

DEVELOPING SCHOOL GROUNDS FOR CHILDREN AND WILDLIFE

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I have worked as an environmental for 30 years visiting many schools working with the children to help explore their grounds or helping with school grounds development

School grounds are important habitats for wildlife and often form part of a valuable patchwork of gardens, parks and other urban green spaces. Development of school grounds can help provide a haven for wildlife, a valuable teaching resource and an exciting, healthy and enjoyable environment

School grounds development is best achieved in stages made up of short and long term projects. Here are **12 simple steps to get you started.**

One

Make a simple map of your school grounds to include all areas within the boundary of your school, both natural and man made including buildings and other structures . This will provide a clear overview of the habitats (*a habitat can be defined as "the natural home or environment of an organism"*) that make up your grounds and indicate areas that could be further developed for wildlife.

Two

Next make a copy of this map and mark on it all the school activities that take place in the grounds, such as sports, quiet play area, growing vegetables, deliveries, etc. Include any developments planned for the future.

Three

Combine the information from these two maps to help plan further developments to your grounds that take into consideration wildlife, school activities and planned developments.

Four

It is also important to look at your school grounds and activities in the context of the local community. Think about what impact your current grounds and any future improvements may have on your immediate neighbours and the wider community.

Five

A major thing to consider is the connectivity between the various areas of the school grounds. This connectivity allows wildlife to move easily between the different habitats and features within your grounds. When planning developments, also consider connectivity with the surrounding area. How will wildlife move in and out of the grounds? Google Earth is a good start point to see how your school grounds fit into the surrounding area. If your school is close to a local park, or similar habitat that can be visited, a quick survey of mobile species (birds, butterflies, bees, etc) will provide an indication of species that may visit your grounds. This can provide guidance regarding species that you may be able to attract to your grounds and the placement of features or new habitats

Six

Record the wildlife that inhabits or visits your grounds. This can be done with the help of a local expert who can provide a useful baseline survey that you can build upon over time. This provides the added benefit of engaging someone who is an expert in species identification and has specialist knowledge that will make it easier to create a record of the less obvious wildlife species.

Wildlife monitoring is an ongoing activity as different species of wildlife will be active at different months. A monitoring scheme can be put in place which will allow continued monitoring of the flora and fauna. The original habitat and species records can then be built upon by casual sightings, sightings made while using your grounds as a teaching resource and with any relevant after schools clubs (such as environmental clubs, science clubs, gardening clubs etc). To help involve the whole school in recording wildlife, each class or year group could have a journal for recording any sightings they make. A simple way of doing this is to use an A4 diary that displays one day per page. As an incentive, a prize could be offered for the most interesting sightings verified each month.

National Survey events make a great spring-board to help get your school involved in monitoring the wildlife in your grounds. They are fun, help wildlife conservation and often have support resources that allow the survey to be incorporated in classroom topics. Many of these survey events provide feedback about the data contributed by various groups or individuals. This can be used to compare with the records your school has made in the survey, again providing another dimension for classroom study.

Seven

Once you know what wildlife lives in or visits your grounds you can start to think about encouraging more wildlife. Encouraging wildlife can be easy. This can be the addition of something major such as a meadow area, bog garden or tree planting. Equally it may be something small such as a well-placed bird feeder, hanging baskets, birdbath, or an insect hibernation home. Developing areas of the grounds is best done in stages to ensure that what you set up or put in place is sustainable.

Nest boxes, bird tables, insect homes etc can be obtained in various ways. These can be purchased from a reputable supplier or you could have a go at making your own. Information on how to do this can be obtained from organisations such as RSPB or from other websites. Your list of birds that visit your grounds will help you decide what types of bird box you need. Different bird species have different requirements. Although nest boxes are artificial, visiting birds are still looking for the same requirements they would in a natural habitat, e.g. the right sized entrance hole, floor space, the distance from floor to nest hole.

