CITIZEN

15 LESSONS THAT BRING BIOLOGY TO LIFE, 6-12
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix
About the Editors xi
Preface Why Citizen Science? xiii

Chapter 1
What Is Citizen Science? 1

Chapter 2
Why Use Citizen Science in Your Teaching? 7

Chapter 3
Implementation Strategies 15

Chapter 4
Case Study: Connecting With Students Through Birds
by Jennifer Fee, Liam Curley, and Nancy M. Trautmann 23

Chapter 5
Case Study: The Mysteries of Monarchs
by NancyLee R. Bergey 33

Chapter 6
Case Study: Amphibians and Reptiles
by Terry M. Tomasek 41

Chapter 7
An Integrative Approach to Studying Our Changing Planet
by Nancy M. Trautmann 49
Lesson 1
Whale Song Project
by Debra Taylor Hall
57

Lesson 2
It's Been a Hard Day's Flight:
Determining Daily Flight Distances of
Monarch Butterflies
by Heather Brubach
65

Lesson 3
Terrestrial Invertebrates
by Susan Sachs
77

Lesson 4
Signs of Spring: Earthworm Inquiry
by Jill Nugent
85

Lesson 5
Animated Maps for Animated Discussions
by Jennifer Fee
93

Lesson 6
Bird Migration Patterns in My Area
by Jennifer Fee
101

Lesson 7
Habitat Matters:
YardMap Your School Yard
by Nancy M. Trautmann, Jennifer Fee, and Jennifer Goforth
113

Lesson 8
Winter Twig Investigation
by Patricia Otto and Jane Ulrich
121

Lesson 9
Flight of the Pollinators:
Plant Phenology
From a Pollinator’s Perspective
by Brian Haggerty, Alisa Hove, Susan Mazer, and LoriAnne Barnett
131

Lesson 10
Ozone Bio-Monitoring Garden Study
by Susan Sachs
143
Lesson 11
Turtle Trackers
by Jill Nugent
149

Lesson 12
Who’s Out There? A Calling Amphibian Survey
by Terry M. Tomasek and Jill Nugent
155

Lesson 13
Wetland Discovery
by Terry M. Tomasek and Danielle Marchand
165

Lesson 14
Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to Study Marine Food Webs
by Melissa K. Demetrikopoulos, Lee G. Morris, and Wesley D. Thompson
173

Lesson 15
Tree Squirrels:
Narrators of Nature in Your Neighborhood
by Steve Sullivan, Kristi Backe, and Michelle Rabkin
185

Appendix 1
Lessons Mapped to Scientific Practices
199

Appendix 2
Lessons Mapped to Crosscutting Concepts
201

Appendix 3
Lessons Mapped to Key Science Topics
203

Appendix 4
Lessons Mapped to Science Process Skills
205

Appendix 5
Lessons Mapped to Primary Location and Season
207

Index
209
Acknowledgments

This book was inspired by conversations at an NSTA National Conference among educators involved in citizen science. It represents extensive collaboration between curriculum specialists, science teachers, and scientists, some of whom are named as lesson authors and others of whom contributed vital reviews of lesson strategies and scientific content. The lessons were selected through a competition that yielded more high-quality lessons than we were able to include, and we extend deep thanks to all who participated. Jennifer Goforth served as our indispensable research and writing intern, and Irka Elsevier as a key editorial advisor. Many of the citizen science and education efforts represented in this book have been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation.
About the Editors

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Preface

Why Citizen Science?

Observing the life cycle of monarch butterflies and following their remarkable migratory journeys between Canada, the United States, and Mexico…

Tracking climate change by recording the dates of first leaf, flower, and fruit of local trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses...

Discovering which bird species migrate, where they go, and when…

Exploring life cycles and population dynamics of frogs, toads, and other animals in nearby ponds…

Citizen science projects such as those listed above gather data through public collaboration in scientific research. Who are the “citizens” who take part in such efforts? Some are students and others are interested or concerned individuals from all walks of life. Together, professional and volunteer scientists collaborate to investigate biological and environmental trends over regions and timelines far broader than anyone could tackle individually.

For teachers, citizen science offers a way to motivate and inspire students through participation in research that is relevant both locally and globally. Students build meaningful connections to the natural world as they make observations, collect data, and view their findings within the broader scope of the project. When students design and conduct their own investigations, they also build science practice understandings and analytical reasoning skills through their involvement in citizen science.

