

Summer Nature Centre 2011

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Goals

The primary goal of the BLESS Summer Nature Centre is to provide a summer program in which children of all ages are free to drop in and participate in fun activities that will teach them about our local environment and the importance of conserving it. Hopefully this knowledge promotes a sense of pride in their local wildlife and a desire to protect it.

Format

The Young Naturalist Program at the BLESS Summer Nature Centre is an 8 week program comprising of 8 different nature-based themes. Each week hosts between 8-12 games and crafts based on the theme. Considering the lack of space within the cabin, some games must be held outside. Generally there are two crafts, at least four indoor games including a coloring station, one or two outdoor games and sidewalk chalk. The games are aimed at elementary-aged children; however, nearly half of the visitors are ages 1-5. This means that there should be limited reading in as many of the games as possible.

Week 1: Shades of Green

Purpose

This week's theme is reusing, reducing and recycling. I based a lot of the activities on St. Albert's new recycling program in the hopes that it will become second nature to them.

Strong points

The children are already familiar with the concept of recycling and composting, so the activities helped to reinforce those ideas. Matching and sorting games were very educational and very helpful. Games where the children had fun while thinking were extremely popular, like pollutant knock-out. The goal was to throw a beanbag at the signs with pictures of things that are bad for the environment, while leaving the good pictures standing.

Areas that need improvement

This theme has improved greatly since I first started as coordinator in 2009. More activities are always a good idea, especially ones where both the parent and the child learn something. Having a compost bin outside the nature centre would be a great way for the children to learn about the importance of organic bins.

Week 2: Wild Things

Purpose

This week was about our local mammals and was largely based on identifying pictures and specimens. It is difficult to protect what you don't even know exists, so the goal of this week was to broaden the children's understanding of our local fauna.

Strong points

Specimen-based learning is always more effective than just looking at pictures. Having skulls, antlers, horns and patches of fur helps to make the concepts more tangible for the children. Specimens also create that sense of wonder and awe, something we should all feel about the world around us. Unfortunately, you will always get the question "Are these dead?" at least once. Think about your answer before that happens.

Areas that need improvement

This theme is well-rounded and very effective. That being said, there is always room for improvement. Try including more information on ecology, herd migration or behavior.

Week 3: Take Flight

Purpose

Similar to last week's theme, the idea is for the children to learn a little bit about our local birds and their ecology. We covered a little bit of information on migration, but mostly focused on identification of some common species.

Strong points

Again, like the mammals theme, there are a fair amount of specimens for the children to look. This definitely adds to the "cool factor". There are a lot of identification games, which could be seen as either a positive or a negative depending on your view. On one hand, there are a lot of bird species in the area and it is very important for children to learn them so that they can be adequately protected in the future. On the other hand, diversification of activities is necessary for the kids to maintain their focus.

Areas that need improvement

More specimens are always welcome, especially in themes that are so visual in nature. There are a couple of sources for taxidermy specimens, most notably the University of Alberta. While it may not be possible to obtain these specimens permanently, it may be possible to rent them. These would most likely be in the zoological collection in Biological Sciences. Another area that could be improved upon is

the outdoor games. The nature centre could really go for some new outdoor games, so expanding on that for next summer would be great.

Week 4: Plants

Purpose

The main purpose of this week was to flesh out an area of knowledge in which many people are lacking: botany. This theme included activities about pollination, identification of local plants and techniques such as vegetation rubbings.

Strong points

It seemed as though everyone learned something this week, even the parents. This is mostly because plants are not as cute and cuddly as mammals and birds, so people don't know a lot about them. It was great to have activities both on the identification and physiology of plants, although it was difficult to make the material easy enough for the children. The most popular activity this week was likely the leaf rubbings, followed closely by the scavenger hunt.

Areas that need improvement

Because this week's theme is so unfamiliar to the kids and parents, it requires a lot of assistance from the coordinator. If there were more resources available for the parents, they would be able to teach their children some of the material when the cabin gets busy.

Week 5: Bugs, bugs, BUGS!

Purpose

Besides the obvious purpose of teaching children about our local flora and fauna, this week's theme will hopefully prevent children from developing a fear of insects. It is so easy for children to fall into the trap of being afraid of "creepy crawlies", which is tragic.

Strong points

This week's theme is not only extremely interesting to most people, but it also lends itself very well to hands-on teaching methods. I was able to incorporate bug hunts, freshwater displays as well as crafts and other games very easily. What never ceases to surprise me is that the children actually remember the insects that I teach them about! Even the very young children can tell me what a backswimmer is, which is so encouraging to hear.

Areas that need improvement

This theme is probably the best-rounded of the program and needs very little improvement. We could incorporate ground insects into the theme very easily by setting up pitfall traps for the kids to look at.

