesser Yellowlegs, Lyre Birds, Greater Prairie Chickens, American Avocets and other birds that many adults remain unaware of. One may find this unbelievable, but trust me it is true. As a group, my ten kindergarteners can name over 100 birds and they know the song/call of over 25 species. This far exceeds my expected goal of getting little ones interested in birds. Their parents are in disbelief as well and they tell me that their child is teaching them a lot about birds that they didn’t know.

I have taught kindergarten in Armour, SD for 20 years and typically I had taught a one month bird unit at the end of the year, but recently since I’ve become an avid birder, I decided to start teaching a bit about birds nearly every day starting at the beginning of the year. It wasn’t difficult to do and it can easily be adapted into my required Science Standards, so that is helpful. It is amazing to me how children soak up this bird knowledge and they love anything that has to do with nature. At first they were slightly interested, but it didn’t take long until they were hooked!

I started out talking to them about my birding experiences, which all of us birders love to do, if we can find someone who will listen. I would show them photos of some birds that I’d seen over the weekend and tell some fascinating fact about them. Early in the year, each student received their very own *Backyard Birds of South Dakota* booklet from South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks. The booklets are kept in school for the whole school year and that is one great tool to help them learn about birds.

I read parts of that booklet each day and I also made a Power Point slideshow starting with a few backyard birds and I continued to add onto it throughout the year. I am very thankful for the use of the photos of our local South Dakota bird photographers for this slideshow. These photos make a big difference. We gather around the Smart Board in our room and look at the photos and I also show them bird videos from the Cornell University - Lab of Ornithology. We do various online bird quizzes at times and they love those. I have bird flashcards that we flip through often and I read many library books about birds. We also play a “Name a Bird” game where they each take a turn naming a different bird. This has gotten quite complex lately with odd birds such as Semi-palmated Plovers, Blue-gray Tanagers and Gyrfalcons being tossed in. I also have a Bird Cam that is motion -sensored. I set it up at my feeders and we look at the photos to see what was at my feeders. I have been able to use these bird photos to teach about birds and story problems in math.

I have set up a bird center in my classroom with bird booklets, pamphlets, a bird memory game, feathers, the Bird Identifier {a bird song identification device} and a couple of pairs of {faulty} binoculars. I have an old field guide that they love to look through. They are thirsty to know more birds and they question me often about what they see in that guide.

We keep tabs on our adopted critter, Buddy, the Bald Eagle from the “Virginia Wildlife Center”. Thanks to a friend who sponsored him for us. We watch the Buddy cam and nest cams at times.

My classroom has a wall of windows and a door to the playground. We’ve had some great sightings from there and we’ve run out to see them. They have enjoyed seeing and hearing the huge flocks of Canada and Snow Geese flying low, nearly one hundred Ring-billed Gulls, a Downy Woodpecker drumming, a few Red-tailed Hawks and one of their favorites – the Bald Eagle.

On my kindergarten blog, I often post links to bird videos and suggestions of where parents could take their children to see birds that I’d seen recently. Now it seems that we are getting other family members involved as well. Students tell me that their dad took them to the dam to go birding or that their mom is taking them birding after school.

We have a town lake that is a few blocks away. We hike out there occasionally and we have had good luck seeing birds there too. Early in the year, I had my students buddy up with the sophomore Biology students to build five nest boxes to be placed at this lake. We built them for Wood Duck, Eastern Bluebird/Tree Swallow and House Wren. We are anxious to see what moves in this spring! We keep a class “Nature Observation Journal” for each season and we will surely be writing about our nest box inhabitants.

During my owl unit, the students thought dissecting owl pellets was very interesting. They love owls and they can identify all of the owls in SD. They actually love all birds it seems! They talk of birds often and we start out each morning discussing our bird sightings. Since spring migration has started, I will often have a child march into the classroom in the morning with a big smile and shout, “Life bird!” Then he/she will share their recent sighting.

The kindergarten students keep a daily journal, where they learn to read and write. I would say that the majority of their daily entries are about birds. My students and I have also published a twenty page bird book titled, *Our Favorite Backyard Birds*, with drawings and text written by these little ones. It is a nice keepsake for the families and grandparents.

The highlight of our school year may be still on the way as we will travel ten miles to a lake for an all-day field trip complete with two birding hikes, a picnic, outdoor classroom, free play and flying kites. I have taken students on that trip each of the last twenty years and it has always been a lot of fun! There is no way to know how many of these little people will grow up to be interested in birds and nature, but I have a feeling that they will.

I am sharing my experience to encourage people to try to get children interested in birds. They really can be very good at identifying birds; in fact many seem to have a phenomenal memory for bird names and facts. It is important for children to become more aware of their outdoor world, so that they will grow up to respect it and care for it. I believe that you would find it rewarding and it is a great way to touch the life of a child.

As you have read, there are many ways to get children interested in birds and I think spending time with them talking about birds and getting them an age-appropriate field guide of their very own would be a good start. It does seem that many children are too “plugged in” to technology whether it is TV, computer or video games although the internet can be a valuable tool in teaching about birds. It is important to get children outdoors more often and one way would be to take them hiking. Point out birds, other animals, rocks, etc. Keep it low key, fun and do it often.

I have a boy in my class who is really interested in birds and often at playtime, he brings over the South Dakota bird pamphlet and points to a bird. He asks me to tell about when I saw the bird and what it was like. He just “lights up” when I tell him my tales, like when I hiked through Union Grove State Park with other birders on a very hot September day, hopping across rocks to cross a river, getting my foot stuck in the mud, climbing up a small cliff, and getting a bloody arm all to see my first Golden-winged Warbler.

Another teacher says it’s because of the way I talk about birds that gets kids excited. She says it’s this passion about birds that fascinates them. Many of us have that passion, so now we need to share it with others and why not share it with kids?