



Developing Your Own Field Investigation Kits



Developed by Educators at the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, Department of Forestry and Blandy Experimental Farm

Why have students learn outside? There is no better location to learn about the biotic and abiotic factors of our environment than outside! Outdoor field experiences provide students with an authentic context for their learning. Getting students outside to study their environment also can increase engagement in learning and develop critical thinking, collaboration, and creative thinking skills.

Field investigation tips. The most valuable field investigations are those done over time (more than one class period); this provides students with ample time to collect their own data, to see how the data may change over time, and gives them an authentic context to help them interpret the data and discuss what it means. Data collected at the same location and same time over several years provides an opportunity to examine data trends or to observe changes. If you are using your schoolyard for investigations, consider collecting the same information each season, at different times of day, and under different weather conditions. For example, you can decide that the class will collect weather data on the second Tuesday of odd number months and every hour of that school day.

If any collecting is to be done, it should begin with a respect for the environment and the organisms you are collecting. Obviously, any collecting for instructional purposes should alter the environment as little as possible and should not significantly damage wildlife or their habitats. Where possible, anything collected should be returned to its original location at the conclusion of the activity. Some wildlife and plant collecting requires [permits](#). Check with your school system for any additional regulations.

Field investigation supplies. Many field investigations will only need a minimal amount of equipment that can be easily put together even on a tight budget. These Terrestrial and Aquatic Field investigation Kits are comprised of free or inexpensive items that can be easily gathered and are tailored to the schoolyard and the type of investigations students will be doing. There are some items that each small group needs and others that may be shared. Directions for making some of the equipment and resources for planning field investigations are included at the end of this handout.

We suggest you use a 5 gallon bucket to hold the materials; an alternative is a plastic bin. Consider making several kits so students can work in small groups. Buckets with lids or rectangular bins stack easily in a corner of the classroom. Buckets and lids or plastic bins can be purchased at most hardware stores or you can use recycled buckets that once held kitty litter, laundry detergent or other non-toxic materials.

The most important consideration in putting together any field investigation kit is not to forget a small **First Aid Kit** for the class. The teacher also should have a way of contacting help if needed.

Terrestrial Field Investigations

Schoolyards provide a wealth of opportunities for investigating without ever leaving the school site. Most schools have some landscaping from bushes and flower gardens to large trees. Even if a school currently doesn't have much more than lawn, students can find an abundance of different weeds mixed in with the grass and a variety of invertebrates that live there. If you can get to a park or other natural area there will be an even greater diversity of plants, animals and ecosystems. Developing the question you want to investigate is the first step, having equipment on hand and ready to go is the next.

Terrestrial Field Investigation Kit contents:

- Biodiversity research frames or quadrats (directions below)
- Field guides are available for a wide variety of organisms. Choice of guides depends on what you are planning to investigate. See Resources for suggestions for purchasing or downloading inexpensive field guides.
- Small net for capturing spiders, crickets and other small invertebrates in the grass, a 4-5 inch aquarium net works well
- Seed collecting wands (directions below)
- T-shirt sweep nets for collecting insects (directions below)
- Magnifiers (such as hand lenses or fold-out magnifiers) and bug boxes
- Large tweezers
- Small trowel and/or hand rake
- Small terrarium to temporarily hold a toad or other small animal for observation
- Tape measures - assorted lengths and types
- Ruler (flexible plastic 6 and/or 12 inch ones work well)
- Misting bottle with water to mist items for closer study with magnifiers
- Thermometers (air and soil)
- Soil probe – at least one for class use (Check for underground wires, pipes, etc.)
- Garden shears for cutting samples of different plants.
- Clip board to hold data sheets (cardboard cut to clipboard size and a binder clip works too)



Central Elementary School Gardens

Aquatic Field Investigations

There are many investigations that can be done in a stream, pond or other body of water. We all need water to thrive and the quality of our water affects all plant and animal life on our planet. Water quality test kits are available from multiple sources to do basic water chemistry. Macro-invertebrates are good indicators of water quality. The type of species found will indicate the health of the water system.

