

Originally published April 11, 2007

Kids connect with nature through bird watching

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Many children can spout off "Animal Planet" facts about elephants and anacondas, but few know their own neighbors.

A few months ago, I showed a fourth-grade class a photo of a blue jay. Two children knew its name. None could identify a mockingbird or a chickadee.



In "Last Child in the Woods - Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder," author Richard Louv links the absence of nature in our wired children's lives with the rise in obesity, attention disorders and depression. Children need opportunities to personally interact with and experience the natural world.

Bird watching, or birding, is a fun family activity and a great way to introduce children to the wonders of

nature.

The last three years, funded by a grant from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, I worked on a project called "Wild Words for Wild Wings" with fourth-graders and their teachers at Hartsfield, Ruediger and Astoria Park elementary schools. Children learned how to use binoculars and field guides to identify birds. They kept journals in which they sketched and wrote about the birds.

On field trips to the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, students practiced their new skills. The same class that neither knew nor cared about blue jays can now identify at least 25 native birds.

While watching birds, the children noticed many things: that bald eagles share parenting responsibilities; when a turkey vulture soars, it tilts from side to side; a heron can stand as still as a statue; and sometimes, if you're very quiet, wild things will come to you.

What children need to get started

Lightweight binoculars that magnify seven or eight times.

Bird book - my favorite is "Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern and Central North America."

Notebook and colored pencils to list, write about and sketch the birds.

"Bird Detective," a booklet that teaches children how to tell one bird from another. It's on the Florida Game & Fresh Water Fish Commission Junior Birding Program Web site at floridaconservation.org/educator/JrBirder/default.htm.

More Birding Resources - www.wildclassroom.net/resources/birds.html.

Sandy Beck serves as education director with the St. Francis Wildlife Association. Her Wild Classroom outreach programs use permanently disabled wildlife to nurture a personal connection with the natural world. Contact her at www.wildclassroom.net.

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SANDY BECK / Special to the Chronicle
Ruediger Elementary teacher Christine Welke and two of her fourth-grade students go birding at the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge.

Where to start

Some of the best birding is in your own backyard, and it's easy to remember birds you see every day. Also, consider joining the Apalachee Audubon Society and going on their birding trips: www.apalachee.org.

NATURE EVENTS

April 13-15, **Pinewoods Bird Festival** at Pebble Hill Plantation, www.pinewoodsbirdfestival.com. Unique activities for both the amateur and advanced birder. Food vendors on Saturday. Gate admission: \$5 for adults, \$3 for children under 12. Coloring sheet available on Web site for free children's admission. Pre-registration and fee required for some space-limited field trips. Contact **Lisa Baggett**, lisa@trs.org or 893-4153, ext. 241.

There are some special activities for children on April 14:

9 a.m. - Family birding class with **Sandy Beck**.
9 a.m.-3 p.m. - Children's activities tent with live birds, hands-on science and art activities, and face painting.
12:15 p.m. - Birds of Prey program, St. Francis Wildlife.

1 p.m. - "Wild Words for Wild Wings" presentation by Ruediger Elementary students

April 19 - 27, **Wakulla Wildlife Festival**, Wakulla Springs State Park.

Many special birding field trips include bird watching at Bald Point State Park, Sunrise Birding Boat Cruise, and River Road Neotropical Birding Tour. \$4 per vehicle admission fee. Pre-registration and payment for field trips required by April 13. Call 224-5950 or log on to www.wakullawildlife festival.org.

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