

## **BLESS SUMMER NATURE CENTRE 2012**

By: Samantha Morris-Yasinski

### **Objective:**

The goal of the Big Lake Environmental Support Society's Summer Nature Centre is to provide families with children with the opportunity to explore nature in an urban setting. Children that attend the nature centre are immersed in various activities, games and crafts that build awareness about the environment, thus fostering an interest in its future preservation and protection.

### **Design:**

The summer nature centre this summer opened on July 2, 2012 and ran m-f, 10am-4pm for eight consecutive weeks until August 24. Each week was composed of a theme and with each theme followed related games, crafts and activities built upon some of the key components of the subject. There were anywhere from 8-15 activities weekly each built for a variety of age groups and reading levels. The majority of children that attended the centre regularly ranged from preschool to early elementary (ages 1-8), with the overall majority of children being elementary. This seems to differ from last year where the majority was pre-school. This summer BLESS was fortunate enough to have a fantastic volunteer, Bettina Beau, contribute approximately 50 hours of her time in approximately six weeks.

### **Materials:**

Majority of my craft materials were purchased from the re-use centre in Edmonton, I found that this played a very important role in allowing children and parents to witness how materials such as paper towel rolls, canning jars and old magnets can be re-used. Obtaining materials from the re-use centre also saved BLESS a significant amount of money and time because canning jars are expensive and it's almost impossible to find an abundant amount of paper towel rolls without paper towel. This year there was a significant increase in the total amount of children who attended the centre, which obviously resulted in a larger amount of material that was purchased. I have noticed that simple supplies such as glue and markers are very expensive end of June/early July; as a result, I HIGHLY recommend purchasing these materials for future summers near the end of August because this is when stores such as Walmart and Staples have great deals. This would save the summer nature centre a noticeable amount of money.

### **Weekly Overviews:**

Note that each week always included sidewalk chalk and coloring, and the below lists of activities are merely an overview and therefore do not include all activities from the week.

*Week 1: Let's Go Green*

*Objective:*

The objective of this week was to introduce healthy environmental stewardship ideas and the significance of stewardship habits into children. This allowed children and even some parents to become more aware of their impact on the earth and the benefits that arise from small and simple environmentally friendly choices.

*Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 70

Jr. High: 8

Elementary: 67

Pre-school: 39

**Total Attendance: 184**

*Activities:*

Recycled Magnets:

- Children chose old magnets then decorated them using scrap paper, magazine clippings and bread bag ties
- This was an extremely popular craft, it was useful and could be put on the fridge at home

Recycled Keepsake Boxes:

- Children chose old boxes, such as old cookie tins, chocolate bar tins, jewelry boxes. . etc and decorated them using only scrap and recycled material such as scrap paper, magazine pictures and bread bag ties
- Also extremely popular and useful at home

Matching:

- This was an activity created by Christi a previous year and it's extremely popular
- It's challenging for the younger children but parents enjoyed the challenge along with the suggested environmentally friendly techniques that followed each picture

Pollutant Knockout:

- This game fosters children to differ between environmentally friendly actions and those that are harmful to the environment
- Also created a previous year by Christi although I had to fix up some of the pictures and make new boards for some
- Extremely popular, as mentioned by Christi when I was hired, throwing games are a favorite of children

Green BINGO:

- This was a new game that I created this year. Children had to walk around inside and outside the nature centre and find the environmentally friendly pictures, actions and ideas on the bingo and cross them off to get a bingo. This is a great interactive way to keep children thinking about the following concepts: reduce, reuse and recycle. I laminated the BINGO sheets, so that

only washable markers would be used on them, then after the children and parents would clean the sheet for the next user.

#### Rainbow Chips:

- This game was created this summer and used multiple times throughout the summer. I glued multiple small pieces of different colored scrap paper on many different cue cards and laminated each cue card with instructions on the back of each card. Every card had a different combination of colors; as a result children could do the activity several times. The goal of this activity was to have kids look closer at nature and find certain colors within nature. Through this activity I hoped to install a sense of awe for nature's beauty, thus promoting them to practice reducing, reusing and recycling.

#### Sort This:

- A very simple outside game that I created that simulates the actions of sorting garbage at home. I had four buckets labeled: garbage, compost, recycle and reuse, and the object of the activity was for kids to sort through the materials into a suitable bucket. Many items had multiple bins that it could correctly go in.
- This was extremely popular amongst children and their parents. It even appeared that many parents enjoyed helping their children practice their sorting techniques.

