

Fostering Wonder

Nature Study Quick Start Guide

Gentle topic ideas for observing, wondering, and going deeper outdoors.

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Gentle Topic Ideas for Going Deeper Outdoors

Nature study does not need to be complicated. A living question, a quiet walk, a careful look, and a simple drawing are often enough to begin. This guide offers broad nature study topics with simple observation ideas, creative follow-up activities, and nature journal suggestions.

Choose one topic, go outside if possible, observe something real, and let the child's curiosity lead the way.

How to Use This Guide

- Choose one topic for the week, month, season, or nature walk.
- Begin with direct outdoor observation whenever possible.
- Follow the observation with a creative activity, experiment, craft, or watercolor study.
- Keep supplies simple: a nature journal, pencil, colored pencils or watercolors, scissors, glue, and a magnifying glass if you have one.
- Let the child draw and notice before explaining too much. The goal is attention, affection, and wonder.
- Revisit the same topic in different seasons to see what changes.

About the John Muir Laws Nature Journaling Method

John Muir Laws is known for helping families and students use nature journaling as a way to observe more carefully and think more deeply. In this approach, the child draws the subject of study and writes simple notes about observation, curiosity, and connection.

A helpful rhythm is:

- **What do I notice?** — careful observations from the senses: color, shape, size, pattern, sound, movement, texture, behavior, or location.
- **What do I wonder?** — real questions that arise from looking closely.
- **What does this remind me of?** — connections to a memory, another creature, a story, a place, a pattern, or a previous nature study.

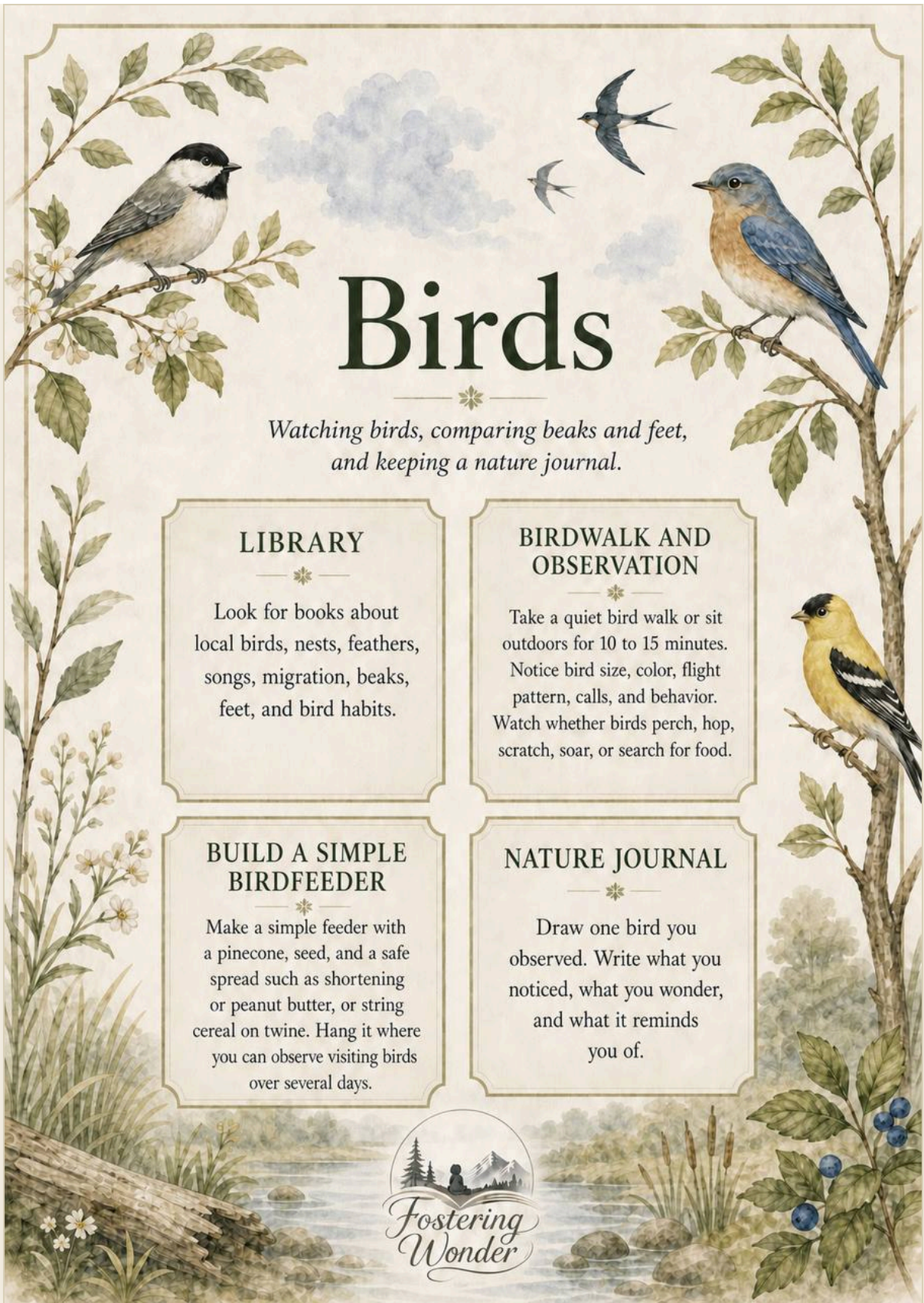
The drawing does not need to be perfect. The journal is a place to pay attention, ask questions, and grow in affection for the created world.

