



## **Exploring Insects and Spiders with Children**

BackYard Nature Center recently put on a series of fun one-hour programs for 4-6 year old summer camp groups that allowed them to observe and learn about insects and spiders. Our program rotated the campers between three 20-minute stations: 1) an area with display habitats so campers could observe live flying and crawling insects and spiders, 2) a table with a variety of books, field guides, models of the life cycles of an ant and a ladybug, etc. and 3) a chance to go out and capture insects for themselves.

Free Resource Trunks from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources made this activity easy-to-do and adaptable to whatever outdoor space you have. The "Illinois' Insects" trunk contains all the needed books, student activities, field guides, posters, observation equipment and instructional videos, while the "Field Trip Pack," contains magnifying glasses, binoculars and containers for insects.

## **Getting Started**

To reserve the trunks, go to <http://dnr.state.il.us/education> and click on "Items for Loan" in the right-hand column. In the drop-down list, you can find out more about the available trunks, their contents, and instructions on how to reserve them for two weeks. Trunks cover a variety of subjects and are appropriate for grades pre-K to 6. They are correlated to the Illinois Learning Standards and the correlation to the Next Generation Science Standards will soon be available.

## **Setting up the Activity Stations**

Use the IDNR portable insect carriers to make display habitats by adding fresh foliage. Collect butterflies, moths, dragonflies and damselflies in areas with wildflowers and tall grasses and use the "sweep net" to collect grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, and harvestmen by sweeping the net across the tops of native grasses. You can also turn over dead branches and rocks to find more insects! For an easy and exciting way to display and observe these worms, pill bugs and other crawling insects, use a clear plastic tub filled with fresh soil or rotting wood. In case you can't find insects, you can always purchase a dozen crickets from any pet store! Keep in mind that caught insects should always be released and collecting is not allowed in various areas, *such as the Forest Preserves of Cook County*.

You can find butterfly nets at a dollar store that the kids can use to capture their own insects, even if all you have is a single tree. They can also look under leaves, rocks or dead wood. The award-winning find during our program was a 2-inch long stag beetle discovered on a tree by one of the campers!

## **Materials:**

IDNR Illinois Insects Resource Trunk, IDNR Field Trip Trunk, inexpensive butterfly nets (optional), clear plastic tub (optional)

## **Links:**

<http://Backyardnaturecenter.org>

<http://dnr.state.il.us/education>