Activities

Critter Camouflage

Grades: 1–2, 3–5

Overview
Playing "Hunting Like a Hawk" and studying photographs and videos, kids explore the role of Blending, Pattern, Disguise and Mimicry in the natural world of predators and prey.

Hide and Seek
Assemble a selection of photographs of camouflaged creatures for students to look at from books and Websites. Next, ask students, working in small groups, to visually search each picture of a camouflaged creature from a distance of at least 15 to 20 feet. Do students see something hiding in the pictures? Can they find each creature? Ask: Why is this difficult to do? Once every student has been able to locate each of the creatures, explain that the animals are hard to find because they are using camouflage to blend into their surroundings. Some animals use camouflage to hide from their enemies; others use it to go unnoticed as they search for food themselves.
Teaching Camouflage
Once students have experienced camouflage in action, discuss in more depth the different features that help to camouflage each of the animals they have seen. Here are the four main types of camouflage that animals use (some in combination).

- **BLENDING** is when colors on an animal's body match its surroundings. Examples: crab spider, white-tailed ptarmigan, polar bear, flounder.
- **PATTERN** is when an animal's stripes, spots, or other color markings make the outline of the animal's body hard to see. Examples: tiger, zebra, leopard frog, blue-ringined octopus.
- **DISGUISE** is when an animal hides in plain sight by looking like an object in its surroundings. Examples: leaf-mimic katydid, walking stick.
- **MIMICRY** is when an animal's looks and behavior imitate that of a harmful or distasteful animal, which makes enemies shy away. Examples: king snake, longhorn beetle, viceroy butterfly.

Hunting Like a Hawk
Even the most effective camouflage can fail if a hidden animal suddenly moves and catches the enemy's eye. Conduct this fun, kinesthetic demonstration to show how movement can attract predators' attention. You will need two or three student volunteers to be “hawks.” The rest of the class will be prey. Have the class move about the room while pretending to be small animals (such as songbirds, squirrels, and so on). When you call out “Hawk!” the prey must freeze. The hawks will then visually search for movement; any student that moves even slightly must take his or her seat. Afterwards, discuss with the class what would really happen in the wild. Why is camouflage alone not enough protection?

What You See...
Is what you get. Or is it? Explain to students that some creatures are very well-hidden: A tiny twig on a tree branch may turn out to be alive, and a green leaf may reveal itself to be a katydid or a praying mantis. Insects such as these are masters of disguise — they look just like something that's found in their natural surroundings. Other creatures use disguises such as dead leaves, rocks, and even bird droppings to camouflage themselves from enemies. And some caterpillars, butterflies, and moths...
even have markings on their bodies that look like large animal eyes. When these “surprise” eyes are exposed, the would-be predator is often startled and scared away. Using books and online resources, share photographs of some of these curious creatures. Then challenge kids to use craft items and their imaginations to create fantastic animals that use disguise as a camouflage method. Invite each student to present his or her work to the class and explain how the animal's camouflage helps it hide from enemies.

Subjects: Vocabulary, Arts and Creativity, Science, Animal Camouflage, Predator and Prey, Diagrams