#### *Recommendations:*

This is a great week and it's extremely popular although the one item that I would love to invest in would be soil compost for the centre because it would provide a great example of what can be composted and how food decomposes overtime. I looked into some from the John Janzen Nature Centre this summer, and from what I remember I believe they were around \$35. If this is not feasible then next summer I will consider talking to the city to see if they would be able to put a compost bin in the park for the summer season.

#### *Week 2: Where's The Water*

#### *Objective:*

This week's objective was to introduce children to the importance of water bodies big and small such as the significance of oceans, lakes, wetlands and river bodies. Children were able to explore and test their knowledge of what organisms live where along with obtaining hands on opportunity of seeing the Sturgeon's river creatures.

#### *Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 62

Jr. High: 6

Elementary: 65

Pre-school: 40

## **Total Attendance: 173**

### *Activities:*

#### Duck Caller:

- Using a plastic cup, square piece of sponge and a string children were able to decorate their cups as they wished
- Extremely popular craft, a repeated idea of Christi's from a previous year

#### Paint a Shell:

- Frog Alley from the St. Albert farmer's market had donated a significant amount of sea shells in the beginning of the summer to the summer nature centre
- Children who visited the centre during the water week painted the shells, and adored this activity!! I highly recommend repeating in future years if shells can be obtained. It also gave some children to not only have an opportunity to see shells but to take one home.

#### Who Lives Where:

- This was a simple sorting table game that I created this year. I laminated multiple pictures of ocean, pond and river creatures, some very large and some very small. Children then sorted the organisms into their correct category of which they would be found or observed naturally.
- This was an interesting sorting game and provided children and parents alike to question the homes of some water organisms. I recommend putting out again in future summers.

#### Wetland I Spy:

- An activity re-used from previous summers. It's fantastic because it gets children and parents to look for wetland animals and organisms that they may have never had the opportunity to see before. Fairly popular.

#### Pond Dipping:

- A classic and amusing activity for all ages and parents. I provided a few buckets of water for the children to spoon and scoop through while trying to identify the river and pond creatures. I allowed some parents to go down to the river with buckets and nets too whenever the request arose.
- This is EXTREMELY popular and I recommend having hands on opportunities as such whenever possible.

#### Frog Toss:

- Another classic water related beanbag toss game re-used from previous summers yet still a favorite of many parents and children.

#### Ocean Memory:

- Another re-used activity from previous summers. I discovered that children absolutely love memory games and will majority of the time beat me in a game. This was a popular table activity, and was great because it provided the opportunity for children to see "new" ocean organisms.

### *Recommendations:*

Personally I think that this week's theme had more than plenty of material to work with and for kids to explore. When exploring the topic of wetlands during this setting I recommend coming up with another migration game (possible one that could be played outside involving lots of running).

### *Week 3: Creepy Crawlers*

#### *Objective:*

This week's objective was to introduce children to the complex and diverse world of insects along with their many interactions they have within the environment. Children were able to see and experience metamorphosis along with many insect artifacts. New artifacts were donated for this week, such as Mountain Pine Beetle Samples, Pine cookie that contains Mountain Pine Beetle galleries and a regular pine cookie. I was also to collect some great dragonfly samples and a full-size paper wasp nest.

#### *Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 95

Jr. High: 8

Elementary: 120

Pre-school: 57

**Total Attendance: 280** (the busiest week of the summer!)

#### *Activities:*

##### Bug hats!

- Using small paper plates, children decorated the top of the plate in the pattern of their favorite insect such as ladybugs, bumble bees, and butterflies. The antennae were then secured on top of the plate, and string was tied onto opposite ends of the plate allowing children to secure their hats on their heads when finished.
- This craft was popular and super cute. I recommend repeating in future summers.

##### Caterpillar Egg Cartons:

- Caterpillars were created out of egg cartons using three egg holder parts. I had pre-cut these prior to the start of the week. Children then painted the caterpillars as their favorites such as the fuzzy bear caterpillar or they created their own. Two small antennae were secured through the front of the carton and googly eyes were provided to use as eyes.
- This craft was also popular and fun.

##### Bug Hunts:

- Using the small bug boxes that are tucked in the science drawer I created an activity called bug hunts. Children were able to go outside with a small bug box, place a bug in it, and examine it using the magnifying glass of the box.

- When examining the bug, the children were told to count their legs and antennae to identify whether or not it was an insect. This was very popular although slightly trickier for some because it takes patience and lots of looking. I highly recommend repeating this activity during other future bug themes.
- For children that wanted to catch larger insects they often borrowed butterfly nets and chased dragonflies and butterflies in the grass.