Aquatic Field Investigation Kit contents:

- Leaf pack bags – use the bags that onions come in or purchase inexpensive lingerie bags
- Two way viewer - allows you to see top and bottom of insects www.nature-watch.com
- Bug boxes and other magnifiers (such as hand lenses or fold-out magnifiers)
- 2 -3 white ice cube trays for sorting insect types
- White dishpans to empty leaf packs into
- Minnow trap (**need fishing license to use**)
- 50 foot rope and tent stake to tie the leaf pack or minnow trap to shore
- Small aquarium net
- Laminated SOS cards or macro-invertebrate ID Cards
- Small paint brushes or tweezers to lift bugs from leaf debris
- White plastic table cloth, shower curtain or white flat sheet to work on when sorting insects; can be divided into quarters
- Spray bottle – misting helps to release tiny macros from leaves
- 25 – 50 foot tape measure to determine water velocity (field measuring tape) OR make your own by taking heavy cord (orange is easily seen in the water) and marking distances on the cord
- Tennis ball, an orange or an apple to determine water velocity
- Stop watch to determine water velocity (a cell phone clock should have a stopwatch feature)
- Secchi disk or Turbidity tube to determine water clarity (See Resources for link to make)
- Yard or meter sticks to determine depth in streams
- Aquatic thermometer
- Water test kit available on-line (see Resources for suggestions)
- Clip board to hold data sheets (a piece of clear plastic cut to the size of the board will help protect data sheets from water)
- Macroinvertebrate identification resources: <https://vasos.org/macroinvertebrates/>
- Disposable gloves & a heavy duty garbage bag (to pick up trash at the site)



Notes:

- A Virginia Fishing License is required to set a minnow trap <https://dwr.virginia.gov/licenses/>
- A scientific collecting permit is required to sample aquatic macro-invertebrates. No permit needed if use Leaf Packs. Go [here for information](#).
- Guidelines for wildlife in the classroom can be found [here](#).

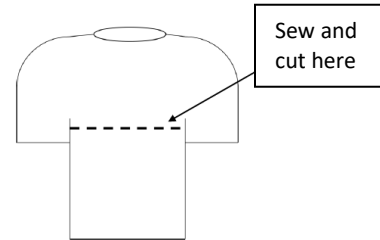
DO IT YOURSELF DIRECTIONS

Directions to Make a Sweep Net for Capturing Terrestrial Insects

A sweep net can be used to collect insects in tall grass along a fence or in a field. These instructions are for making a sweep net from a large white t- shirt and a coat hanger.

SUPPLIES NEEDED (for each sweep net):

- 1 old, youth large white t-shirt (shirt should not have any holes)
- 1 wire coat hanger
- 1 pair of pliers to open and bend the coat hanger
- 1 large sewing needle
- Heavy duty thread for sewing
- Duct tape



DIRECTIONS:

1. With needle and thread, sew tight, close running stitches across the shirt just below armpits (see picture). Cut off the arm and neck section just above your stitching and this will give you what looks like a bag. Make sure your sewing is tight enough that small insects cannot fall or crawl through.
2. Make a small cut in the hem on the bottom of the shirt.
3. Unbend the coat hanger.
4. Thread the coat hanger through the hem.
5. When the coat hanger is threaded through the entire hem of the shirt, re-twist the ends together. This will become the handle of your sweep net.
6. Cover the end of the wire coat hanger that is now the handle with duct tape to cover any sharp edges.
7. To use, sweep the net through tall grass or weeds to collect insects. Take a look inside and you will see what you caught easily against the white background of the shirt.

Directions to Make Shaking Containers for Capturing Terrestrial insects

A shaking container is used to collect insects that may be in the leaf litter. Basically you have two containers of the same size and one lid. One where the bottom has been replaced with wide screen to let the insects fall through but catch the leaves and another container on the bottom that catches the insects as they fall through the screened container. You put leaves in the screened container, put the lid on it and then hold the screened container slightly above the bottom container as you shake. Collect the insects that fall into the bottom container.

