CATCHING INSECTS

Have you ever heard about the old woman who swallowed a fly? She swallowed an INSECT! But the spider she swallowed next to eat the fly is NOT an insect. Know why? Insects, like that fly, are creatures with bodies made of a head, a middle section called a thorax, and an abdomen (kind of like your belly). Attached to the thorax are often wings, and 6 legs. That spider? She has 8 legs! Not an insect! (She belongs to a group called Arachnids, which includes things like scorpions and ticks.) Come along outside with us and explore the thrilling diversity of the 6-legged creatures!

Time: 20-minute activity

Materials:
- YOU and your insect capturing abilities
- Clear jar or plastic container with a lid out of the recycling bin
- Any kind of net with fine mesh that allows air to flow through, but keeps insects inside
Be aware: Some insects sting, some bite. If you’re catching with your hands, be sure you aren’t catching something that might hurt you. The insect is only trying to defend itself from a predator, and that’s YOU!

Directions:

1. With permission from an adult, head outside to a place where you may find some insects. You could explore a lawn or a garden, a city park, an open field, under stones or along the edges of an alley, or a more wild place filled with plants native to Wyoming.

2. Turn your observational skills on, looking with keen eyes, and listening with ears turned on. Inspect flowers and blades of grass. Get down on hands and knees and watch for insects crawling on the ground. Turn over rocks or logs, remembering to put them back just the way you found them. And watch the air for flying insects. Did you find an insect?
3. Limber up and get ready for your insect hunt! Creep and pounce! Chase and lunge! Move your body like an insect hunter! Once you have spied an insect, catch it anyway you can so you can have a closer look. Be gentle, taking care not to crush or damage the insect, so when you release your insect, it can go back to living its insect life. Here are a few insect-catching ideas:

a. Catch with your hands. Creep up slowly, and pounce on the insect, forming a temporary cage with your hands. If you use this technique, be sure you aren’t catching an insect that may bite or sting you. You could pounce fast, or you could pounce slow and gentle. What technique works best for grasshoppers? For beetles?
b. Catch with a container. Take the lid off of your container, turn it over the top of an insect that is on the ground, and scoot the lid underneath the insect, capturing it inside the container. Or enclose a flower or leaf inside the container and lid, capturing the insect inside. This technique is great for insects that visit flowers for nectar or pollen, and works well for insects like bees and wasps, that you wouldn’t want to catch with your bare hands. Ouch!

c. Catch with a net. Any kind of net that lets air pass through but keeps the insect inside will do. Even tiny nets used for fish tanks can work (just be sure to ask an adult for permission!). If you use a proper insect collecting net, you can practice these steps:
   i. Sweep the net toward the insect, capturing the insect inside the net.
   ii. Sweep the net quickly in the opposite direction, and then back again.
   iii. Then slow your movement as you let the body of the net fold against the net opening, trapping the insect inside the upper part of the net.
4. Time to slow down. Sit and watch. Become a keen observer of your catch. Snap a picture or sketch a drawing. Have you captured an insect? Can you count the legs? Does it have wings? What else do you notice about this creature? How does it move? What is it up to? Does it move fast or slow? What colors do you see?

5. Important note: Before you visit another location, leave your catch behind, and clean your net and containers of seeds and dirt. Why? Insects are sometimes specialists, meaning they rely on only a single type of food that may not exist at other locations. If you move them, they may not survive. And it’s always good to practice PlayCleanGo’s slogan: “Keep the adventure, leave the invasive species.”

Wonder Why with Nature WY…

Wonder why there are certain kinds of insects in some locations, and not others? Why would you find butterflies in one location, but not another? Or grasshoppers? Or dragonflies? Think about what an insect needs for life. With an adult’s permission, visit a place, and make a prediction about the kinds of insects you are likely to find there. Were you right? Why or why not? What did you learn?

Wonder how much you could lift if you were an ant? Go exploring, and find an ant carrying a piece of food. How long is that ant? How big is that piece of food compared to that ant? As big as its head? It’s whole body? Bigger? If that ant were your size, what would it be able to carry? Could you do that?!?

Want to see even closer? Try making a spy pot! Cut off the bottom of two small plastic containers or pots, attach a layer of cling wrap to the bottom of each with a rubber band, put the insect of interest inside one cup, and slowly put the second cup inside the first, until the insect is held softly still between the two layers of cling wrap. Have a look!
Wonder what kind of insect you've found? Try using a scientist's tool called a dichotomous key to help you identify the group of insects to which your creature belongs. Or try a resource like the clickable guide at www.bugguide.net, Seek by iNaturalist, or reach out to an expert like Scott Schell, the Assistant Extension Entomologist (entomology is the study of insects) at the University of Wyoming, to share photos of your interesting finds and learn more!

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