

Insects and Similar Land Creatures

Do try to avoid the term “creepy crawlies” when describing these animals as this term, whilst bringing up a reasonable image of them, destroys the feelings of openness, interest and awe one endeavors to cultivate in children while exploring the natural world.

The animals in this group can be regarded, in many ways, as the terrestrial counterparts of the sea creatures we just studied. Indeed, technically, the phyla arthropoda contains lobsters as well as ants and beetles, for instance: the hard outer covering, division of body parts and number of appendages are the characteristics which unite them. However, as we’ve said repeatedly in this book, fourth grade animal studies is not about the intricacies of taxonomy – it is about a broad understanding of the animal world.

In any case, this group is vast! Insects alone account for something like two-thirds of all known animal species on the Earth – imagine what that translates to in terms of numbers of individual animals!

Try to bring a picture of this to your child. Begin, as always, with living examples. Go for a walk in the woods, in a park, on a farm, or in your yard. Take along a shovel, digging fork and tarp. Find a place with rich hummus-laden soil and dig up a few spades’ full and lay them out on the tarp. Gently unlump the soil and observe. If the soil is at all rich, you will see earthworms, beetles, millipedes, ants, grubs . . . a host of creatures.

Capture some and place in canning jars with fine muslin taking the place of the lid, secured by the lid ring. Using a magnifying glass, have a good look (yes – finally! You’ve been waiting to use that magnifying glass since your child was four!). How many legs do you see? Segments or body parts? Do the creatures have identifiable heads? What do you see on the earthworm? Watch how the different creatures move. Have they curled up, immobile? Are they still or walking or wriggling?

Have a good look and then let them go where you found them, gently replacing the earth. Identify the creatures as best you can, perhaps using a guide book. But beware! Don’t let the guidebook get in the way of looking properly at the animals. It might be better to not take the book out with you, but to instead refer to it once you return home.

Get a butterfly net and sweep it along in some tall grass. What have you caught? Do try to avoid butterflies, moths and bees as their delicate wings and legs can be badly damaged in a net. Hardier creatures like grasshoppers are fair game, though. But take care – they can leap and escape before you’ve had a chance to examine them!

Find a patch of nectar-rich flowers in a park, garden or field and watch the insects which come. Delight over the fat humming bumblebees. Watch the butterflies flit from flower to flower. What other insects do you see? Observe closely – some might, at first glance, look like bees or wasps, but upon closer examination, clearly are not.

Look for spider’s webs and spiders in dusty corners in barns, outbuildings and in rotting trees in the woods. Look closely at the patterns of the web. What does the spider do if you touch the web? Is there a wrapped-up creature in the web, ready for the spider’s next meal?