In this book, we profile several scenarios of middle school classes engaging in citizen science and provide 15 lessons that present specific ways to build citizen science data collection and analysis into your science teaching. The lessons are organized around the 5E Instructional Model to progress from engagement and exploration through explanation, elaboration, and evaluation, and they engage students in the full range of science practices delineated in the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

We invite you to dig in and become part of the exciting and rapidly growing citizen science movement. Your students will not only learn science, they will be scientists, and their projects will bring biological and environmental science to life in your classes. What better way to fulfill the NGSS mandate to couple science practice with content and give students a real-world context in which to apply what they are learning?
Bird Migration Patterns in My Area*

by Jennifer Fee, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Overview

Students consider indicators of climate change, interpret various representations of eBird citizen science data, and reflect on how their actions as citizen scientists can assist in better understanding bird migration as a local indicator of climate change.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define migration and relate it to habitat preferences of individual bird species
- Use citizen science data outputs to interpret trends in bird migration occurrence and timing
- Name at least two factors that impact changes in animal populations over time

Big Idea

Trends in citizen science data collected over time can indicate the influence of changes in habitat, including those caused by climate change.

Citizen Science Connection

eBird (http://ebird.org)

Time Required/Location

90–120 minutes, indoors

* Modified from Bird Migration: A Local Indicator of Climate Change, by Julia Skolnik and Jessica Jones, The Franklin Institute

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Resources Needed

- Computers with internet access
- Projector and screen
- Speakers
- Handout
- Additional resources on bird migration patterns (optional)

Background Information

Although migrating birds use photoperiod (length of daylight) as their major guide during migration, they will use local favorable weather conditions to their advantage as well. eBird is a citizen science project in which anyone, anywhere in the world, can submit their bird sightings online. The massive database housing these results is proving valuable to scientists conducting research on a variety of topics including adaptations of bird species to changes in climate or other aspects of the environment. A recent study using eBird data found that many migratory species, including the red-eyed vireo and scarlet tanager, tend to arrive at their nesting grounds earlier in warm years and later in cold years. However, other species such as the barn swallow and eastern wood-pewee do not seem to be adapting in this way to climate variation, and their populations may be suffering as a result (Hurlbert and Liang 2012).

See Chapter 4, “Case Study: Connecting With Students Through Birds,” for further information and stories about teachers integrating eBird and animated maps into their science teaching.

Conducting the Activity

Engage

1. Ask students about the birds they have observed in their yards, at school, or at a local park:
   
a. What kinds of birds have you seen? If you don’t know the names, what do they look like?

b. Which species do you notice year-round? Are there others that you see only in the summer or only in some other season? What is migration?
c. Where do you typically see birds?

d. Are the birds you see usually alone or in groups? What are they doing?

2. Watch video about changes in timing of bird behavior at www.fi.edu/birds (Bird Behavior). Engage students in a discussion about observed changes in bird behavior.

   a. Ask: What evidence of changes in migration timing were noted in the video? What is changing about birds’ behavior patterns? What have scientists noticed? What did the scientists say this could mean?

   b. Why do you think this is happening? Do you think it is a problem? Why or why not?

In a warmer than usual spring, insects emerge and plants bloom earlier than usual. Migratory birds may not arrive in time to sync with these food sources because they cannot perceive and respond to cues when they are in their wintering ground hundreds or perhaps even thousands of miles away.

3. Ask students, “What is citizen science?”

   **Citizen science** refers to efforts in which volunteers partner with professional scientists to collect or analyze data. In the eBird citizen science project, any person anywhere in the world can submit information about the birds they have observed. This is creating a massive database with over one million new bird observations entered each month! The data are useful for exploring bird population dynamics and relationships to habitat. For example, we will use eBird data to find out what bird species live in our area, and which of them migrate. The data also are useful in tracking responses to global climate change such as changes in location of individual species or the timing of their migratory flights. See Chapter 1, “What Is Citizen Science?” for more information.

### Explore

1. Using eBird’s “Explore Data” function, select “Bar Charts” and select your state or other region of interest. Figure 6.1 shows an example chart for New York State. Take a look at the bar charts for your area. Do you see any species with thick green bars stretching across the entire year? (These species
And other species for which the green bars get much shorter or disappear entirely in certain seasons? (These species are migratory.) Looking at the bar chart for your area, what are some species that remain year-round? Are there others that migrate to your area for the summer breeding season? Are others present only in winter months, or pass through and are seen only during the spring and fall migratory periods?

In Figure 6.1, for example, you can see that eastern bluebirds and American robins are seen in New York year-round, whereas vee- ries and wood thrushes are seen there only in summer months. The gray-cheeked thrush migrates through New York in spring and fall, but isn’t present in summer or winter.

2. Using eBird’s “Line Graphs” function, create a graph comparing frequency of sightings of two bird species—one that is migratory and another that is resident year-round. For example, in Figure 6.2 you can see that yellow warbler sightings drop almost to zero in winter months in New York, whereas northern cardinals are commonly seen year-round.
3. Discuss the meaning of \textit{frequency} as used in these graphs.