PRINTABLE TOPIC CARDS

Nature Study Activity Cards

Each card gives a library basket idea, one observation activity, one creative follow-up activity, and a simple nature journal suggestion.

Use one card at a time, or print the pages and keep them in a nature study binder.



Birds

*Watching birds, comparing beaks and feet,
and keeping a nature journal.*

LIBRARY

Look for books about local birds, nests, feathers, songs, migration, beaks, feet, and bird habits.

BIRDWALK AND OBSERVATION

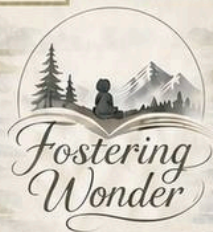
Take a quiet bird walk or sit outdoors for 10 to 15 minutes. Notice bird size, color, flight pattern, calls, and behavior. Watch whether birds perch, hop, scratch, soar, or search for food.

BUILD A SIMPLE BIRDFEEDER

Make a simple feeder with a pinecone, seed, and a safe spread such as shortening or peanut butter, or string cereal on twine. Hang it where you can observe visiting birds over several days.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw one bird you observed. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Fishes

*Observing fish helps children see how
fins, tails, gills, and scales fit life in water.*

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about fish,
ponds, rivers, oceans,
aquariums, gills, fins, scales,
and underwater habitats.

ACTIVITY 1 FISH MOVEMENT OBSERVATION

Observe fish in a pond, creek,
aquarium, nature center, or a
video. Notice how they swim,
turn, pause, and use their fins
and tails.

ACTIVITY 2 MAKE A FISH BODY MODEL

Create a simple fish from paper,
foil, or clay. Add fins, tail, gills,
and scales. Gently move the
model through the air or over a
blue paper "pond" to notice
how the fins and tail might
help a fish steer and swim.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw a fish and label a few
body parts. Write what you
noticed, what you wonder,
and what it reminds you of.





Amphibians

Studying amphibians invites children to notice damp habitats, life cycles, and change over time.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about frogs, toads, salamanders, wetlands, ponds, eggs, tadpoles, and amphibian life cycles.

ACTIVITY 1 DAMP HABITAT WALK

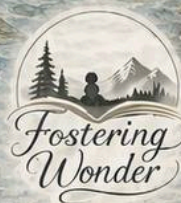
Visit a damp or shaded place such as a pond edge, garden, creek bank, or wetland. Look for signs of a good amphibian home: water, mud, insects, shade, leaf litter, or hiding places.

