

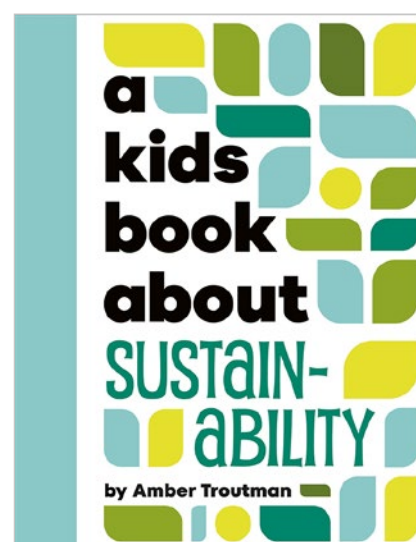
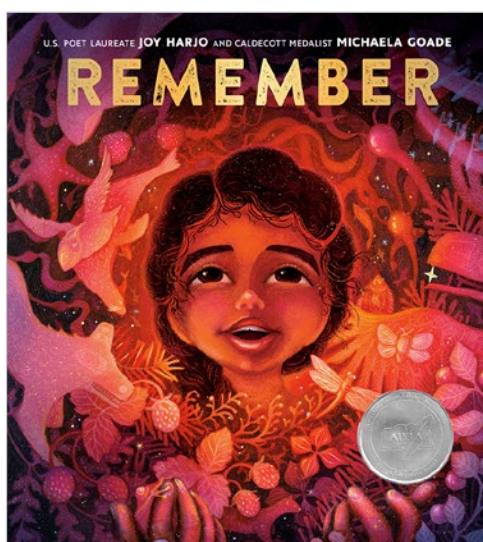


Penguin  
Random House  
ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Inspire Teaching and Learning  
with Outstanding Books

## THEMATIC GUIDE

## Teaching Nature ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



Books can serve as a reminder that nature surrounds us all the time, and that nature is defined by our experiences. The activities in this guide encourage both early aged and upper-grade elementary students to step away from screens and into green spaces.

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

Young children often notice plants and animals that adults don't see. They love to watch butterflies, pick flowers, and play in the sand. They see, hear, smell, touch, and even taste parts of the world adults only glance at. As teachers, we can and should encourage students to connect with nature. Research suggests that spending more time playing outside is linked to improved cognitive function, increased happiness, better attention spans, and reduced anxiety in children compared to those who don't spend time outside.

Teachers are in a unique position to help students step away from screens and into green spaces. While schools may not be located in "wild" areas, teachers can utilize any outdoor space with students. Plants that pop up through the concrete, birds soaring through the sky, and ants on a sidewalk are all part of nature. Books can serve as a reminder that nature surrounds us all the time, and that nature is defined by our experiences.

The titles in this collection include fiction and nonfiction texts, both picture books and chapter books, and provide a broad appeal for today's elementary school students. The wide variety of texts also allows teachers to integrate these texts into multiple subject areas.

## ■ HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The titles in this collection all focus on nature. From picture books to chapter books, they bring the outside in. However, they can and should serve as a gateway to the outdoors for young readers. Teachers can choose to select individual or multiple texts depending on reading level, thematic consideration, or instructional goals. Conversation starters are provided to encourage conversations. Texts can be used as read-alouds, whole-class texts, and independent reading. Activities apply to all titles and can be adapted to whole-class or small-group settings.

## ■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION



### Rachel Carson's Wonder-Filled World:

How the Scientist, Writer, and Nature Lover Changed the Environmental Movement

KATE HANNIGAN, Illustrated by KATIE HICKEY

9781662680571

Calkins Creek | Hardcover | \$18.99 | 40 pages

*Rachel Carson's Wonder-Filled World* is a great way to introduce young readers to Rachel Carson. With lyrical language and beautiful illustrations, the book highlights how Rachel Carson became a scientist and writer.

- Rachel Carson encouraged everyone, from children to adults, to have a sense of wonder when looking at the world around them. What do you wonder about in your yard or schoolyard?
- Rachel Carson believed that chemicals used to kill bugs (pesticides) were harming the environment and people. She wrote *Silent Spring* to make people aware of what was happening. Why did she call the book *Silent Spring*? How did people react to her book?
- Throughout the story the author describes what Rachel sees, hears, smells, feels, and tastes. Why do you think she does this?