Week 6: Pond Life

Purpose

This week's theme is likely the most important because we rely so heavily on our wetlands, and they are in need of our help. The children learned about some of the wildlife that lives in and around wetlands and about different types of wetlands such as bogs and fens.

Strong points

This week had the most activities and the greatest diversity of games. The children used pond water to learn about invertebrates that live in our wetlands and puzzles to learn about our local fish and waterfowl. Despite there being such an abundance of things to do and learn, the children were not overwhelmed; they were excited.

Areas that need improvement

This is definitely one of my favorite weeks and there isn't too much to suggest for improvement. Right now, the different components in this theme seem a little disjointed, so perhaps including an activity on wetland ecosystem as a whole would help tie it all together.

Week 7: Changes

Purpose

The purpose of this theme is to familiarize children with the concept of metamorphosis beyond the context of butterflies and frogs. Many people don't know that most insects go through one type of metamorphosis or another, so it is always fun to enlighten them.

Strong points

There is no shortage of information on metamorphosis and there are plenty of examples for the children to see. In addition, almost all children learn at a young age what the lifecycle of a frog is, so it becomes easier to apply that to other animals such as beetles and dragonflies.

Areas that need improvement

Metamorphosis is a complex topic to teach young children. Not only is it a huge word, but there are some big questions behind it. Questions like "why" and especially "how". It is imperative that you have a good understanding of the process and understand why it evolved twice, independently. Aside from the

difficulty of the material, the theme as a whole was relatively straightforward. The outdoor games were lacking a little bit, so we could definitely use a little diversity in that area of the theme.

Week 8: Taiga, Taiga

Purpose

It seems that children are more familiar with far-away ecosystems such as the amazon rainforest and the coral reefs. The goal of this theme is to bring it a little closer to home; the boreal forest. Surprisingly enough, most people don't even know where the boreal forest is, even though we live so close to it! This ecosystem is so vital to Canada and the entire world; these children have to learn about it.

Strong points

This was a great way to tie in some of the other themes from the summer. We learned about the mammals, birds and plants that make up the boreal forest as well as the wetlands. The true or false game was a very useful tool to introduce the taiga to the kids (and the parents as well!).

Areas that need improvement

This is a new theme, so there is a fair amount of material that can be added. It would be great to go into a little more detail about the food chain in the boreal forest as well as some basic forest ecology. I would like to see some more outdoor games created for this theme as well.

General

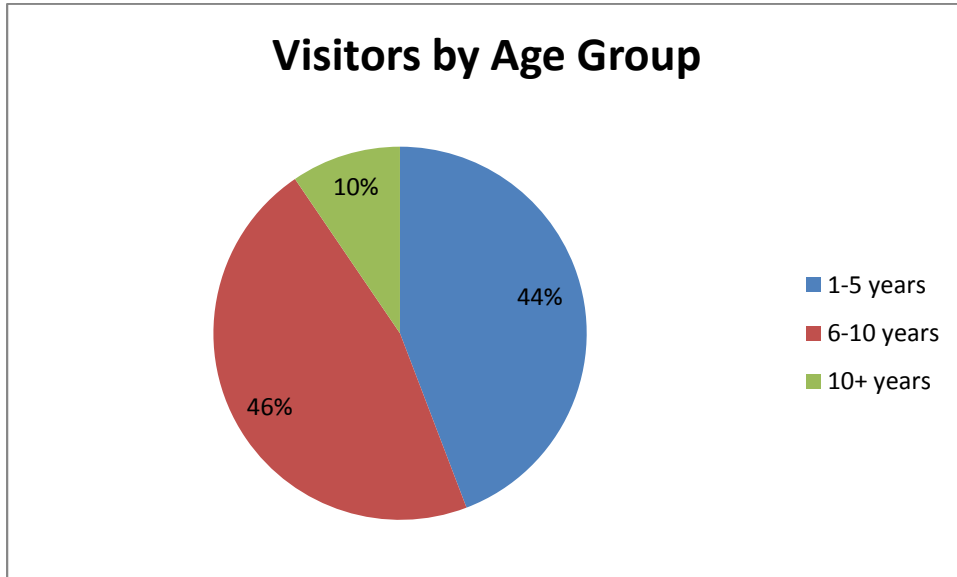
This summer was most definitely a success. We surpassed last year's numbers by an unimaginable margin and have had such glowing reviews from the community. Further growth is always possible, but we may need to look at expanding our hours and our staff in future years.