ACTIVITY 2 FROG LIFE CYCLE WHEEL

Make a simple life cycle wheel or accordion booklet showing egg, tadpole, froglet, and adult frog. Add one small note about what changes at each stage.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw one amphibian or one stage of its life cycle. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Reptiles

Reptile study helps children observe warmth, scales, camouflage, movement, and quiet watchfulness.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about turtles, lizards, snakes, crocodylians, scales, eggs, basking, camouflage, and reptile habitats.

ACTIVITY 1 SUNNY PLACES OBSERVATION WALK

Look for sunny rocks, warm paths, logs, dry soil, or sheltered places where reptiles might warm themselves. Discuss why reptiles often seek warmth from their surroundings.

ACTIVITY 2 MAKE A CAMOUFLAGE REPTILE

Draw or cut out a lizard, turtle, or snake. Color it to blend into a chosen habitat such as rocks, leaves, sand, or bark. Place it on a background and see how well it hides.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw a reptile or a place where a reptile might live. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Mammals

Looking for signs of mammals and comparing adaptations helps us notice life all around us.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about local mammals, tracks, dens, fur, teeth, nocturnal animals, and mammal families.

ACTIVITY 1 MAMMAL SIGNS WALK

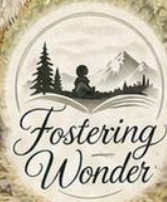
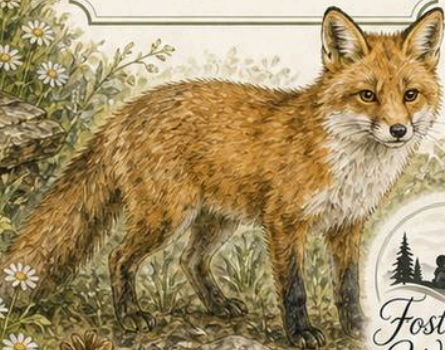
Take a walk and search for tracks, burrows, nests, scat, fur, chew marks, paths through grass, or other clues that mammals have been nearby.

ACTIVITY 2 MAKE TRACK PRINTS

Use clay, play dough, or a shallow tray of damp sand to make animal track impressions from toy animals, carved potatoes, or your own drawn templates. Compare foot shapes and what they might tell you.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw a mammal or one sign of a mammal. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Insects

Careful observation of insects helps children notice design, movement, pollination, and tiny details.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about bees, butterflies, beetles, ants, grasshoppers, wings, antennae, metamorphosis, and pollination.

ACTIVITY 1 CAREFUL INSECT HUNT

Look near flowers, grass, leaves, bark, logs, or garden beds. Observe insects gently without harming them. Notice legs, wings, antennae, body sections, colors, and movement.

