Who visits the milkweed?

K to 2, ages 5 to 8. One 40-minute session outdoors, repeatable.

A structured look at a single plant. Children count and sort what they find, and discover that one kind of plant can be home to a dozen kinds of animal.

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What students will be able to do

- Observe a single plant closely for a sustained period.
- Sort animals by simple observable features: how many legs, wings or no wings, colors.
- Understand that different animals want different things from the same plant.

Materials

- A milkweed plant or patch, in a garden, a verge or a planter
- Hand lenses, one between two
- A clipboard and tally sheet each
- A white sheet or tray to hold under a stem

How it runs

1. Before going out, agree the rule: we look, we do not pick, and we do not touch the plant with bare hands.
2. Give each pair one stem to be responsible for. Ownership makes children look properly.
3. Five silent minutes first. Nobody says anything, everybody just watches. It changes what they see.
4. Tally what is found: on the flowers, on the leaves, under the leaves, on the stem, and flying past.
5. Sort the finds as a class: legs or no legs, wings or no wings, eating the leaves or drinking from the flowers.
6. Look for a monarch egg on the underside of a young leaf. It is the size of a pinhead, pale and ribbed, and finding one is the highlight of the year.

Discussion questions

- Which animals were eating the leaves, and which were drinking from the flowers? Why is that a difference worth noticing?
- Lots of the insects on milkweed are orange and black. Why might so many different animals wear the same colors?
- What would happen to these animals if somebody mowed this plant?

Taking it further

Repeat the same count on the same plant once a month. The change from June to September tells a story no single visit can.

Safety

No picking and no bare-handed handling. Check the patch for wasps first. Milkweed sap must not get near eyes.

NGSS alignment

Code	Performance expectation
K-ESS3-1	Use a model to represent the relationship between the needs of different plants and animals and the places they live.
2-LS4-1	Make observations of plants and animals to compare the diversity of life in different habitats.

https://milkweedusa.com/learn/sorting-living-things/