

Nocturnal Animals and the Night Sky - January 2009 Classroom Reader

Nocturnal Animals

Animals are nocturnal for any number of reasons: to avoid diurnal (daytime) predators, to feed on nocturnal prey, or even to avoid the heat of the day. Many people are familiar with nocturnal animals such as raccoons, owls and opossums, but what about flying squirrels or woodcocks?



The Southern flying squirrel is rarely seen, but often leaves clues alerting us to its presence. The bulk of their diet is nuts and seeds (which means they are frequent visitors to birdfeeders), and they also feed on insects, eggs and even carrion. Nuts eaten by flying squirrels have a small cap taken out of the end; nuts eaten by Eastern gray squirrels have approximately 1/3 of the nut chewed off. They nest in old woodpecker holes and other tree cavities, and are quite social. It isn't unusual to find 5-6 flyers nesting together in colder months. Their name is a misnomer, however, as they cannot actually fly, but rather glide from tree to tree with the help of a membrane that spans their sides, running from the front leg to the back. Unlike their gray squirrel cousins, flying squirrels have a flat tail that acts as a rudder when gliding.

American woodcocks belong to a group of birds known as sandpipers, and even though they are considered shorebirds, they live in the forest! They are quite secretive and difficult to spot, thanks to their camouflage feathering. Woodcocks have long, flexible beaks which are used for feeding on earthworms. These birds stomp their feet in an effort to make the worms move, and then pierce the ground to obtain their meal. In January they are much more apparent in Georgia, because this is the beginning of breeding season. Males have elaborate courtship behaviors in which they make *peent*-ing calls while on the ground, which is followed by a spiraling flight. As he descends, he flies in a zigzag pattern and resumes calling, landing next to the female.



While we are fast asleep in our beds at night, often there is more going on outside our windows than we realize.

Teacher Resources

Are you ready to spice up your curriculum? Nocturnal animals are not the only thing to learn about this month - January is a great month for star gazing! Check out these websites to find out more about nocturnal animals and the night sky!

Legg Middle School Planetarium:

<http://www.coldwater.k12.mi.us/lms/Planetarium/planetarium.htm>

This middle school in Michigan has a great site that shares information on constellations and lesson plans on how you can tie this topic back to your curriculum. This is also a great resource for students!

Creatures of the Night: <http://42explore.com/night.htm>

This site provides student appropriate information about all sorts of nocturnal animals – including activities that they can do at school and at home!

Reading List

Dondiego, Barbara L. and Vansant, Rhonda. Nocturnal Animals and Classroom Nights

This book provides multidisciplinary activities to turn your classroom into an exciting indoor "campsite". Arts and crafts, science, music, math, dramatic play, and language arts combine to help children discover the amazing world of day-into-night, the moon and stars, and nocturnal animals. Each chapter begins with a science goal, followed by suggestions on how to plan activities, lists of helpful visual aids, and related discussion topics. Helpful, attention-getting symbols throughout the book tell when safety precautions are necessary. Reproducible pages and patterns included. (Ages 4-8)

Jango-Cohen, Judith. Flying Squirrels (Pull Ahead Books)

This is a great easy to read book on flying squirrels with lots of fun facts and beautiful photographs. (Ages 4-8)

Love, Ann and Drake, Jane. The Kids Book of the Night Sky

Using a lively combination of clearly written text, myths and legends, jokes, and activities, the authors present an excellent introduction to the many wonders of the night sky throughout the seasons for young children. (Ages 4-8)

Consolmagno, Guy and Davis, Dan M. Turn Left at Orion: A Hundred Night Sky Objects to See in a Small Telescope--and How to Find Them

This is a great hands-on book for the beginner astronomer to help you locate and learn about objects in the night sky using a small telescope. (Upper level students)