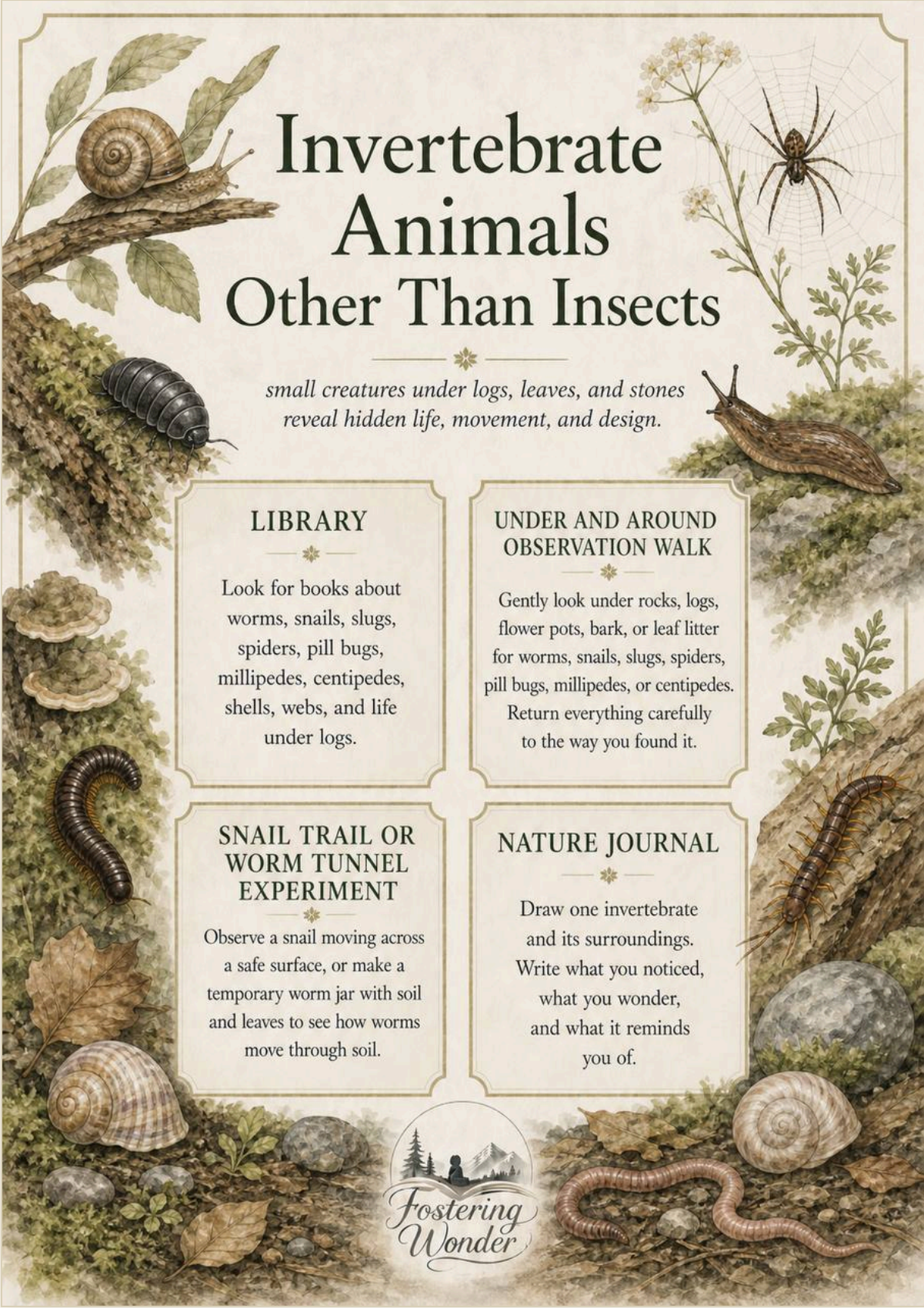
ACTIVITY 2 CREATE AN INSECT MODEL

Make an insect from paper, clay, pipe cleaners, or natural materials. Include three body parts, six legs, antennae, and wings if your insect has them.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw one insect close up. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Invertebrate Animals Other Than Insects

*small creatures under logs, leaves, and stones
reveal hidden life, movement, and design.*

LIBRARY

Look for books about worms, snails, slugs, spiders, pill bugs, millipedes, centipedes, shells, webs, and life under logs.

UNDER AND AROUND OBSERVATION WALK

Gently look under rocks, logs, flower pots, bark, or leaf litter for worms, snails, slugs, spiders, pill bugs, millipedes, or centipedes. Return everything carefully to the way you found it.

SNAIL TRAIL OR WORM TUNNEL EXPERIMENT

Observe a snail moving across a safe surface, or make a temporary worm jar with soil and leaves to see how worms move through soil.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw one invertebrate and its surroundings. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Wildflowers

*Wildflower study encourages attention to color, form, pollinators,
and the beauty of ordinary places.*

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about local wildflowers, flower parts, petals, seeds, pollinators, meadows, and plant families.

