

SPECIES IDENTIFICATION ACTIVITY PARK DISTRICT NATURAL AREAS

Urban natural areas provide critical habitat for threatened species, enhance community well-being, and promote conservation in the city.

Participants learn to observe and identify species using the Chicago Parks District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide. They also outline the importance of urban natural environments to plant and animal communities with a focus on native and migratory species.

This activity was developed from the Green Ambassadors teen program. The youth in this program found that Rapid Color Guides, which help people put names to species, helped them form a powerful connection to the natural environment.

See other Rapid Color Guides for the Chicago Region at: <http://fieldguides.fieldmuseum.org/>

Introduction

Natural areas in cities allow for greater adaption to climate change, including mitigating the “heat island effect” of cities (overwarming due to concrete surfaces absorbing heat), reducing run-off, acting as a natural “carbon sink” and providing habitat in the city for native species. The Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Species Identification Activity provides participants with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the species that occur within prairies and savannas in the Chicago Region. Participants inventory plants, animals, and insects by comparing what they observe to images on the Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide. Once participants identify a species, they have the option to check it off on the Chicago Park District Prairies and Savanna Species Checklist, or to use a notebook to record their observations. A reflection period follows during which participants discuss what they learned and the facilitator helps connect this activity to the larger context of climate action and the importance of natural areas. Participants who enjoy using the Rapid Color Guide can design their own using a template available through the following link: <http://fieldguides.fieldmuseum.org>

The Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide is designed for habitats within the Chicago Park District, but can also be used at other prairie and savanna sites. This Rapid Color Guide provides one photo per species (most are from summer or fall). Species may look different at different times of year so the user may need to look up images of the species during the season the activity is used. Use the accompanying Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Species Checklist or a notebook to write down today’s observations, and note past sightings.

WHAT IS A RAPID COLOR GUIDE?

A Rapid Color Guide is a field identification tool that allows you to quickly identify species using color photographs. The Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide is designed for identifying species of prairie and savanna habitats. If you are interested in additional guides to groups of local plants and animals, go to: <http://fieldguides.fieldmuseum.org>



The Chicago Park District has more than 50 Natural Areas throughout Chicago. These natural oases provide quiet respite for people and nature. Explore nature in the city! Find the nearest natural area to you by visiting: <http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/nature/nature-areas/>

The guide has flowers and grasses in alphabetical order by scientific name and organized by popular taxonomic groupings- i.e. flowers (forbs), grasses and birds- all for ease of use by non-expert.

GET READY!

Materials:

1. Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide- We encourage you to reuse the guide by laminating it and/or instructing participants to mark species in a notebook rather than on the guide itself.
2. Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Species Checklist or a notebook for recording observations
3. Pencils/pens for participants
4. Sheets of paper for the reflection (optional)
5. Clipboards (optional)
6. Prizes (optional)

THE ACTIVITY

Time:

- Introduction- 15 to 20 minutes
- Identification- 15 to 30 minutes
- Reflection and Assessment- 15 to 20 minutes
- Total: A little over an hour

Number of People: A few people to a large group

Procedure:

1. Provide participants with a clipboard, pen or pencil, Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide, checklist and/or notebooks for observations.
1. Describe the identification activity as a way for participants to explore the natural area and learn about native species through the use of a field guide and checklist.
2. Introduce the Chicago Park District Prairies and Savannas Rapid Color Guide as a color-image identification guide. The guide and the checklist allows users to rapidly inventory their species observations.
3. Instruct participants that they have 15-30 minutes to walk through the natural area for the activity, and that they should stay on the paths and boardwalks at all times.
4. Remind participants to explore within a safe distance of the home base (depending on age). If there are not enough color guides, clipboards, or chaperones, participants can group together to share.
5. After the allotted time, collect participants back together. Check in with participants about what species they found, and how many.
6. Provide prizes to participants who return having identified the most species (optional).
7. Facilitate participants in sharing what they learned and connect this learning to climate action by asking the guiding questions.

Skills learned through this Activity: Using a field guide to identify species, recognizing distinct physiological features of species, gaining familiarity with basic taxonomic groups

REFLECTION

Goal: Helping participants solidify their knowledge and make connections to climate action, and connect to and understand the importance of natural areas.

Procedure: Have participants reconvene after completing the identification activity to reflect on what they have learned as well as share their feedback. The facilitator can ask participants the guiding questions to begin a discussion about how this activity connects to larger concepts such as urban wellbeing, biodiversity, and climate action. The last guiding question asks participants to share their personal experience of this activity.

Guiding Questions:

1. How do natural areas provide benefits for all urban inhabitants- including humans, animals, plants and insects? Examples: Increases people's awareness of native species of the Chicago Region and interest in conservation
2. How do natural areas in cities increase awareness of biodiversity and of the local impacts of climate change? Examples: Natural areas provide a space for communities to take climate action, through conservation education, stewardship, and can be a platform for communities to connect cultural heritage to climate change adaptation
3. Did you like this activity, and why? What aspect did you find the most interesting? Would you want to return to this natural area? With whom could you share what you learned today?



Prairies are complex ecosystems dominated by grasses and other non-woody plants called forbs. Prairies are crucial and endangered habitats in the Midwest- of the 22 million acres of native prairies that once covered the state of Illinois, less than 1% are still present today. You can contribute to prairie restoration through planting native prairie species in your backyard, and by participating in stewardship events in the Chicago Parks: <http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/nature/>

Vocabulary:

Native Species- species which are not introduced by humans, and are naturally occurring and adapted to a particular ecosystem or habitat

Community well-being- the health of a community, which involves factors such as strong social ties, connection to cultural heritage, and access to green spaces.

Additional Resources:

Chicago Park District Natural Areas:
www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/nature/

Chicago's Climate Action Plan:
www.chicagoclimateaction.org

Information on Illinois prairies:
www.museum.state.il.us/muslink/prairie

Information on Chicago natural history and ecosystems:
www.chicagowilderness.org/?page=publicationsnew

Native plants for your garden:
climatechicago.fieldmuseum.org/sites/default/files/Native%20Plant%20List.pdf



Major Sponsor



Find this and other climate action tools at
climatechicago.fieldmuseum.org

© The Field Museum