

## The Children's Nature Collection

Susanna Ramsey



*Vole skulls from the nature collection*

Over the last two years I have put together a nature collection which I take into local primary schools. It is like a mini natural history museum: an extensive collection of feathers, bones and photos from Richmond Park.

The National Curriculum requires children to look at nature in almost every year of primary school. In Year One children look at "Parts of the Body", "How Animals Move" and "Mother Nature, Designer". Some also study birds. Year Two study "Plants and Animals in Local Habitats" and "Variation", learning how to categorise plants and animals. In Year Four they look at "Habitats", different animals in different habitats, grouping plants and animals, food chains and food sources. Year Six study "Interdependence and Adaptation", learning how animals and plants depend on each other and how different species adapt to different circumstances.

Sometimes the whole school comes in to see the collection, one class at a time. After a short talk, the children look at whatever catches their eye. Sometimes classes come in for a longer session on a particular subject – perhaps Bones or Adaptations. They look at the collection, play a specially designed game such as Feather Bingo or Bone Snap, and then complete a worksheet using the collection: drawing a skull, comparing teeth, finding the smallest bone or softest feather and thinking about why they are different – much more exciting than looking at a book or website!

Deer bones are the most impressive: ribs, a jawbone, leg bones and vertebrae, which the children can link up. There are also rabbit backbones, a complete Jackdaw skeleton, bones from a fox and a wood mouse, woodpecker wing bones and two sets of grass snake backbones, one with ribs and even teeth in the jawbone! The

tinest bones are those dissected from owl pellets. Barn Owl pellets contain perfectly preserved bones from voles and shrews; you can see the ball and socket joints from the voles' hips and the teeth inside their jawbones; their shoulder blades are as small as a child's finger nail and just as transparent; their ribs are minute! There are about forty vole skulls! Children compare these with the deer bones and at the same time, learn about food chains. The objects inside Tawny and Little Owl pellets are more varied but fragmented: beetle wing cases, rabbit claws, baby bird leg bones and a tiny vole tail. What surprises all the classes is how similar the bones are to our own and how much they vary in size.

The feather collection is tremendous: complete wings and tails from a Sparrowhawk, Magpie, Great Spotted Woodpecker and juvenile Robin; Kestrel and Jackdaw tails; Woodcock tail feathers; part wings from a Tawny Owl, Green Woodpecker and Pheasant; feathers from a Chaffinch, Little Owl, Mistle Thrush, Woodpigeon and all kinds of ducks and geese. Children can feel the softness and fringed edges of the owl feathers and compare the stiff Woodpecker tails with the showy tails of the Parakeets. Variations are obvious: the iridescent Magpie feathers, the camouflage of the Woodcock and the brilliant blue Jay wing coverts.

Adaptations become clear when they compare Sparrowhawk talons with the feet of the Robin and Woodpecker. There are different birds' nests too: one woven from deer hair and grass, one lined with mud, and one decorated with moss. There are shells from hatched eggs. (The

children think they are Cadbury's Mini Eggs!) Other more gruesome items are a crow's beak (with tongue!) and a squirrel's paw.

Colourful photos brighten up the collection. One display board shows different birds, focusing on their heads and beaks. Children enjoy looking at the different colours and shapes and like to point out which birds they have seen. Some claim to have seen them all, of course! Another board has photos of fungi, trees and flowers.

Children and teachers find the collection amazing. The "Ooh"s and "Aah"s and general buzz of excitement as they come in are wonderful! Boys especially think the bones are really cool! One boy said he wanted to be a rugby player until he was thirty, and then do my job! One girl said she was going to make a book about nature with her friend when she got home. A very young boy described the collection as "double good, thumbs crossed, and hands in the air!"

The collection has already been to several local schools, where it has been seen by over a thousand children, and has been displayed at the Park Open Day and other local events.

If you would like to find out more, please contact Susanna Ramsey at [sjramsey@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:sjramsey@tiscali.co.uk).

*Richmond Park's status as a National Nature Reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest means that visitors should remove nothing (except litter) from the Park – but this collection has been assembled for educational purposes with the consent of The Royal Parks.*