



Young students investigating plants at DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge in Nebraska. | Todd Wick

Todd Wick, Fifth-Grade Science Teacher, Blair School District, Nebraska

For Todd Wick, a fifth-grade science teacher for the Blair School District in Blair, Nebraska, the nearby DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge is an invaluable teaching tool. The refuge, which straddles the border between Nebraska and Iowa, provides an outdoor classroom throughout the school year, where Wick's students study wildflowers and native grasses, observe the refuge's eagles and other birds, learn about animal tracking, and conduct "BSI" (Beaver Scene Investigation) inquiries about resident mammals. Each fifth-grade student keeps a naturalist's journal throughout the school year, and refuge studies help students to meet state learning standards for science and writing. Similar refuge-based studies are part of the curriculum for the district's 3rd, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 11th graders as well.

"The refuge makes a difference in how kids view nature and how they view life," says Wick, who has seen problem students transform to being "fully engaged, with their hands always up and always wanting to share what they've learned." The refuge "makes learning real," he says. "It's real life, real science—and that has meaning to the kids." A measure of the program's success is that many of Wick's students have shared their refuge experiences with family members and friends, bringing them to DeSoto on weekends to share what they've learned.