SUPPLIES NEEDED for one shake kit:

- 2 plastic containers of the same size (I like the quart or shoe box size)
- 1 lid for the plastic container
- Gorilla glue
- Wide gauge screen or plastic chicken wire cut to the size of the bottom of the plastic container
- Wood burning pen or hot tip cutter (something to cut the bottom of the plastic container)



Directions:

1. Take one of the plastic containers with the lid and set it aside, you will be doing nothing to these items
2. Draw on the bottom of the plastic container leaving a lip around the edge. This will be the area that you cut out of the bottom (represented by the dashed line here:

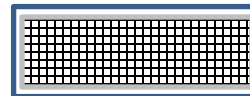


3. Cutting the plastic container. Heat is your best option here, using a razor knife can crack the bin. Slowly use the hot pen to cut/melt through the plastic along your drawn guidelines until your rectangle is cut out along the bottom.

4. Along the bottom inside lip that you left behind, place a strip of gorilla glue all along this lip.

5. Press your precut screen into the gorilla glue strip and allow to dry.

6. Once everything is dry, you are ready to use your shake container to collect insects



Directions for Making a Seed Wand for Collecting Seeds

A seed wand allows students to collect a variety of seeds that are found along edges of fields. Not all types of seeds can be collected this way, but for small seeds or seeds that are out of reach, it is the easiest method. You will need a pair of tweezers and a small container to put the seeds in once collected.

SUPPLIES NEEDED (for each wand):

- Microfiber cleaning cloth
- Rubber bands
- Dowel or found stick about 2-3 feet long

DIRECTIONS:

1. Wrap the microfiber cloth around one end of the dowel or stick.
2. Secure with rubber bands.
3. Wave the wand through tall weeds or grasses.
4. Remove seeds with a pair of tweezers and sort according to type.

Directions for Making Animal Track Tubes

Animal track tubes can be used to investigate what types of animals you may have in your schoolyard that you may not see during the day. It is important to place these tubes along edges, think along the school building or along a row of plants, places where the animals will have cover while moving through the schoolyard.

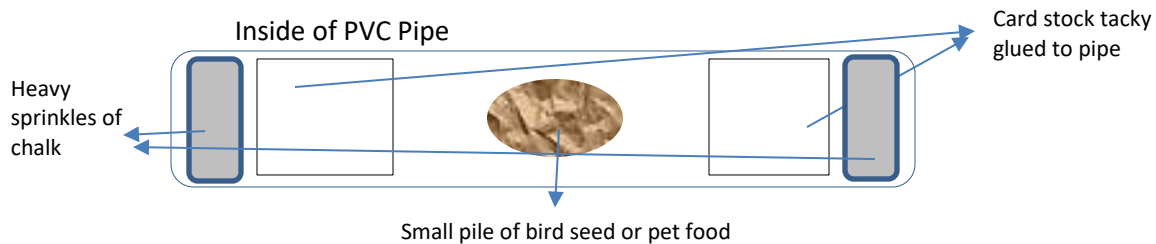
SUPPLIES NEEDED (per tube):

- Large diameter (~6 inches) PVC pipe cut to ~2 ft in length
- Chalk dust such as Irwin Strait-Line marking chalk
- Saltshaker container to place the chalk dust in
- Spray adhesive such as Elmer's Craft Bond multipurpose spray adhesive
- Card stock or thick plain white paper
- Bird seed or pet food pellets
- Hooked metal stakes, optional

DIRECTIONS:

1. Cut the card stock into approx. 4 equal pieces
2. Spray adhesive onto one side of two pieces of card stock, allow to dry for a few seconds so that the adhesive is tacky not permanent as you will be removing these pieces of paper from the PVC pipe when finished.
3. Once tacky, secure one piece of card stock to the inside a couple inches of either end of the PVC pipe

4. Place the PVC in its location in the schoolyard
5. Place the bird seed or pet food inside the pipe in the center
6. Sprinkle chalk on the card stock on either end of the PVC pipe
7. Secure each end with hooked metal stakes in you are concerned with dogs in your schoolyard
8. In the morning, remove the card stock from either end and examine for animal tracks



The idea here is that the animal will go inside the pvc pipe in search of the food in the center and walk across the chalk then leave footprints on the card stock on its way to the food. You can choose to place a few of these around your schoolyard to investigate what moves in different areas. It is suggested to place leave them overnight as school buildings tend to have too much activity for animals to move through them during the day but doing a during a school day and then overnight night investigation would be great! A note about habituation: it is important that you do not repeatedly place these tubes in your schoolyard as we do not want the animals to become habituated to feeding at these tubes!