Insect Memory Cup Game:

- A re-used activity from previous summers although extremely popular. Children, with themselves, parents or friends try to flip cups and match the insects under the cups to get the most pairs. Always popular.

The Pollination Game:

- Partially re-used from a previous summer but also tweaked of this summer. Children were given small containers and had to find the pollen hidden on laminated flowers around the nature centre.
- The kids then had to take two pieces from the flower in their bucket and bring it back to their hive. Each time after bringing pollen to the hive the children had to do the “Bee Dance” to let their other hive members know where the flower was. This was repeated until 2 pieces of pollen were obtained from each flower.
- Fun, popular and highly educational. Parents quite enjoyed watching and helping their kids do the “Bee Dance” and found it fascinating that bees communicate in such a way.

Metamorphosis (butterfly lifecycle):

- I set up four hula-hoops on the grass outside the nature centre. Each hula-hoop had a sign inside of it that represented a lifecycle phase of metamorphosis. Children started at hula-hoop 1 (egg), and while in the hula-hoop had to act like an egg. Then they would run to hula-hoop 2 (caterpillar) and act like a caterpillar, this was repeated through each hula-hoop, 3 and 4 being chrysalis and butterfly respectively.

Other activities included:

- Butterfly to flower bean bag toss
- Pond dipping
- Insect puzzles
- Insect artifacts

*Recommendations:*

This is another week that had plenty of material to work with and there are also plenty of new ideas and activities that could be created or expanded on every summer. I would recommend trying to set up some pitfall traps if possible in future summers.

*Week 4: Fantastic Feathers (my favorite topic!)*

*Objective:*

This week's objective was to introduce children and parents alike to the interesting topic of birds, their lifecycle and their diversity. Kids were able to discover why different birds have different feet and how bird feet can lead to an understanding in specialist and generalist species. Migration, and molting were some of the other topics explored.

*Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 79

Jr. High: 5

Elementary: 85

Pre-school: 60

**Total Attendance: 229**

*Activities:*

#### Window Decals:

- Small pieces of colored tissue paper were glued onto a larger white piece of tissue in the shape of a circle, rectangle or heart. Once the large piece of tissue was decorated string was secured so that the decal could be hung in the window. (Although next time I recommend just using white paper, children are a little too generous with glue sometimes to work with thin tissue).
- This was an educational and popular craft. Many parents were unaware of the exact reason that birds fly into windows.

#### Bird Binoculars:

- Using a paper towel roll, cut in half kids were able to create their own bird watching binoculars. The two halves of the roll were secured with staples on either end and a piece of string was tied around on one side so children could wear their binoculars around their neck. The children decorated their binoculars using paint and magazine clippings.
- Very popular craft with easy set up and clean up.

#### Bird BINGO:

- Similar to the Green BINGO, I created a few laminated bingos with pictures (and descriptions below) of commonly seen birds and bird related objects. Children took a BINGO sheet walked around outside the centre and crossed off what they saw using a washable marker. After the activity was completed they wiped off the BINGO so that another family could use it. I recommend repeating this activity, very enjoyable.

#### Forks, Knives and Spoons:

- This activity already existed within the cabin so I created instructions and examples to go with it. Children would choose a fork, knife or spoon and try to scoop up as much of the "food" off the table into their "stomach" (a container) as they could using only the utensil. They quickly discovered that the spoon and fork were the easiest to use and the knife the most difficult.

The knife represented specialists where as the fork and spoon represented generalists.

- A fun and educating game. Well enjoyed.

Bird Watching:

- A hula-hoop was set up outside and provided was a bird ID book and a pair of binoculars. The object of the activity was to look through the binoculars, spot and ID as many birds as one could. This was unsuccessful majority of the time due to the heat of the week; only a few birds could be spotted early in the morning. Although unsuccessful most the time, certainly popular.

Nest Building:

- Small green baskets were available for children to weave material through or fill with material that birds would use to build nests. After children built their nests they were challenged to camouflage it and have a parent, a friend or myself try to find it. Very popular.

Other activities:

- Listening to the bird calls I had playing on the stereo in the cabin
- Bird artifacts (which there are plenty)
- Marble migration
- Matching bills to feet

*Recommendations:*

I have no significant recommendations for this week for the material, activities and specimens are comprehensive. The small recommendation I have would be to challenge future summer coordinators to create an outside running migration activity.

