

Wetlands Walk

Purpose: To gain a general knowledge of the importance of wetlands, including some plants, birds, and animals.

Objective: The students will be able to discuss the importance of wetlands in general, and will be able to discuss certain plants, animals, and birds that live in the wetland, and why the wetlands are important to them.

Stop at Trail Post # 1:

As we begin our wetlands walk, please remember to stay on the trail, obey trail signs, and show respect for all living and non-living things. (If bison are on the trail, move away from them. Do not allow students to approach any wildlife.)

Stop at Trail Post #2:

Have students look at the tall plants with feather-like tops that are growing nearby.

Ask Students: Does anyone know what these plants are?

Information: These plants are called Phragmites. They are invasive plants.

Ask Students: Does anyone know what invasive means?

Information: An invasive plant is one that grows and spreads, taking over the area and crowding out other plants. They can be hard to control or get rid of, but many birds use the plants you see here during the nesting season as they provide cover and protection for them.

Proceed down the trail (south) to Trail Post # 3:

Have the students walk down the wooden walkway, and step carefully across the rocks to the blind. Have one of the students read the names of the ducks and shorebirds there.

Ask Students: Have any of you ever seen any of these birds before?

Have students read out loud the information on the opposite side of the blind that talks about the insects that live here in this wetlands area.

Carefully return to trail and proceed south again to Trail Post #4. Have the students stop, look, and listen to any birds they can observe in the area.

Ask Students: Can you name any of the birds you see?

Information: Two birds that can almost always be seen here in the spring of the year are the red-winged black bird and yellow-headed black bird.

1. Red-winged black birds nest here and in other wetlands in the spring. In the winter they form large flocks near farms and suburbs. Look at the bright red stripe on the shoulder or upper wing of the bird. These are the male birds. The females have a dark brown stripe. Listen! Have the students listen to the birds.
2. Yellow-headed blackbirds are related to the meadowlark and can be seen by the hundreds in wetland areas in the spring. Sometimes their bright yellow heads appear almost orange in color. When hundreds of birds are together in an area they can be very noisy! They spend the winter in flocks, often mixed with other blackbirds.

Proceed south on trail to Trail Post #5:

Have the students reach down and take a handful of the sand from the trail. Have them look carefully at the sand and roll some of the grains between their fingers.

Ask Students: Did you know that this sand is different than the sand on the ocean beaches?

Information: The sand on the ocean beaches is made from small broken pieces of rock that is washed and rubbed together by the water to polish it.

The sand you have in your hand was made differently. A small piece of waste material (perhaps from one of the brine shrimp that lives in the lake) starts the grain. Minerals (calcium carbonate) continue to deposit and grow around the small piece of waste material. It is then rubbed together by the movement of the water, finally forming these oval, polished grains called oolites.

Ask Students: Can you think of something else that is formed in this way?

Answer: A pearl.

Proceed south to Trail Post #6:

Ask Students: What other animals do you think might use the wetlands besides birds?

Information: The coyote is a mammal that comes to the wetlands to hunt for food such as birds and small mammals.

Bobcats, a small wildcat with a short tail, also hunt for food here.

Proceed down the trail to the point at which it turns west towards the mountains. Go past the fence and then turn north heading back towards the ranch.

Stop at Trail Post # 7.

Ask Students: Do you see any other birds or animals here?

Information: Bison are often seen here and over on the mountainsides to the west. They sometimes use the wetlands trail and even push over the trail post signs.

Bison are large animals and a big bull may weigh 1200 pounds or more. Although they look awkward and clumsy, they can suddenly take off and can run up to 40 miles per hour. They have large horns and are very dangerous! ***NEVER approach*** them or tease them, but give them the right of way. After all, this is their home.

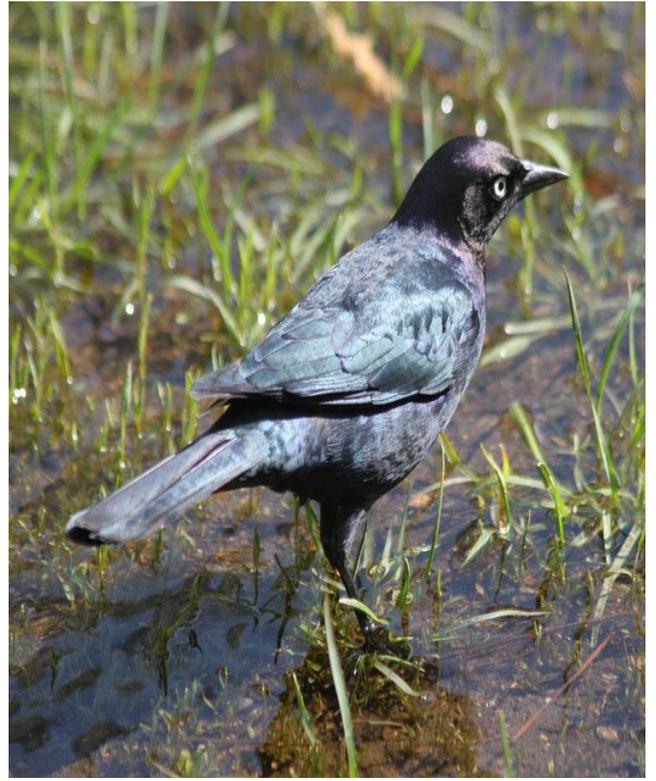
Ask Students: Do you know what a meadowlark is? Have you heard or seen one on this trail? Who can imitate the song of a meadowlark? Many meadowlarks live here. They build domed nests on the ground and you can hear their beautiful song almost everywhere on the island.

Ask Students: What are the colors of a meadowlark?

Proceed back to the ranch house.



Red-winged Blackbird



Brewer's Blackbird



Yellow-headed Blackbird



Meadowlark