Refer to your earlier maps to find suitable locations for nest boxes and feeding stations e.g. place bird feeders away from areas where there is a lot of school activity and in areas where bird activity has been recorded. Many birds follow distinctive foraging flight paths so bird feeders, bird bath, nest boxes etc should be positioned in these areas where possible. Bird feeders and nest boxes should not be sited too close together as birds are unlikely to nest in places where there is a lot of (feeding) bird activity, especially larger bird species. The planning and

placement of these features could be done as part of a lesson or with an after schools club.

Eight

Use your school grounds wildlife surveys to make a list of any endangered or threatened wildlife that visits your grounds. (We can provide a list of vertebrates). Many of the animals that were once thought common, such as Song Thrush and House sparrows are now threatened or even endangered along with many other species of flora and fauna. School grounds really can make a difference to local wildlife. Such conservation projects in school grounds can also be a valuable teaching opportunity for Citizenship as well as science and geography. Pupils can experience conservation in action. This also has a global dimension in that it illustrates that it is not just animals such as tigers and whales that are threatened species.

They can also experience the planning and decision making that is required to protect a habitat and the need to balance this with human activities i.e. normal school life. It helps to give the child that all important contact with nature as part of their daily lives and will hopefully encourage them to consider our potential impact on the natural world and that we are a part of this natural system. Children (and adults) should also see the natural world as something to be enjoyed and marvelled at.

Nine

Create a plan that sets out how you will maintain what's already present in your grounds and how you want to further develop your outside space. A major tool for protecting and managing habitats globally and locally is a Biodiversity Action Plan or BAP for short. This may sound complicated, but in affect it is simply a plan of action drawn up to maintain the diversity of animal and plants in a habitat and if necessary to increase this diversity. By completing some of the above steps you will already have the basis for your BAP. A plan like this ensures that the grounds habitats stay healthy and supports a good diversity of species. The action plan will be made up of instructions to maintain the current level of biodiversity and a structured approach to continue to develop your grounds. By making biodiversity a part of everyday school life and carefully planning developments to the school grounds i.e. steps one to three an outside space can be created that will be harmonious to both wildlife and everyday school activities.

Ten

To take advantage of the newly developed school grounds, take a fresh look at the curriculum for ways that you can increase the use of your grounds in teaching. The school grounds are especially good for geography and environmental science at all ages. It can provide a valuable opportunity to undertake scientific enquiry, use scientific techniques and higher thinking skills and to propose and test hypothesis. Grounds provide an excellent opportunity to understand the ecology of a habitat and the inter relationships of animals and plants. Grounds provide the added benefit that the pupils can study the grounds/habitats with increasing detail as they progress through the school.

Eleven

Look for other cross curriculum activities that could be undertaken in the school ground such as art, creative writing, improvisation, history, numeracy and more. These can be stand-alone activities or activities designed to enhance classroom work.

Twelve

Share your discoveries with others. Get in touch with any local conservation groups or your school locality group. A weblog is a good way of sharing your observations and developments with other schools across the country (– and indeed across the world) and with other like-minded people who are interested in the natural world. The following is a link to my urban wildlife blog <http://urbanwildlifejottings.blogspot.co.uk/>

This can also be a good IT project. You could share your environmental work first hand with other schools within your locality group. Invite classes from other schools and get the children to take them around to tell them about the school grounds, discuss the wildlife, plants/vegetables that are grown, new developments etc.

You could also open up the grounds during school events such as the Summer Fayre and groups of parents can be shown around the grounds (for a small fee). On a scientific/conservation level, share your observations with conservation groups and through national surveys (see step 6).

These 12 steps are designed to provide an overall plan of action and to be a guide rather than hard and fast rules. So you might find you are at stage 1 or you may already be at stage 4 or 6.

For more information about school grounds or information about a visit to your school please contact me on seawatch17@yahoo.co.uk

You can also contact me through the website link at the top of this document. This is a new website that I am working on to link together all the various projects I am involved with, rather than providing lots of links to different sites.

Good luck with your school ground projects.