In eBird, “Frequency” refers to the percentage of birding checklists within a defined region and range of dates that include that particular species. A simpler way to think about this is that it represents the chance you would see this species if you were to go birding in that region at that time of year.
4. Ask students why they think one species stays through the winter and another migrates to a different wintering ground?

_In this case, the yellow warbler eats insects, which are not present in New York in the winter. In contrast, the northern cardinal eats seeds that are available all winter long. The beaks of these two species are quite different and adapted for eating these specific types of foods._

**Explain**

As a group, investigate whether migratory species in your area have changed their migratory habits over the years.

1. List up to five species that are found in your area only during the summer. These are migratory species that breed in your state. For example, using Figure 6.1, the Veery and Wood Thrush would be excellent choices.

2. Again navigate to the “Explore Data” tab and click on the “Line Graph” option. Select up to five species of interest that migrate. Set Location to your state and Date Range to “1900–1965.” Grab a screen capture of the resultant graph (see Figure 6.3 as an example, p. 108). Then run again with the date set to “2010” ending with the current date (see Figure 6.4, p. 109). Again grab a screen capture so you will be able to compare to the historic query.

Note differences in the two graphs (and look up explanations if possible). In this example, it is evident that the turkey vulture overwinters in New York in recent years, but didn’t arrive until March in the historic query. What are some explanations?

_Climate change is one possible explanation. However, other habitat changes also could be responsible. For example, a student could suggest that more automobile traffic is leading to more road kill. More dead animals means more food for scavenging turkey vultures, an explanation that has nothing to do with climate change. Also note that the differences in sample size could also account for some differences—with more checklists entered in recent years, there is a greater chance that someone will detect a species._
The wood Thrush arrives around the same date historically and today (around April 15), but it is reported less frequently today than in the past. What are some explanations?

According to the All About Birds website, wood thrush is a forest species that has declined 43% since 1966, with threats to both its North American breeding grounds and Central American wintering grounds. Forest fragmentation in North American forests has resulted in both increased nest predation and increased cowbird parasitism, significantly reducing their reproductive success. Another factor is acid precipitation. A study by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology was the first large-scale analysis that linked acid rain to this thrush’s decline, attributed to loss of carbon needed to create the birds’ eggs. For further information, see Chu and Hames (2002).

Elaborate

1. Invite students to think about migratory birds they know in their area. Ask: “What birds live here, and when do they come and go?” Have students select a migratory species of interest. Using sources such as the All About Birds website, the “Range and Point Maps” feature in eBird, or a printed field guide, ask students to identify the summer (breeding) and winter (non-breeding) regions for their species. Where do birds of that species go when not in your region?

2. Draw students’ attention to bird migration patterns as a possible local indicator of climate change. Highlight the parts of the video (shown in the Engage portion of this lesson) that noted bird migration patterns. Ask students why they think studying bird migration can help us understand more about changes in our global climate. Summarize other possible explanations for changes in arrival and departure dates and frequency of sightings.

Evaluate

1. Encourage students to work in pairs or groups with the eBird database and the “Bird Migration in My Area: eBird Data Collection Table” to determine the recent arrival and departure dates of five species of migratory birds in your county or state and to organize these species according to the timing of their migratory flights. Tell them to be prepared to share these trends with the class.
FIGURE 6.3.
Frequency of sightings of four migratory species in New York State, 1900–1965
LESSON 6
Bird Migration Patterns in My Area

FIGURE 6.4.
Frequency of sightings of the same four species in New York State, 2010 to present

Note the difference in scales between Figures 3 and 4 (In the frequency graph, the historic scale ranges up to 70%, whereas the modern scale is only 40%; the sample size scale is only 160 historically but goes up to 7,000 sightings in the modern graph).
LESSON 6
Bird Migration Patterns in My Area

- Ask students to describe at least two factors that might impact changes in animal populations over time.
- After students have documented trends, encourage them to share preliminary findings they have made based on the eBird database.
- Note if any students found conflicting trends, and encourage them to use sufficient evidence to support their explanations.

Extend

Consider implementing additional lessons from the Franklin Institute’s Communicating Climate Change curriculum (Skolnik and Jones 2011). One option is to take students outside to observe birds. You could invite a local bird expert to accompany your class on a field trip to a local birding hotspot. After registering your class with an eBird account, your students can record bird sightings and submit a collated class list to eBird. For a longer-term study, they could go birding once a week (or other interval of your choice), and submit each collated class list to eBird. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology offers a curriculum kit that supports learning about bird diversity and identification and supports teachers and students participating in eBird and querying the eBird database (Fee, Rosenberg, DeRado, and Trautmann 2011).