### Remember

JOY HARJO, Illustrated by MICHAELA GOADE

9780593484845

Random House Studio | Hardcover | \$18.99 | 40 pages | Lexile: AD480L

Also available: E-Book, Audio Download

In *Remember* by Joy Harjo, readers are introduced to the poet laureate's well-known poem about the importance of nature and family. Harjo, a member of the Muscogee Nation, urges readers to pay attention to the wonder of the world around them.

- How does Joy Harjo show the ways people and nature are connected? How do Michaela Goade's illustrations show these connections?
- Is nature important to you?
- Why do you think the poet repeats the word "remember" throughout the poem?



### Birdlore:

The Iridescent Life of Florence Merriam Bailey

JESS KEATING, Foreword by DEVON HOLZWARTH

9780593488584

Knopf Books for Young Readers | Hardcover | \$19.99 | 40 pages | Lexile: AD480L

Also available: E-Book

Jess Keating's *Birdlore* introduces readers to Florence Merriam Bailey; she may not be a household name, but thanks to her, we watch birds instead of wearing them! A lifelong bird lover, she didn't want to study dead birds in a lab like most scientists

at the time. In college, she spoke up against using bird feathers as fashion and instead began leading her friends on birdwatching walks. She invited people outside, into the wild, to observe birds. Eventually, she used her own notes to write the first modern field guide for bird watching!

- Why do you think the author wrote this book?
- Was it easy or hard for a woman to become a scientist during this time?
- Why did Florence Merriam Bailey want to observe birds in the wild rather than see them used for hats?



## ■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION



### Being Home

TRACI SORELL, Foreword by MICHAELA GOADE

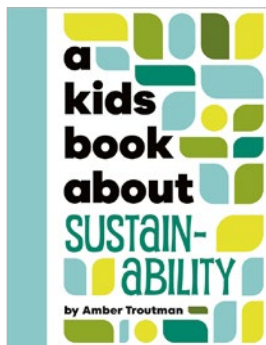
9780593620670

Kokila | Hardcover | \$18.99 | 32 pages | Lexile: AD450L

Also available: E-Book

*Being Home* by Traci Sorell and Michaela Goade is a gorgeous homage to culture, family, and nature. When a young Cherokee girl moves from the city to the reservation, she says goodbye to the crowds and the noise and hello to family and nature. She leaves behind some things she loves, but she is excited to play in the creek, explore the forest, and observe different animals and plants.

- In *Being Home*, Etsi (the Cherokee word for mother) tells her daughter that they are moving because the noise of crowds and cars “is not our rhythm.” The little girl is excited to move to a place with more opportunities for spending time in nature. Do you like playing outside? What do you like to do outside?
- As Etsi drives, the little girl watches the landscape outside change from the city to countryside. She sketches what she sees on pages 15-16. What do you notice about the landscape changes as you look at Michaela Goade’s illustrations?
- After she arrives in her new home and her relatives help them unpack, the main character notices that the noises of her city home have been replaced by the sounds of nature and family—the “rhythm of being home.” Think about the sounds of your neighborhood—what do you hear?



### A Kids Book About Sustainability

AMBER TROUTMAN

9780241743485

DK | Hardcover | \$19.99 | 64 pages

Also available: E-Book

*A Kids Book About Sustainability* by Amber Troutman presents ideas for living responsibly in language adapted for children. Filled with ideas for living life in a way that protects the earth, the book is accessible for children and adults.

- Do you know what sustainability is? Does your family do anything to help take care of the earth?
- This book is designed in a minimalist way. There are very few illustrations and only a few colors are used. Why do you think that is? How might it be related to the topic of the book?
- This book is all about individual people, like you and me, making small changes to help the earth. Some people think we need to have big groups, like companies and governments, make big changes in order to make a difference. What do you think?

## ■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

The books in this collection all center around nature. Below you will find activities to help students build knowledge and reflect on the importance of nature in their lives. These activities can be used as pre-reading activities or follow-up activities.

### SCAVENGER HUNT

Time to get those kids outside! You can do this in your schoolyard, neighborhood, or local park. You do not need pristine wilderness or even a large space—anywhere outside with plants and soil/sand will work! The goal is to get students outside and looking at nature.