ACTIVITY 1 WILDFLOWER COLOR WALK

Look for wildflowers in a field, yard, trail, park, or roadside. Notice color, petal shape, leaf shape, stem, height, scent, and where each flower grows.

ACTIVITY 2 MAKE A WILDFLOWER SEED PACKET

Choose one wildflower and learn how it makes or drops its seeds. Fold a small paper envelope, decorate it with the flower's name and picture, and use it to collect a few seeds from a safe, approved place. Add the date and where the seeds were found.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw one wildflower carefully, including leaves and stem if possible. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Weeds

Weed study helps children notice persistence, roots, seeds, and the surprising design of common plants.



LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about common weeds, seed dispersal, roots, dandelions, burrs, plant survival, and useful wild plants.

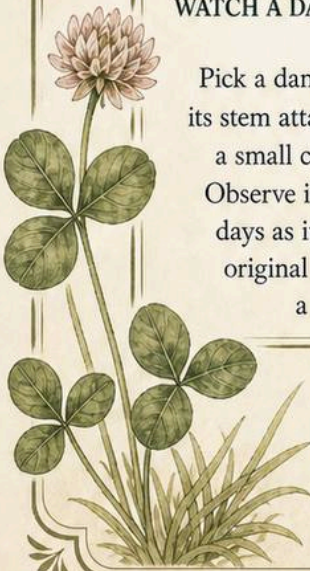
ACTIVITY 1 COMMON WEED OBSERVATION

Choose one weed from a yard, sidewalk crack, garden edge, or field. Notice where it grows, how strong it is, how its roots hold, and whether it seems easy or difficult to remove.



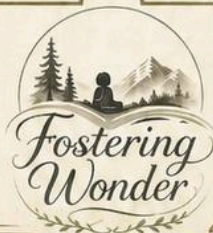
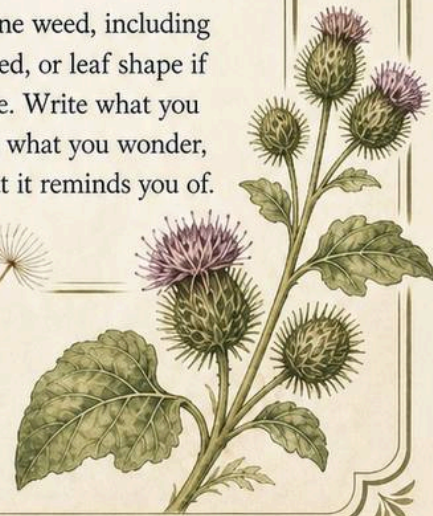
ACTIVITY 2 WATCH A DANDELION CHANGE

Pick a dandelion that still has its stem attached and place it in a small container of water. Observe it over the next few days as it changes from its original flower form into a seed head.



NATURE JOURNAL

Draw one weed, including root, seed, or leaf shape if possible. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Garden Flowers

Garden flower study invites close observation of petals, scent, buds, beauty, and visiting pollinators.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about gardens, flower parts, pollinators, seeds, bulbs, annuals, perennials, and how flowers grow.

ACTIVITY 1 GARDEN FLOWER OBSERVATION

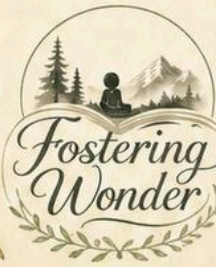
Choose a garden flower and look closely at petals, leaves, stem, center, buds, scent, color patterns, and texture. Use a magnifying glass if available.

ACTIVITY 2 PRESSED FLOWER BOOKMARK

Press a small flower or a few petals between paper under a heavy book. When dry, use them to make a bookmark or nature card.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw the flower at one stage, or draw the bud and bloom side by side. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Cultivated Crop Plants

Crop plant study connects nature study with gardens, food, growth, and harvest.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about gardens, farms, seeds, vegetables, grains, fruit, harvest, and how food plants grow.

