

Hide and Squeak

This is a simple activity for younger kids which explores the concept of camouflage and can be done with any size group.

Materials

Beans, toothpicks or similar item of about 4 to 5 different colors, approximately the same size, evenly divided by color (about 10 -15 total for each child); small plastic bag or envelope in which kids can place the items they collect

What to do

Scatter the beans or toothpicks randomly over a mowed grassy area (size of area depends on number of children participating). Explain to your kids that they are “hawks” looking for “mice,” and the mice in this population are a variety of different colors. Show them samples of the mice so they know what to look for.

On your signal, have the children search for as many mice as they can find in a minute. Have the kids count the number of each color they found, and then total up all the mice of each color picked up



Graph illustrates the effect of camouflage. Few brown “mice” were found.

by all kids. This would make a great graph. Some colors will be found more easily than others.

Discuss with the children how camouflage protected some of the mice. Relate this to protective coloration of animals, explaining that if

this were a real population of mice, the mice that remained in the population would be more likely to have babies of the same color. Ask the children what they think will happen to the number of mice of each color over time. (Note: if you use toothpicks or other sharp items, you probably should send your “hawk-eye” children to clean up the rest of the mice to prevent potential safety hazards in the future.)

You might want your kids to look around the area for insects or other small animals which have protective coloration. You could have them think of animals which are camouflaged against their surroundings and discuss their adaptations. Another option is to search the Internet for examples of camouflage or have them look through magazines or library books with examples of camouflage.



Human “hawks” search for mice in a field.

Nature Note: Camouflage

Most people like to be noticed. But to go unnoticed is of utmost importance to many animals. Camouflage helps wildlife escape detection and possible death.

Protective coloration is the most common type of camouflage. Many female birds, particularly ground-nesting birds like the quail and mallard duck, are mottled brown and white. They become almost invisible while sitting in grasses and reeds. Grasshoppers are generally green and brown. Mice and other small mammals are shades of brown which helps them blend in with their natural surroundings.

Many aquatic animals are also camouflaged. Fish possess protective coloration on top and bottom. Most have light bellies which, when viewed by predators from below, blend in with the water’s surface and the sky. If you look down at most fish, the dorsal side (top) is usually a darker color or has a pattern which matches the stream or lake bottom. The brook trout, our state fish, is well disguised by the dark green and olive markings on its back.

Color patterns are also an effective form of camouflage because they help break up an animal’s profile. The white spots



The copperhead’s color pattern blends in well with leaves on the forest floor.

on a fawn or a young wild boar mimic the scattered rays of sun reaching the forest floor through the trees. The indistinct rings and spots exhibited by some snakes break up their solid color and allow them to lie undetected among leaves and rocks.

Camouflage provides many animals with their first and often best line of defense – the ability to avoid detection by predators. On the other hand, it may also benefit predators which depend on stealth to catch their prey.



The winter pelage of the snowshoe hare provides camouflage in the higher elevations of West Virginia.



Coloration and vertical pattern of the barred owl’s feathers lets the barred owl hide in the trees.