This can be done in any season and can be adapted to fit your students. Create a list of items students can look for outside. Students can work individually, in teams, or even as a whole class. Give students the following instructions:

*Let's see what we can find outside! On this list you will find items commonly found in nature and some challenging items, too. When you find an item on the list, check it off. Please leave items where you find them and leave no trace (this means no one should be able to tell you were there).*

Sample ideas:

- A leaf
- Rough tree bark
- Smooth tree bark
- Something with long leaves
- Something blue
- Something green
- A seed
- A flower
- A pretty rock
- A pinecone
- A feather
- A bug

Scavenger hunts encourage active engagement with nature and allow students to hone their observation skills. In addition, scavenger hunts cultivate curiosity and a deeper understanding of how ecosystems and different species interact.

After completing the scavenger hunt, talk with students about Florence Merriam Bailey and Rachel Carson. Both women used their observation skills to help people learn to appreciate nature. Students might be inspired to write about their scavenger hunt experience in the form of a poem like Joy Harjo's *Remember*.

## ■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

### MAPPING OUR PLACE

Discuss with students how many Indigenous cultures have mapped their relationship with nature through songs, stories, and poems. Point out that maps can show more than just streets and directions—they can show relationships and memories.

Show students the map on pages 15–16 of *Being Home*. Take a few minutes to discuss what the character has included on her map and what it might mean.

Next, hand out blank paper to students. Tell students they are going to create their own “Place Map” of the neighborhood where they live or go to school. Ask them to draw a map similar to the one in *Being Home*, but they should include things that are important to them. After they draw the streets and buildings that are important to them, challenge them to dig deeper.

- What do they wonder about (like Rachel Carson)? Have them mark spots where they have seen interesting insects, plants, or animals. They can sketch what they’ve seen or use symbols.
- Think like Florence Merriam Bailey—where do they see birds? Mark those places on the map. Students who are older might label species they have seen.
- Where do animals live? Mark their homes on the map.

When students are done, have them share their maps. You could extend the project by creating a “Wonder Wall” displaying all the maps. You could also have students research the history of their town or neighborhood and create a historical version of their map. Who used to live there? What plants or animals made their home there? Why might the resident people and animals have changed over time?

### REAL-LIFE CONSERVATION HEROES

Make your students aware that there are people working hard every day to make the world a better place for everyone and everything that lives here. Invite guest speakers to visit in person or virtually: park rangers, scientists, members of the local environmental commission, activists, etc. If you can’t invite guest speakers, have students research people and organizations working to protect nature and promote sustainability.

If you can’t bring in guest speakers, check out Skype With a Scientist ([skypeascientist.com](http://skypeascientist.com)) for virtual options. This organization has a database of scientists all over the world who want to connect with classrooms virtually.

## ■ THEMES

The following themes appear throughout the titles in this set. Essential questions are designed to be broad in the interest of capturing readers' attention, inviting multiple perspectives, and applying to big ideas across subject areas and units of learning. Conversation starters promote connection and relevance before and after students read.

### **STEWARDSHIP & ACTION**

*Essential Question:*

How can small actions create big changes for the environment?

*Conversation Starters:*

- What is our responsibility to the world around us?
- Can kids help protect the environment? How?
- How can we take responsibility for nature around us?

### **WONDER & OBSERVATION**

*Essential Question:*

How can curiosity help us care for nature?

*Conversation Starters:*

- What happens when we take the time to stop and observe nature where we live?
- How does exploring outside make you feel about protecting nature?
- Does sharing nature with your friends and family make it more valuable?

### **SENSE OF PLACE**

*Essential Question:*

What does it mean to belong to a place?

*Conversation Starters:*

- How are we connected to the plants and animals in our community?
- What makes a place feel like home for humans, animals, and plants?
- Does a place have to be special in order to be protected?

### **CULTURE & CONNECTION**

*Essential Question:*

How do different cultures understand our relationship with nature?

*Conversation Starters:*

- What can we learn from people who have lived in a place for thousands of years?
- What do different cultures think about protecting nature for future generations?
- Can learning about how different cultures care for nature help us think about better ways to protect the environment?