ACTIVITY 1 FOOD PLANT OBSERVATION

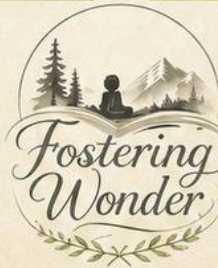
Choose a crop plant such as beans, corn, tomatoes, lettuce, squash, wheat, or strawberries. Notice which part people eat: root, stem, leaf, flower, fruit, seed, or grain.

ACTIVITY 2 SPROUT A SEED IN A JAR

Place a bean or pea seed against a damp paper towel inside a clear jar or bag. Watch for roots and shoots over several days. Sketch the changes as it grows.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw the crop plant and label the edible part. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Trees



*Tree study gives children a familiar friend
to revisit through bark, leaves, shade,
seeds, and seasons.*

LIBRARY BASKET



Look for books about trees,
leaves, bark, seeds, cones,
roots, forests, orchards, and
seasonal tree changes.

ACTIVITY 1 ADOPT-A-TREE OBSERVATION WALK



Choose one tree to visit often. Notice
bark, leaves, branches, flowers, seeds,
cones, shade, bird life, insects, and
seasonal changes.

ACTIVITY 2 BARK AND LEAF RUBBINGS

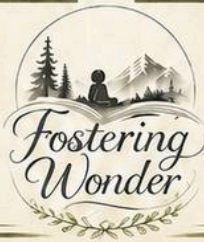


Make a bark rubbing with paper
and crayon, then place a leaf under
the paper and make a leaf rubbing
with crayon as well. Compare the
tree's textures, leaf veins,
and shapes.

NATURE JOURNAL



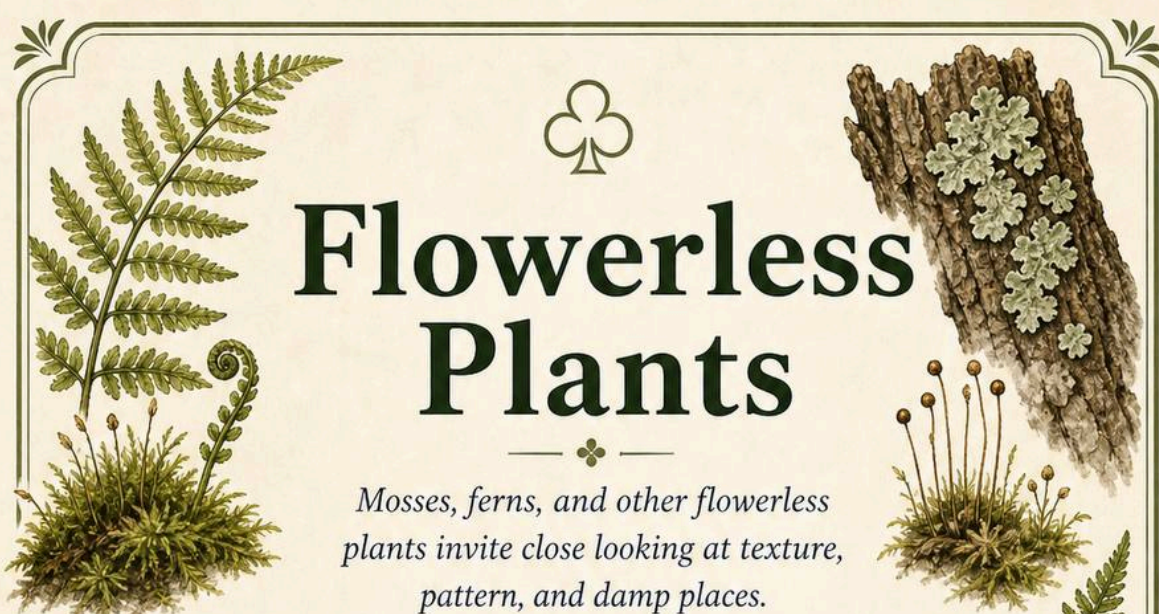
Draw a leaf, bark pattern, seed,
cone, or whole tree shape. Write
what you noticed, what you wonder,
and what it reminds
you of.