The Log Cabin

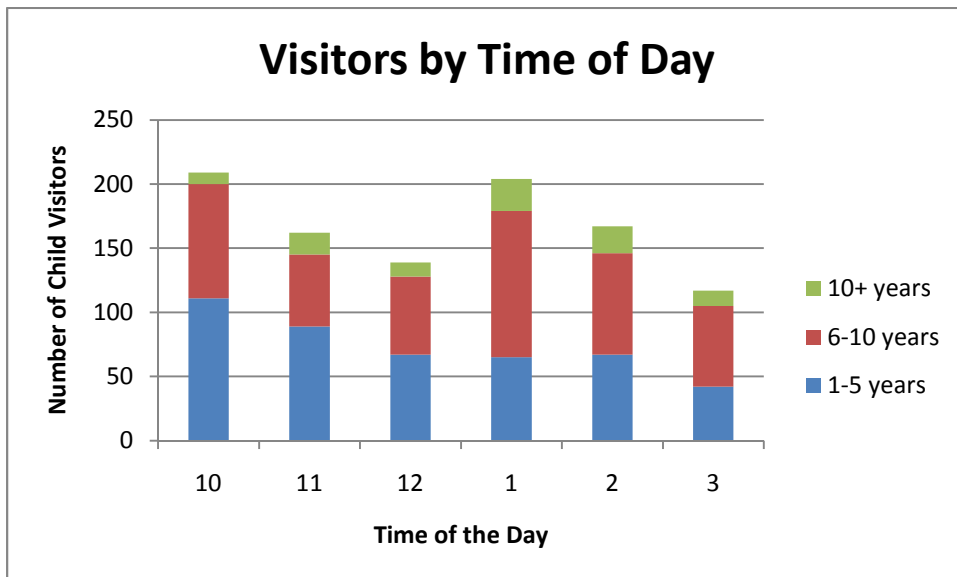
The cabin has seen better days, that is for sure. The carpet needs to be steam cleaned before next summer. I do not want toddlers crawling on that floor in its current state, especially considering the mice encounters I've had. The light switch requires a new cover, which is an easy fix. The door has not been replaced since the break-in of 2009, so I would like to see a new door eventually. The screen door (surprise, surprise) requires a new screen. Currently, we have 5 full-sized chairs in the cabin, all of which are older than I am (well, most likely anyway). New chairs would be ideal for the program next summer.

Statistics

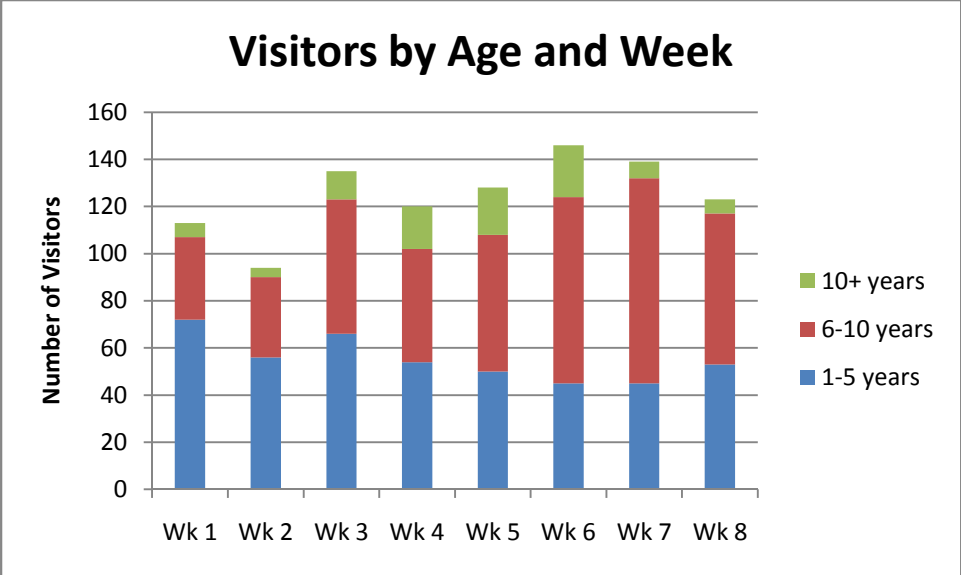
This summer, we saw a staggering 996 children come into the cabin. This is not the number of different children coming in, but the total number of visits to the cabin.



This pie chart clearly shows the demographic we are serving at the summer nature centre. Pre-school and early elementary children make up 90% of our visitors, with only 10% being older than 10 years old.



This graph shows the total number of visitors by age and time of day they came into the nature centre. Before compiling my data, I had thought that the morning hours were quieter than the rest of the day. As you can see, that is simply untrue. 10-11am is our busiest time, followed closely by 1-2pm.



To determine which week was the most popular, I graphed the number of visitors by week. Week 2 was the slowest, although this is not due to the material. This week was particularly rainy. In fact, it rained every day during that theme. Aside from that one rainy week, the rest of the summer showed steady visits, tapering off a little bit towards the end. This can likely be attributed to back to school preparations.