

# "Trails to Nature" Program Improves Student Achievement

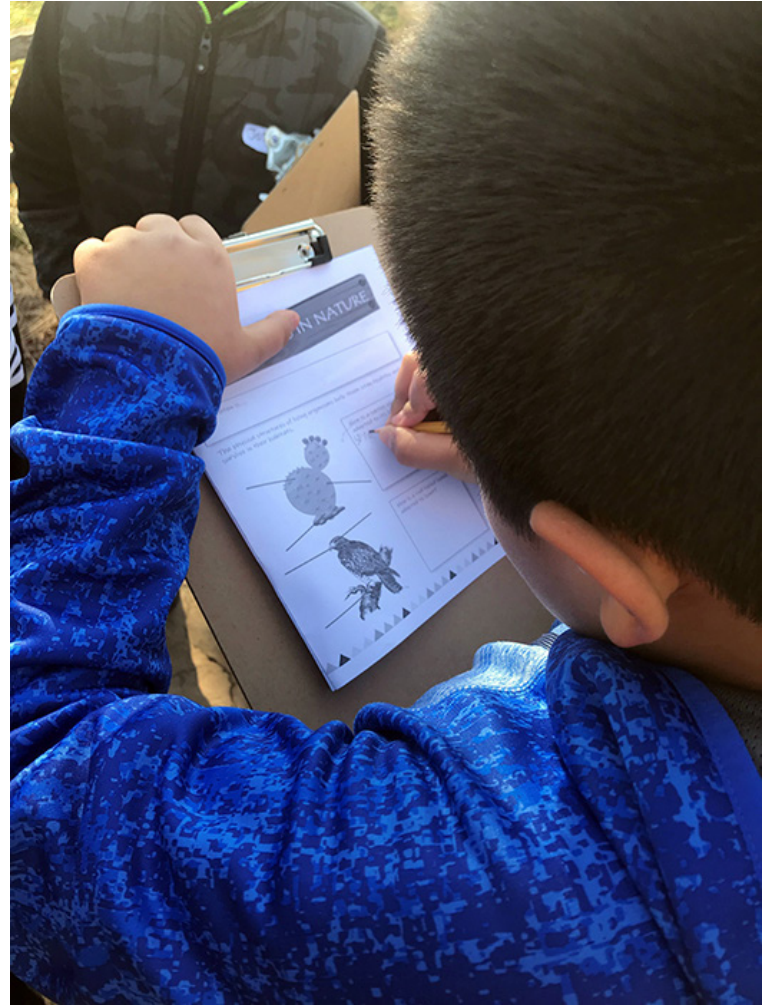
*Haily Summerford, MBA, Executive Director, Friends of the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge*

It was a chilly fall day as students arrived at the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge to participate in a new program called Trails to Nature. The students were oddly quiet as they looked around, amazed by what surrounded them: colorful fall leaves, sounds of birds singing, and the absence of the noise of cars. For many participating students, a visit to the Nature Center marks their very first encounter with the natural world. With science journals and pencils in hand, students explored the Refuge, conducting outdoor, hands-on, science-based activities and conservation problem-solving. They developed scientific questions, conducted experiments, and found answers through the scientific method.

Thanks to a grant from the Alcon Foundation, the Friends and Nature Center staff worked closely with the Fort Worth ISD to develop and pilot this new program with W.J. Turner Elementary. The school's principal, Elida Gonzalez, determined the program would be for 5th graders to help with their state test scores. Using a published research model created by the Friends' Executive Director, Haily Summerford, the Friends and Nature Center and W.J. Turner staff identified the areas where 5th grade students were struggling in science and developed the program to focus on these specific student expectations. A student journal was also created to reinforce the concepts in the field.

The goal was to see student participation in the Trails to Nature program result in a significant increase (5 to 10% improvement) in student science knowledge, measured by pre-/post-state exam questions. To everyone's surprise, students saw an average of 25% improvement in their pre- and post-test scores. This far surpassed the program's upper-end goal of 10% improvement.

By getting to know and appreciate nature around them, students acquired a new confidence and stronger sense of place. Watching the students explore nature, one could not help but smile and hope that their excitement about nature would inspire them to become future conservationists who might one day work at the Nature Center.



*5th graders from W.J. Turner Elementary enjoy hands-on activities during "Trails to Nature" at the Nature Center. FONC Photo.*