*Week 5: Time For Trees*

*Objective:*

The goal of this theme was to introduce children into the world of trees. Children learnt the difference between coniferous and deciduous, what pollination is and how insects help with pollination. There were also hands on opportunities to discover the needs of trees and plants. I also provided my two plant ID books on the artifact table for children and parents to look through.

*Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 84

Jr. High: 1

Elementary: 109

Pre-school: 58

**Total Attendance: 252**

*Activities:*



#### Paint a Vase!:

- Children were able to paint wine bottles and mason jars into flower vases. This was extremely popular and fun. Kids love the idea of making something useful and being able to take it home.

#### Coffee Filter Flowers:

- Children colored coffee filters and then secured the filter to a straw lastly attaching petals to the straw. This was more popular than I imagined often children made one or two to go inside their flower vase.

#### Tree Scavenger Hunt:

- I believe this activity was reused from a previous year, children walked around outside the nature centre collecting tree related items into a bucket

#### Tree Role Play:

- Three hula-hoops were set up outside on the grass area and children had to run from hula-hoop 1-3 stopping at each hoop to make the actions of a seed, seedling and tree. This was fairly popular.

#### Grow Your Own Grass:

- Another reused activity from previous summers children filled plastic cups with soil, planted grass seeds and watered the seeds.
- Extremely popular and educational, kids were coming back the next week to show me how well their grass grew! I highly recommend continuing this activity each summer.

#### Pollinator Memory Cup:

- Another reused activity, children flipped cups to match pollinating insect pairs, popular as always.

#### Leaf Rubbings:

- A classic educational activity to teach kids about leaf veins and edges how different plants can have different leaves while having fun. Very popular.

#### *Recommendations:*

I really wanted to make an activity called "Tree-Via", similar to a bingo but with more in-depth descriptions of trees and plants around the centre to find. If time permits in future summers this would be a great hands on, plant identifying activity. It would also be great if we could obtain some more plant presses, unfortunately I had a ton that I donated last winter, else they would have been perfect for the centre! Other than that this was another terrific week with more than plenty available artifacts and activities.

#### *Week 6: Wildlife Wonders*

#### *Objective:*

This week's goal was to focus on local wildlife and animals that are commonly seen while touching on some exotics that are often easily confused. There was an opportunity for children to touch and observe many local specimens. Children

learnt the differences between horns and antlers along with which species these are found on and why.

*Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 60

Jr. High: 2

Elementary: 79

Pre-school: 56

**Total Attendance: 197**

*Activities:*

Wild Masks:

- Children decorated the front of large paper plates as their favorite wild animal. This included coloring the plate, gluing ears and whiskers or a long nose. After the finishing touches the plates were then hole punched on each side and the masks were secured with string around the children's heads. The masks ranged from elephants and coyotes to cheetahs and rabbits. This was an extremely fun and popular craft.

Paper Bag Deer Puppets:

- Unfortunately it wasn't until I had already created the craft and craft outline that I had realized paper bag deer puppet have been made in the past. Despite the reoccurrence it was very popular.

Who's Spots?:

- Children and parents had to guess which cat each card with spots belonged to. Very few were able to get 100 percent on this activity, but it was extremely popular both children and parents enjoyed the challenge.

Deer Stalker:

- I created 6 deer, laminated them and camouflaged them around outside the nature centre. Children had to see if they could spot all the deer, I had to help some families. But this was a great way for children to experience and understand the idea camouflage and how it connects to wildlife.

Wild Charades:

- I wrote out many wildlife names and put them in a container on a table. Children were then supposed to act out the wildlife they picked from the container or have their parents help them act it out. This game kept some older children occupied for an hour when playing with their siblings. Super entertaining and popular. I highly recommend repeating.

Rabbit Races:

- Basic potato sack races, children competed against siblings, parents or raced alone. Very popular and fun.

Bowling for Gophers:

- Children were provided with 3 softballs and had to roll the balls on the grass fast and hard enough to knock down six handmade gophers. Not extremely educational, but certainly fun.

Matching Tracks:

- A reused activity from previous years. Children had to try to match animal tracks with the correct animal picture. One of the more challenging activities of the week, but very educational and interesting. Highly recommend for this theme.

*Recommendations:*

This summer I greatly expanded on the outdoor activities of this theme, which was one of its previous weaknesses. As a result of the additional activities there's nothing that I can think of at the moment that could make this week any more interactive than it already is.

*Week 7: Sensational Seasons*

*Objective:*

The goal of this week's theme was to introduce children to the concept of seasons and what happens during each season. This included everything from bears hibernating, and leaves changing colors to wildlife adaptations to cope with the changes such as animals camouflaging to others having blubber.

*Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 57

Jr. High: 0

Elementary: 72

Pre-school: 50

**Total Attendance: 179**

*Activities:*

Rain Sticks:

- Children made rain sticks by decorating paper towel rolls, and then filling the rolls with noodles and securing each end with foil. When the tube is slowly tilted side to side the sound made is supposed to resemble the sound of rain. Very popular although assistance was often required.

Handprint Sun:

- Time to get messy! Children painted one hand yellow and stamped it in a circular motion with their fingers spread on white paper. Once satisfied with the yellow sun, they painted the same hand red and stamped over the yellow. The end results were yellow/orange/red suns. They looked super awesome and were super popular but assistance was required for younger children.

Blubber Mitt:

- Difficult to explain but super cool. Using two Ziploc bags, I filled one bag with vegetable lard and then zipped another bag into it so that there was a layer of lard between to bags. Children were then able to place their hands into the "mitt" and then place the mitt into a container of very cold water. Neither the parents nor kids who tried this activity could feel the chill of the water. This was then used as an analogy to explain the purpose of blubber.

#### Season memory:

- Given the popularity of the other memory games I created a season memory matching game. Children had to flip over the cards and try to match the seasonal pictures to obtain the most pairs.

#### Summer Scavenger Hunt:

- I created a scavenger hunt where children had to find and collect summer related items from nature. Always popular.

#### Spring Baby Matching:

- Children and parents had to match pictures of spring babies to their moms. I chose a mix of common babies and uncommon babies to make the activity slightly more challenging. Majority of the audience found it difficult to distinguish between ducklings and goslings.

#### Seasons Quiz:

- I laminated some season's quizzes for kids and parents to complete with washable markers. The quizzes were exceptionally challenging and more popular amongst the mid-older elementary children. I definitely recommend reusing in future summers.

#### Other activities:

- Rainbow Chips
- Tree role play
- Seasonal artifacts

#### *Recommendations:*

I think some additional activities would certainly add to the theme but overall there is nothing major to add or recommend. Children and parents found it to be overall and interesting week with many hands on activities.

#### *Week 8: Backyard Biodiversity*

#### *Objective:*

This week's purpose was to serve as a wrap up week by reinforcing some key concepts and ideas while introducing their involvement in the concept of biodiversity. Children were able to see how they can increase their backyard diversity and how this in turn can help the overall greater biodiversity.

#### *Attendance (Broken into groups):*

Adult: 53

Jr. High: 1

Elementary: 72

Pre-school: 46

**Total Attendance: 172**

#### *Activities:*

#### Pinecone Birdfeeder:

- Earlier in the summer I collected a ton of pinecones. Children then chose a pinecone from the bucket, tied a piece of string around the cone, spread vegetable lard using a popsicle stick and then rolled the cone in birdseeds. Children were then able to take the cones home to hang in their back yards, thus increasing the amount of birds in the yards, thus increasing the biodiversity.

Picture This:

- Children decorated a colored piece of construction paper using Easter grass, pom poms, feathers and macaroni noodles to create a backyard biodiversity scene. Some pictures turned out super cool.

Other Activities:

- Wetland “I spy” – wetlands are some of the most diverse ecosystems
- Rabbit Races
- Bowling for Gophers
- Frog Toss
- BLESS BINGO –reused activity from a BLESS function in the past, but well related to theme due to the diverse amount of pictures on the bingo
- Insect memory cup –insects are the most diverse organisms on earth and compose the majority of life on the planet
- This week had the most activities of the entire summer because it encompassed so many of the previous summer activities very well

*Recommendations:*

I think that this theme was extremely well done. It would be cool if in future summers an activity such as “mini-plot sampling” was created. This would allow children to do a “species” count in a small area, a great way to get some hand on experience in differentiating species in one area. Another cool activity would be to look at soil and water samples under a microscope seeing as we were donated 4 microscopes this summer.

**Conclusion:**

Overall, 2012 appears to be an extremely successful summer for Big Lake Environmental Support Society’s summer nature centre totaling 1666 visits within its eight weeks of operation. Majority of the visitors were in elementary this summer although I’m sure it will fluctuate between elementary and pre-school depending on the parents and children that choose to join the centre summer from summer. There also appears to be a trend in the amount of visitors that attended the centre throughout the summer, with the peak weeks occurring during the middle of the season. As a result, I am sure that this is merely a taste of the success to come.