## ■ POST-READING ACTIVITIES

### GUESS THE TREE

*Option A - Outside: Take students to an outdoor area with several different trees.*

*Option B - Inside: Print and hang color photos of different trees around the classroom at eye level.*

Start the first round by having one student in each pair put on a blindfold while their partner is the observer. The observer should choose a tree to study and spend five minutes taking detailed notes about their chosen tree. If outside, encourage them to walk around the tree, stand close and far away, and even touch the tree, if possible. Whether they are observing a live tree or one of the photos, encourage the observer to write about the size and shape of the tree, what the bark looks and feels like, what the branches and leaves/needles look like, and any unique features. The blindfolded student should wait quietly during this time. This might be an opportunity for the blindfolded student to participate in a quiet mindfulness activity!

After five minutes, have the students switch roles so the observer now wears the blindfold and the new observer chooses a tree to study. Repeat the same observation and note-taking process.

Once both students have completed the observation portion, give students fifteen to twenty minutes to write about their tree using the notes they took. Older students can choose to write either a descriptive paragraph or a poem, but the goal is to write detailed enough descriptions so their partner can correctly identify which tree they observed. Encourage students to use specific details, sensory language, clear and vivid descriptions, and similes and metaphors in their writing. For younger students, encourage them to use descriptive words and phrases. They might write one to two sentences.

Finish the activity with an identification challenge where partners read their writing aloud to each other. The listening partner should try to identify which tree is being described. Have students check their answers together and discuss what details were most helpful for identification.

\*This activity can also be done with other natural elements. Houseplants, stones, cut flowers, even feathers collected from nature walks can be used!

### BEING AN ADVOCATE

Have students brainstorm a list of local or regional environmental issues they care about. You may want to share recent local events like new developments where fields or forests used to be, wildfires, air pollution, etc. Allow students to discuss the issues and ask questions.

Have students choose the issue that is most important to them. Challenge them to write letters to local officials or newspapers about the environmental issue

## ■ POST-READING ACTIVITIES

they care about. For younger students, provide templates or allow them to create flyers and posters to share with the community. For older students, share mentor texts such as letters to the editor and published letters to politicians. Explain that these letters usually follow a specific style: students should introduce who they are, what they are concerned about, and what they think the politician or community should do. Work with students to create their letter. Depending on their abilities, students might research and write their own letter or you might create a template and require them to add one to two sentences about their topic.

When students have completed their letters, decide if you will mail or email them. Guide students through the appropriate process. Explain that they may or may not hear back from the person they write to, but that they are exercising their rights as citizens by sharing their thoughts.

This project empowers students to advocate for causes that matter to them, connecting environmental issues with being a good citizen. Through this lesson, students discover that they don't need to be of voting age to be a part of the conversation—their voices carry weight and they can meaningfully contribute to important conversations about their world and community.

## ■ OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

*The Best Worst Camp Out Ever* by Joe Cepeda

*I Am Made of Mountains* by Alexandra S. D. Hinrichs

*What's Inside a Bird's Nest?* by Rachel Ignotofsky

*Dream for the Land* by Laekan Zea Kemp

*City Summer, Country Summer* by Kiese Laymon

*A Universe Big & Small* by James Yang

## ■ FILMS & DOCUMENTARIES OF INTEREST

*Backyard Wilderness* (Netflix)

*National Parks Adventure* (Vimeo)

*Scout & The Gumboot Kids* (Prime)

*The Biggest Little Farm* (Prime)

## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Sarah Mulhern Gross is a high school English teacher and National Board Certified Teacher in Lincroft, New Jersey. She has an MAT degree in teaching biology from Project Dragonfly and Miami University. She is a contributor to *The New York Times* Learning Network and her writing has appeared in *Scientific American*, ASCD, *The New Jersey English Journal*, and *The Washington Post's* Answer Sheet. Sarah has presented for NCTE, NJCTE, NJCEL, NJEA, *The New York Times* Learning Network, Fordham University's Summer Literacy Institute, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and the New Jersey Science Teachers Association. She is the co-founder of #nerdcampNJ, NJCTE past vice-president, and past faculty board member for curiousSciencewriters, which provides a platform for publishing student science writing.

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