



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume VI: Asking Questions in Biology

Rachel Carson and the Questions that Helped Save Bird Populations

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Meaningful connections with nature begin through observation and wonder, not expertise. Inspired by Rachel Carson, an environmentalist whose work in the mid-1900s launched the modern environmental movement, this unit, intended for 7th- and 8th-grade students, encourages students to ask thoughtful questions, see science as something they do rather than something they are, and recognize their capacity to make positive change. It explores how curiosity and firsthand experiences in nature can inspire scientific inquiry and environmental stewardship among middle school students. The unit covers various birds, including birds of prey and songbirds, but eventually centers on Chicago's migratory birds, the endangered Great Lakes piping plover, and the restoration of Montrose Beach as their habitat. Students participate in outdoor observations and citizen science projects that contribute real data to ongoing research, as well as inquiry-based investigations that connect local ecosystems to broader topics such as conservation, climate change, and habitat restoration. Ultimately, the unit aims to foster lifelong curiosity, strengthen students' confidence in science, and demonstrate how community action and careful observation can lead to meaningful bird conservation.

(Developed for Life Science, grades 7-8; recommended for Science, grades 5-6, and Biology, grade 9)

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