

Heil Valley Ranch Ecology Hike

Small group--20-30 students

NOTE: This outline is only a suggested program template. Please modify or tailor your approach to be appropriate for your program or group.

Location: Heil Valley Ranch Picnic Shelter and Lichen Loop Trail

Program Theme: The foothills ponderosa pine ecosystem provides habitat for many plants and animals.

Possible Ecological Concepts:

- Ponderosa pine ecosystem
- Habitat (food, water, shelter, space)
- Food chains (wildlife examples: mountain lion, black bear, Abert's squirrel, fox, great horned owl)
- Predator/prey relationships
- Herbivore, carnivore and omnivore feeding strategies
- "Nature Detective" approach for the hike (looking for evidence of wildlife: tracks, scat, antlers, bones, nests, tree cavities, etc.)
- Sensory experience (group quiet time with eyes open, closed)
- Trail safety (e.g. lions, bears, weather, rattlesnakes, etc.)
- Forest and fire ecology and management

Staffing: One or two naturalists per group of 10-15 students, along with parents and teachers.

Program Resources and Set-up: Four picnic tables in or near the picnic shelter are set-up as interpretive stations, each staffed by one VN (Feel free to substitute stations as necessary to tailor the program to the needs of the group):

- Table 1: Mountain lion (lion skull, pelt, track, scat, and deer antler, track, and scat)
- Table 2: Black bear (mount, skull, pelt, track, and scat)
- Table 3: Abert's squirrel (mount, photos of Abert's, Fox, & Pine squirrels, and Goshawk, chewed pine cones, "feeding sticks," and ponderosa pine cookie)
- Table 4: Great-horned owl (mount, skull, and pellet display)
 - **Note:** If conditions are windy at HVR, do not expose GH owl to the wind; keep owl out of the wind in VN vehicle adjacent to the picnic shelter and use vehicle as one of the interp stations.

Program Procedures:

- When the school bus arrives, one VN should board the bus, welcome the class, and briefly describe the program schedule.
- Review responsibilities of parents and teachers with the adult leaders at the picnic shelter before the station rotation. The guidelines are outlined in the field trip attachment titled *We Love Our Adult Leaders*.
- After an introduction, divide the class into **four groups** and rotate through each station.
- Each group will move between the tables (lion, bear, squirrel, owl), learning about each animal and reinforcing ecological concepts. About 5 minutes should be spent at each table, or about 20 minutes total. **Designate one VN as timer to stay within about 20 minutes total. (smart phone or watch timer; kitchen timer – available at Walden Ponds VN Center).**
- Following the wildlife stations, have parents/teachers take students to the **restrooms** while materials are being put away in VN vehicles. **NOTE: Do not leave interpretive props at shelter while hiking.**
- Divide students into **two groups** of ~10-15 students, with 1-2 VNs per group, and hike the Lichen Loop Trail, one group clockwise, the other counter-clockwise. (~1.5 hour hike)

Program Tips:

- Ask the teacher to divide students into groups **prior to their arrival** at Heil and have them wear **name tags** (first names only), if possible. Name tags help VNs personally engage students.
- Check with the teacher to find out what concepts need to be stressed and what background the students have. Is this an introductory or culminating activity? This should be done by the Contact VN before VNs plan the program. Also, remind teachers about name tags.
- Remind the teacher that students need closed toe shoes, water, sunscreen, snacks, jackets and rainwear, if necessary (Contact VN)

REMINDER: The Contact Naturalist's responsibility is to facilitate communication between the VNs and the teacher, and between the naturalists themselves. All VNs are responsible for participating in planning and leading the program.

Revised November 2019
VN Joyce Costello