Flowerless Plants

Mosses, ferns, and other flowerless plants invite close looking at texture, pattern, and damp places.



LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about mosses, ferns, lichens, mushrooms, spores, damp habitats, forests, and simple plants.

ACTIVITY 1 MOSS AND FERN OBSERVATION WALK

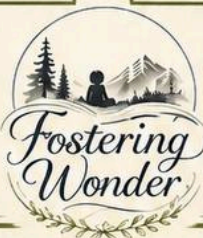
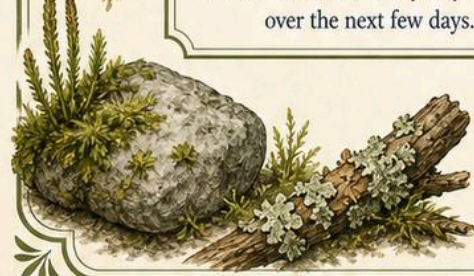
Search damp, shady, or rocky places for mosses and ferns. Notice where they grow best and how they are different from flowering plants.

ACTIVITY 2 MAKE A TINY MOSS GARDEN

Place a small fallen patch of moss in a shallow dish or tray with a little soil, pebbles, bark, or twigs. Mist it lightly with water and keep it in a shady place for observation. Notice its texture, color, moisture, and any tiny changes over the next few days.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw a fern frond, moss patch, or other flowerless plant. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





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Brooks, Lakes, Rivers, and Oceans

— ❖ —

*Water study helps children notice movement,
reflection, shore life, currents, and habitats.*

LIBRARY BASKET

❖

Look for books about streams, ponds, lakes, rivers, oceans, shells, currents, waves, shorelines, and water habitats.

ACTIVITY 1 WATER MOVEMENT OBSERVATION

❖

Watch moving or still water. Notice ripples, waves, currents, reflections, sounds, foam, eddies, or what the water carries along.

ACTIVITY 2 BUILD A MINI WATERSHED

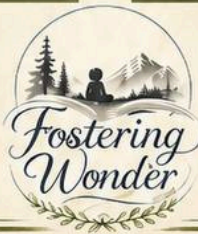
❖

Shape moon sand, soil, clay, or foil into hills and valleys on a tray. Sprinkle or pour a little water at the top and watch how it cuts into the "ground," forming channels like tiny streams, rivers, lakes, or low places.

NATURE JOURNAL

❖

Draw a water scene or one object found near the water. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Rocks and Minerals



Rock and mineral study trains the eye to see pattern, texture, weight, color, and hidden history.

LIBRARY BASKET



Look for books about rocks, minerals, crystals, gems, fossils, soil, volcanoes, mountains, and how rocks form.



ACTIVITY 1 ROCK AND MINERAL OBSERVATION WALK



Collect a few rocks from a safe place. Compare color, weight, texture, sparkle, layers, smoothness, roughness, and shape.



ACTIVITY 2 GROW SALT CRYSTALS



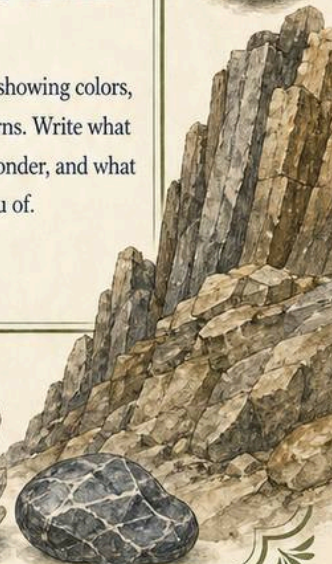
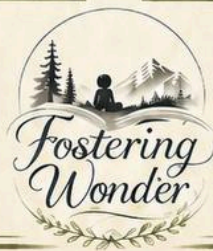
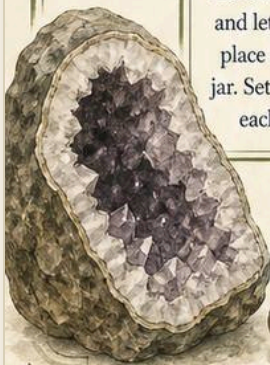
Pour 1 cup of very warm water into a small jar. Stir in 1/3 cup of salt, then add more salt 1 tablespoon at a time until no more will dissolve. Tie a string to a pencil and let the string hang into the water, or place a pipe cleaner shape partly in the jar. Set the jar in a safe place and check it each day as crystals begin to form.



