

## Ballard Nature Center's Naturalists Plot and Plan During the Winter

It is great fun to be the naturalist from Ballard Nature Center during a "Naturalist in the Classroom" presentation at a school in the winter. Walking out the door, carrying my tub full of tricks, amidst a shower of thank you's, I could not have been happier. Even though the teacher had had to prompt the children into an expression of gratitude by announcing, "now what do we say," I knew their words to be sincere, after all they had stayed in during recess to listen to me.

"How many babies do bats have?" asked one of the second graders during the presentation. I had brought along Charles Schwartz's *Mammals and How They Live* and now utilized it to provide the answer. One of the many wonderful sketches in the book shows a mother bat with three of her young clinging tenaciously to her belly. But in two seconds came the same question from another bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed little girl. I did a quick replay cheerfully, "one or two or more, depending on species - oops, I should say - type or size of bat," but I could see in her face that she was not satisfied with my answer. Hesitantly, she said "But a picture in our book says bats have lots of babies." The teacher produced the book in question and the picture, an illustration which showed one adult bat surrounded by at least fifty baby bats. Ah, ha! The teacher and I shared a moment of understanding, realizing at the same moment what had caused the misconception in the child's mind. For me, it became a teachable moment. I invited them to conjecture: "Mama bat flies back into the cave and must find her two babies amongst the many in the nursery, but how will she know them in the total darkness?" When the answer "by smell" is ventured, out of my tub comes a set of film canisters containing scented cotton balls. Mama Bat (the teacher) is challenged to sniff out two from hundreds of baby bats (actually just seven students who were selected from thirty very eager volunteers).

My point: How very impressionable children are with their wonderful enthusiasm for learning and their natural curiosity and how very careful we educators must be! We at Ballard Nature Center are entrusted over and over again with the awesome responsibility of creating in children's minds a vivid awareness of their natural surroundings. We strive to teach them skills by which they can discover for themselves ways to make their outdoor experiences truly meaningful. Sometimes at Ballard Nature Center we are pretty sneaking at accomplishing that goal. We engage them in run-and-jump-and-giggle games. We challenge them to see as well as a hawk, observe like a wild turkey, listen like an owl, etc. We offer them puppet shows, puzzles, pelts, and picnics. And, sometimes out at the wetland we just let the frogs and the dragonflies and the crawdads do the teaching.

We naturalists at Ballard Nature Center hope that someday that awareness we've instilled in our young pupils will develop into a deep appreciation for the natural world and into a feeling of responsibility for it.

Each winter we await spring when our charges disembark from buses and off we go marching toward the trails, singing our scientists' song, "We ask questions. Yes we do. We find answers that are true." All winter long we naturalists plot and plan and ready ourselves for the awesome responsibility.

No, to be truthful, it's not all winter long, it's nearly all the time. It is great fun to be a naturalist, at Ballard Nature Center, engaged in creating innovative educational programming, and what's even more fun is seeing the children's responses. So, "Now what do we say?" "Thank you and I hope to see you at Ballard Nature Center soon."

By Patty Gillespie (written February 24, 2010)