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Guidelines for 4-H Nature Hikes

A Natural Science Leader Guide

Oregon has many different types of areas available for day nature hikes. The ocean dunes and sea cliffs, mountains, inland valleys, the high desert, and all the habitats in between offer a vast variety of plant and animal communities to be explored. Nature hikes can support and enliven many of the 4-H projects in the natural sciences and summer camping programs. The main characteristics of a successful, enjoyable hike are that everyone is prepared, learns something, and returns safely.

The following ideas are presented to help adults and youth leaders be successful at taking young people on a walk in the out-of-doors to become better acquainted with the natural world around them.

Being Prepared

Whether the hike is a 4-H club activity or a camp activity, 4-H'ers can help with the planning, agree to various responsibilities, and create a list of necessities to take along. While hikes are planned to be only a single-day activity, in the event of an emergency it's important to be prepared to spend a night away from home or base camp. Some things to consider before the hike include:

- Why are you taking the hike?
- Where will you hike?
- If hiking off public lands, do you need permission from the property owner?
- Is there a good quality map of your planned hiking area available? Who will carry the map on the hike? Who knows how to read the map?
- What are the hazards of the hike area? Poison oak, poison ivy, nettles, rattle snakes, flash flooding?
- What type of clothing and footwear will you need for the forecast weather and season of the year?
- What will you see, learn, collect?
- What type of equipment do you need, both for safety and for collecting specimens?
- Who will carry the first aid supplies?
- Should you carry food and water? How much will you need?



- When will you leave on the hike, and when do you plan to return?
- Who knows about your hike and will summon help if you have not returned at the scheduled time?

Before the hike, youth may enjoy preparing trail snacks or planning a cookout or special sack meal on the trail. Each youth could also assemble his or her own hiking kit, including such items as a notebook and pencil, a book of matches wrapped in foil, a pocket knife, a compass, signal mirror, toilet paper, phone money, and a canteen. Training in the use of some of these items should take place before the hike. The leader might invite a member of the county Search and Rescue Team to speak to the group about how to be prepared when hiking.

Learning Something

As with any educational activity in the 4-H program, the 4-H hike should be designed to be age-appropriate. Young hikers may be content to compare leaf shapes, colors, and textures without being concerned with the names of the plants. On the other hand, youth enrolled in 4-H projects in entomology, forestry, or geology may use the hike as an opportunity to expand their collections.



Seeing is the first step in introducing and acquainting youngsters with our natural world. The leader will quickly learn the group's interests by watching their response to birds, frogs, salamanders, trees, mosses, and insects. Move at a pace that allows the hikers to see, hear, feel, and talk about what they see. The leader can create excitement about observations by joining hikers in seeing things along the trail and encouraging youth to record the sightings in a notebook. Be alert to the information youngsters can share with the group about objects of interest they discover.

Selecting a theme for the hike can help to focus attention and encourage observation. Some possible themes include:

- A scavenger hunt—youth “collect” sketches of sightings, tree bark, leaf rubbings, and nonliving items.
- A habitat hike—assign each youth to be a particular animal that lives in the area. During the hike, they try to locate all the elements needed for a complete habitat—food, shelter, and water in enough supply to support themselves, a mate and an offspring.
- Silent hike—Walk along, making as little noise as possible and without using words to communicate.
- Sightings hike—Youth keep a record of all the live birds and animals seen on the hike. The hiker with the most sightings at the end of the hike gets a prize. A list of ideas for hike activities can be found in *Oregon 4-H Outdoor Project Leader Guide* (4-H 301L).

Additional resources that may be helpful in planning an educational hike are selected *Oregon 4-H Forestry Fact Sheets* (4-H 33100L), *4-H Forestry Quiz Series* (4-H 33120), and *4-H Geology Leader and Member Guide* (4-H 340).

Resource people from agencies such as Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife or the Department of Forestry are another source of help with teaching on hikes. Determine what resources are available in your community to assist with your program.

Returning Safely

Youth should understand basic trail manners, which will both help to keep them safe and preserve the outdoor experience for those who come after them.

Everyone should stay on the established trails, obey posted signs, use only established sanitary facilities, be respectful of wildlife and plants, be careful with fire, and carry out all equipment and garbage from the hike. Additional ideas on outdoor safety can be found in the *Oregon 4-H Outdoor Project Leader Guide* (4-H 301L).

Plan for adequate supervision on the hike. One adult or senior teen counselor for every 10 youth hikers is a good minimum ratio. The “buddy system” is a fun method of keeping track of young hikers who enjoy being paired with a friend.

If you are hiking to a particular location, such as a fossil bed, you may plan to cover 2.5 to 3 miles in an hour. Plan a 5-minute rest break every half hour. If you are hiking to look for and study animals and plants, you may spend a much longer time going only a short distance.

The leader should set a hiking pace that is matched to the capabilities of the whole group. This will help reduce the chances of some youth getting blisters. The leader should be able to see all members of the group at one time—never let the group get spread out over an extended length of the trail. If there is a large variance in hiking speeds in a group, assign an adult or senior teen counselor to each specific group. The whole group should come back together at each hiking break to help ensure that no one is left behind.

Points to Remember

- The leader should have concrete objectives for the youth participating in the hike, even if it's just a walk around the campground.
- Involve youth in planning where to go and what to take on the hike.
- Arouse curiosity before the hike, so youth will be keyed into seeing, smelling, and studying many aspects of the living and nonliving world.
- Assist youth in learning to prepare equipment or food that will be needed on the hike.
- Review outdoor manners.
- Assure that there is adequate supervision.
- Keep the group together.
- Enjoy yourself.

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