

# Take a Micro-

# Hike

BY JUDY L. SHULL

**W**hat happens when you announce a woodland hike to a group of elementary students? If your classes are like mine, they probably greet the announcement with enthusiastic shouts, then tear through the woods at maximum speed and volume, paying absolutely no attention to anything in the sky, water, woods, or path. Their only focus seems to be getting to the end of the trail first.

This class was no exception. One day I planned a lovely walk in the woods for my 20 first through fourth graders. The planned trail covered a half mile, good for about 10 minutes at their usual rate. After dividing the class into four groups, I briefly explained the "micro hike" concept to them. It is a short, slow, outdoor discovery trip, trying to see as much as you can. Then I sent the first group of children down the trail with their adult leader. Spaced about three minutes apart, two additional groups set out to explore, or so I believed.

I reserved the five most rowdy and easily bored students for my group. They charged off down the trail, nearly leaving me behind. I cleared my throat. They begrudgingly stopped and stared in my direction. "What do you see?" I asked.

"Nothing," came the expected reply.

"Come take a look," I invited.

Two students moved a step nearer, and I pointed at the damp soil in front of my toes. They looked closer. "What do you see?" I asked again.

With a puzzled look, one towheaded student said, "An animal print of some kind?"

"Do you know what kind?" I asked.

After some deductive reasoning, we eliminated bear- and tiger-sized animals, as well as snakes (no feet!). Upon further reasoning, we also eliminated birds and fish. With a little help from the teacher and an encounter

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with a reference book, the students identified the small, long-toed, human-shaped footprint. The group agreed that a raccoon had recently passed this way. "How recently?" I questioned. They felt the earth and talked about the previous night's rain. The animal had made a distinct impression in the soft earth. The young detectives figured out that the raccoon's stroll had to have occurred after the rain, because the ground needed to be soft for it to make such a good print. "Are there any more prints

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thought so, because they remembered it a couple of years later, describing it as one of the best hikes they’d ever had.

Since the other groups had taken the quick and noisy route, they were waiting impatiently for our arrival. I discovered that when describing a micro hike you must make sure you have the leaders’ full attention. Your assistants must understand that the goal is to discover, not merely to finish

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nearby?” I wondered aloud. Yes, a foot away two more came into view.

By the time we left the prints, we’d covered only a couple of feet and taken 10 minutes. After that, my rambunctious students couldn’t be restrained. They followed worm trails, watched bugs building homes, butterflies exploring flowers, insects eating crumbs, and fish swimming in the quiet stream. We hadn’t even gone an eighth of a mile, but more than an hour had passed.

Does this sound like fun? My students

the trail. Observing the finer points of nature is the key. We can learn much from the small parts of the world around us. This is a new idea to most adults as well as children. Suggest to the leaders that they look for animal tracks, birds’ nests, a variety of seed pods, and the vast array of life around water. Whatever catches their interest they can enthusiastically share with the students.

The entire idea of slowing down and looking for more than a few moments at anything is difficult for most children. Full

of energy and curiosity, they usually rush ahead on their discovery trips. Emphasize to your assistants that the group leader is the key. Show them how to ask questions that make children look and consider. Suggest questions such as these: What do you hear? Is it a bird or insect? What do you see in the field? How many kinds of flowers can you count? Is that a butterfly or a moth? How can you tell the difference? What kind of tree is this? Look at the bark and the leaves. Look at the dirt. What is alive near your feet? Each team leader will have different interests and notice different things.

Leaders and students may wish to carry field guides. Most school libraries should have an assortment of helpful trail encyclopedias. To become better acquainted with these books, visit your local library or bookstore. Some guides to look for are “The Peterson Field Guide Series” sponsored by the National Audubon Society, “The Audubon Society Field Guides,” the “A Golden Guide” series of pocket books, and the “Spotter’s Handbook” series.

I am usually bombarded at the end of a micro hike with enthusiastic comments from students. They are excited about their discoveries and observations. Most young students will try to tell anyone who will listen what they have seen and learned. Some are distressed by what they have missed. If time permits, revisit a high point or two.

Taking a micro hike is an interesting educational side trip from the textbook, and worksheets of most science programs. In grades one through four those using the textbook *Rockets and Raisins*, Unit IV, could benefit from a micro exploration trip. On a variation on the micro hike theme, we recently discovered a rabbit’s nest near the school. Over a period of several days, the students in grades one through eight carefully and excitedly watched the kits’ growth.

In the same science series the textbook *Habits and Habitats*, Unit III, might include a micro hike to a fossil bed, if possible, for a trip back in time. Recently some of my first-through eighth-grade students took several hikes that covered no more than a quarter of a mile of creek bed. We returned home with half a dozen fossils from each.

Here are a few suggestions to make your micro hike more valuable:

Micro hikes can occur in parks, in the woods, or in your yard, school yard, church yard, or even on the playground. All that is needed is a little bit of outdoors. It can include grass, bushes, gravel, weeds, or the driveway.

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Keep the groups small. Four or five students usually work best. It is difficult to control a crowd, and noise scares many creatures away.

On a micro hike the aim is not to go far, but to learn much. Dress for getting down on your hands and knees. Then pick the starting point and stop, look, and listen often. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? Nothing? Look again! Somewhere around a blade of grass, under a stone or in a hole, a wonderfully cre-

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ated creature is going about its daily life.

Did you find anyone home? Is anyone traveling? What did you see? An insect? A reptile? Just a boring bug? Look again; what is it doing? Where is it going? Is the creature carrying anything? Watch it. Does it make a sound? Does it move slowly or fast in “bug time”? How do you know?

Have students check the field guides for answers. Assign research questions to be answered after returning to the classroom. Direct students to check encyclopedias and science books for more information.

When the group loses interest in one spot, move on to the next, but no more than a foot or two. There is perhaps an entirely new kingdom to discover. Who rules this territory? Are the occupants hunters, gatherers, or farmers?

“Busy as a bug” is a term you will understand after a micro hike. If you are really watching and discovering, you may discover wars being fought, casualties being carried home, or hunters with their conquests. Scatter a few crumbs and watch the gatherers. With careful observation, students may observe mating dances in progress, or dwellings under construction.

After returning to the classroom, we discuss our wildlife experiences over lunch. I

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have found that a teacher-directed lunch discussion helps clear up students' misunderstandings about what they have observed. Students' participation is usually great. This leaves a positive reminder of what they have enjoyed and helps avoid less-desirable topics students might choose. An added benefit of the teacher-led lunch discussions is improved student-to-teacher communication. Such interaction helps to establish a basis for positive discussions on a broad variety of subjects.

If you are interested in doing more outdoors with your students, I recommend two

books by Joseph Cornell: *Sharing Nature With Children* and *Sharing the Joy of Nature*. Both books present various nature activities for all ages.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible sends us to the small world. Probably the most familiar text is “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” (Proverbs 6:6, NIV). The Spirit of Prophecy reminds us, “God has surrounded us with nature’s beautiful scenery to attract and interest the mind. It is His design that we should associate the glories of nature with His character. If we faithfully study the book of nature, we shall find it a fruitful source for contemplating the infinite love and power of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The world God has created is right outside your door. Discover with your students the lesson He has prepared for you today. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Published by Dawn Publications, 14618 Tyler Foote Road, Nevada City, Calif. 95959, U.S.A. Many state and national parks carry these books in their gift shops.
2. Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1952), p. 144.

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