Directions for Making a Biodiversity Research Frame

Collecting data for every plant and animal that live around your entire schoolyard is virtually impossible and much too time consuming. Scientists collect data in smaller units (called samples) and then estimate the total number based on the possible number of units in the area being researched. There are many methods for collecting data in small units. One method is to use hula hoops which when rolled or thrown provide a semi-random sampling method.

You can also make a square frame using yard or meter sticks. Each small group of students can survey a different section of the school yard. If you are looking for insects and other animal life we suggest you conduct the survey several times, varying the season and time of day in order to get a clearer picture of animal life in the schoolyard.

Directions can be found online for making a biodiversity research frame or sampling quadrat out of PVC pipe. This is a method for sampling vegetation cover types along a transect.

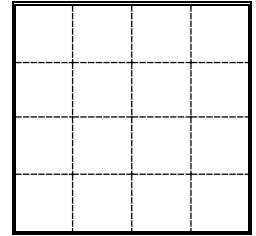
SUPPLIES NEEDED (for one set or frame):

- 4 meter or yard sticks (for smaller frames use 30 cm rulers)
- Braided nylon string (melt ends using a candle)
- Pony beads, washers or paper clips to keep string from slipping back through the holes
- Drill

DIRECTIONS:

1. Drill evenly spaced holes in each stick large enough to put the string through.
For example: if you want a 10 x10 grid then drill a hole every 10 centimeters.

2. Cut the string slightly longer than the length of the stick. You will need enough string to go through the hole and be tied to the bead or washer and then through the hole of the opposite stick and be tied to another bead.
3. Repeat for the number of grids you want to have in the frame.
4. To use the frame lay down two of the sticks in the grass and stretch tight; lay the other two sticks across the first two to form a series of grids.
5. Survey the life in each grid or a random set of grids in the frame.



Other Resources:

North American Conservation Education Toolkit: Field Investigation and other guides developed to help educators explore the environment thru scientific investigations. The Toolkit can be downloaded free at [North American Conservation Education Strategy](#)

Wildlife Information: the Virginia Fish and Wildlife Information Service (VaFWIS) of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) houses the most current and comprehensive information about Virginia's Wildlife resources. <https://services.dwr.virginia.gov/fwis/> You can use the visitor options or sign up to receive additional information

Snake, Lizard, Turtle, Bats, and Frog and Toad identification guides can be purchased from Department of Wildlife Resources <https://dwr.virginia.gov/shopdwr/>

Native Tree, Shrub and Vine guides from the VA Dept. of Forestry www.dof.virginia.gov may be purchased or downloaded for free.

Virginia Native Plant Society: <https://vnps.org/> has several regional native plant guides (click on *Growing Natives*) along with information for the *Flora of Virginia* app

Topographic map of field site: download for free from: <https://store.usgs.gov/map-locator>

Land use maps: look up your local land use plan, it usually has maps that you can use

For Watersheds: <https://river-runner.samlearner.com/> and <https://mywaterway.epa.gov/>

Bay Backpack: <https://www.baybackpack.com/>

Virginia Save Our Streams: <http://www.vasos.org/> The Virginia SOS website is packed with water quality monitoring information, especially for macroinvertebrates. The Stream Insects and Crustaceans ID Cards are located at

Leaf Pack Project: <http://www.stroudcenter.org/lpn/resources/equipment.shtm> The Leaf Pack project offers a method of studying macroinvertebrates in the classroom. Data sheets and other activities are available.

The Climate Explorer:

<https://noaa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=8b910d9c7b9744ea94e07d82f5420782>