NATURE JOURNAL



Draw one rock closely, showing colors, lines, speckles, or patterns. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





Climate and Weather

Weather study helps children notice daily changes in air, clouds, wind, rain, and seasons.



LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about weather, clouds, wind, rain, snow, seasons, climate, storms, temperature, and weather tools.

ACTIVITY 1 WEATHER WALK AND SKY WATCH

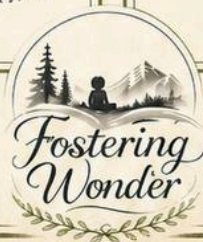
Step outside at the same time each day for a week. Notice temperature, clouds, wind, rain, humidity, and shadows.

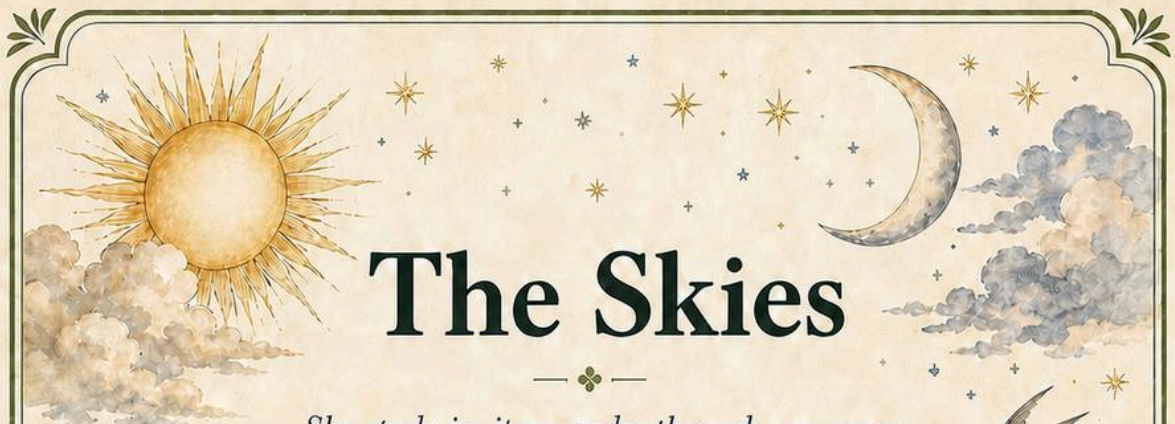
ACTIVITY 2 MAKE A CLOUD VIEWER

Cut a square or circle from the center of a piece of cardstock to make a simple viewing frame. Around the frame, draw a few common cloud types so the child has pictures to compare with the sky. Hold it up toward one section of the sky and look through the opening. Notice the cloud shape, color, thickness, movement, and whether the edges look soft, wispy, or sharply formed.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw the sky or clouds from one day. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.





The Skies

Sky study invites wonder through sun, moon, stars, clouds, shadows, color, and changing light.

LIBRARY BASKET

Look for books about the sun, moon, stars, planets, constellations, shadows, clouds, and the changing sky.

ACTIVITY 1 DAY OR NIGHT SKY OBSERVATION

Observe the sky during the day or evening. Notice the sun's position, moon shape, shadows, stars, planets, clouds, changing colors, or the direction of light.

ACTIVITY 2 MOON PHASE WHEEL OR STAR MAP

Create a moon phase wheel, a watercolor sunset, or a simple star map of a constellation you observed or studied.

NATURE JOURNAL

Draw the sky you observed. Write what you noticed, what you wonder, and what it reminds you of.

