

Backyard Field Guide

By the time a child is in second grade, he has probably had lots of experience in classifying objects, and even words, by their colors, shapes, sizes, spellings, and other properties. He may even know a bit about how to classify living things into groups: plants and animals; insects and spiders; reptiles, mammals, birds, fish, etc. Second graders are also blossoming in their writing skills, learning how to write both fictional and informational texts.

A great way to combine your child's natural curiosity with his developing classification and writing skills is to have him create field guides. Whether it's a field guide for the park, the woods, or your own backyard, your child will gain a new appreciation for the living things around him, while at the same time getting lots of good practice developing those second grade language arts skills!

What You Need:

- Loose-leaf paper
- Three-ring binder
- Pencil
- Clipboard
- Digital camera (optional)
- Markers, crayons, or colored pencils
- Access to non-fiction resource books, field guides, or online field guides
- Stapler

What You Do:

1. Take your child exploring. Choose an outdoor area where you can observe living creatures in their natural setting, such as a garden, park, or a corner of your backyard. Set a reasonable goal for the number of creatures you'd like to put in your field guide. (Three is a good starting point. You can always add more later.)
2. If you have a digital camera, use it to take pictures of the plant and animal life you see. If you don't have a digital camera or would rather use illustrations, have your child draw the animal or plant on the blank paper, using a clipboard. Be sure to emphasize the importance of patience, and of looking closely at details. For example, if you are looking at an evergreen tree, does it have cones or berries? What do they look like? What do the needles and bark of the tree look like? How many needles are in a group? Tiny details like these will prove important in identifying the plant or animal.
3. Assist your child in using resources, such as books and internet field guides, to identify the living things you observed. A good online source is eNature.com. Your child will need to look carefully at his illustrations and/or the digital photos and will need to recall those tiny details in order to identify individual species.
4. After your child has identified a species and read a little about it, it's time to create a page about that creature for a field guide. He'll want to include general information about the plant or animal, such as its name and classification, where it lives, what it eats, and how it grows. It's also fun to include lesser-known facts about it, too. Is it poisonous? Is it a source of food for certain animals? Have your child write this information in a paragraph or two on a piece of paper, or create bold headings on the left side of the page, and list factual information. The name of the species can go at the top in a bold or fancy print. The layout possibilities are really endless, so encourage your child to be creative and have fun!
5. Be sure to have your child save room for an illustration. He may wish to use his initial illustration (cut and paste, if necessary), or create a new one. If you were able to get good digital photos, photo illustrations could also be added.
6. After a page has been made for each creature, have your child place the pages in the binder. Encourage him to add more pages to the book later. As more pages are added, he may want to rearrange pages in the field guide according to their classifications, such as organizing it into a section on plants, and a section on animals.
7. As a special touch, your child can also create a cover page for the binder and a Table of Contents page.
8. Encourage your child to share his field guide with visitors. In this way, he'll be sharing more than just information. He'll be sharing his writing and research skills, and his love for the outdoors!

