

## Nature Notes, July 2023

### Young Naturalist program teaches kids about biodiversity

By Greg Fenty

There is a lot of talk these days about biodiversity. But what exactly is biodiversity; why is it important, and how do you measure it? Simply put, biodiversity is all the life (plants, animals, fungi, bacteria, etc.) that lives in your environment.

Every molecule of your body is composed of atoms that come from what you eat, drink, and breathe. It is important that the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe comes from a healthy environment. The best way to make sure the environment remains healthy for us is to make sure it is healthy for all living species. That's when biodiversity becomes important. Generally speaking, the more living creatures that share your environment, the healthier it will be for you.

Measuring biodiversity can be as simple as getting outside, looking for different creatures, and counting them. It's an impossible task for scientists alone, so they rely on volunteers, or Citizen Scientists, to help them out. For kids, who are naturally curious about nature, discovering different creatures is fun. Designing nature programs for kids based on Citizen Science concepts adds a science element to it.

The Young Naturalists is a conservation education program started by the Saskatoon Nature Society in 1968 with an emphasis on helping kids learn about the science of monitoring wildlife. The program is active all year round. In winter there are bird counts, including the popular Christmas Bird Count for Kids.

Birds are relatively easy to count, but figuring out the secretive creatures which share our environment sometimes takes a little detective work. We study tracks and scats to determine who left them behind. We dissect owl pellets to identify the prey on which owls have been dining. In spring, we take to local conservation areas to look for the first flowers of the year, check out the local pond to discover underwater invertebrates (lots of mosquitoes this year), and visit an owl nest with local naturalists to learn about great horned



Catching and studying butterflies at the Northeast Swale is fun for active kids. Photo by Andrea Patel

owls and the science of bird banding. In summer, we learn about butterflies and other insects. The fall is all about bird migration. We get up close and personal with some northern saw-whet owls at the local banding station and try to get close to the magnificent sandhill cranes as they pass through the Saskatoon area.

Our main conservation project is the Mary Houston Bluebird Trail. You may have seen birdhouses on fence posts in rural Saskatchewan. Some are set up in a line called a bluebird trail. The Saskatoon Bluebird Trail was started by Mary Houston and the Young Naturalists in 1969 to give bluebirds and tree swallows a helping hand. These birds were in decline due to habitat loss and competition for nesting sites from introduced species from Europe like the house sparrow and starling. The basic idea was to provide more homes for bluebirds and tree swallows.

The idea behind putting up nest boxes sounds good in theory, but would it work? That is the question the kids wanted to know; and there was only one way to find out. So during each nesting season in June the Young Naturalists are responsible for monitoring the 250 nest boxes along the Mary Houston Bluebird Trail to determine the species nesting and how many offspring they are producing.

The main goal of the program is to make the science of nature memorable and fun - and it does!

*Greg Fenty is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society and co-ordinates the Young Naturalists program.*