Lesson Resource

- Bird Migration in My Area: eBird Data Collection Table

On the Web

- All About Birds (www.allaboutbirds.org): Photos and information about behavior, habitat preferences, and range maps of bird species
- eBird (http://ebird.org): A citizen science project that collects and displays data about birds from around the world
- NASA, Global Climate Change (http://climate.nasa.gov): A website that documents the evidence, causes, and effects of climate change

References


**Additional Resources**


Summary: A scientific article about evidence of the ecological impacts of recent climate change on flora and fauna from polar to tropical environments


Summary: In-depth explanation of eBird and scientific models produced with its data
Index

A
A Field Guide to the Animals of Vernal Pools, 166
A Framework for K–12 Science Education, 1, 15
  crosscutting concepts in, 16
  lessons mapped to, 201–202
  disciplinary core ideas in, 15
  scientific practices in, 15–16
  lessons mapped to, 199
Abbott, Taylor, 28–29
Abry, Harrison, 131–141
Adaptation, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Adopt-a-Vernal Pool Endangered Plant Monitoring Project (California), 165
All About Birds website, 98, 100, 107, 110
All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, 53
Amphibian studies
  frog call investigations, 4, 8, 41–42, 155, 158–160, 162
  FrogWatch USA, 155, 159, 161
  North American Amphibian Monitoring Program, 4, 41, 42, 47, 155, 4, 41, 42,
   47, 155–158
  Turtle Trackers lesson, 149–154
  Who's Out There? A Calling Amphibian Survey lesson, 155–163
Amphibians and Reptiles case study, 9–10, 41–47
  aquatic turtle and box turtle mark and recapture studies, 43–45
  calling amphibian surveys, 41–42
  citizen science participation, 46
  other types of survey projects, 45–46
Animal behavior, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Animal Diversity website, 162
Animated Maps for Animated Discussions lesson, 26–27, 93–100
  background information for, 94
  big idea of, 93
  citizen science connection of, 93
  conducting activity for, 94–99
  extensions of, 99–100
  learning objectives of, 93
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 93
resources needed for, 93
time required and location for, 93
Anstey, Mary, 8
Aquatic species and habitats, 3, 52
   Amphibians and Reptiles case study, 9–10, 41–47
   Turtle Trackers lesson, 149–153
   Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to Study Marine Food
   Webs lesson, 173–183
   Wetland Discovery lesson, 165–170
Argumentation, 16, 17, 44, 61
   lessons mapped to practice of, 199
Arkansas Box Turtle Survey, 149
Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, 153
Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory (New Hampshire), 165
Asking questions and defining problems, 16
   lessons mapped to practice of, 199
Atwood, Frederick, 30
Authentic student investigation, 5, 7, 10–11, 12, 13, 19, 44, 173

B
Backe, Kristi, 185–197
Barnett, LoriAnne, 131–141
Bergey, NancyLee, xi, 33–39
BioBlitzes, 52–53
Biodiversity, 52–54, 79, 146, 165, 175, 181–182
   lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Biological interdependence, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Biotic/abiotic interdependence, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Bird feeders, 8, 23–26, 97, 117, 118
Bird Migration Patterns in My Area lesson, 50, 101–112
   background information for, 102
   big idea of, 101
   citizen science connection of, 101
   conducting activity for, 102–110
   extension of, 110
   learning objectives of, 101
   mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
   mapped to key science topics, 203
   mapped to primary location and season, 207
   mapped to science process skills, 205
   mapped to scientific practices, 199
   overview of, 101
   resources needed for, 102, 110, 112
   time required and location for, 101
Bird studies, xiii, 1, 4, 5, 9
   BirdSleuth Investigator, 26, 28, 29, 30
Christmas Bird Count, 1, 4
   Connecting With Students Through Birds case study, 23–30
   eBird, 4, 5, 9, 12, 19, 23–30, 50–51, 54, 93–96, 99–105, 107, 110, 112, 118
   Project FeederWatch, 4, 23, 30
Brubach, Heather, 65–75
BSCS 5E Instructional Model, xiii, 15. See also specific lessons
Bucket of Bugs game, 79
Burne, Matthew, 166
Butterfly gardens, 36, 71

C
Calhoun, A. J. K., 169
Carolina Herp Atlas, 2, 46, 149
Case studies
   Amphibians and Reptiles, 41–47
   Connecting With Students Through Birds, 23–30
   The Mysteries of Monarchs, 33–39
Cause and effect, 16, 201
   lessons mapped to concept of, 201
Christmas Bird Count, 1, 4
Citizen science approach to teaching, 7–13
   for authentic student investigation, 5, 7, 10–11, 12, 13, 19, 44, 173
   benefits of, 7
   connecting with local experts for, 12–13, 110, 118
   cross-curricular connections of, 7–8
   for data analysis and interpretation, 11–12
   to encourage students to identify as scientists, 12–13
   for healthier kids and healthier planet, 8–9
   implementation strategies for, 15–20
   motivation and skill building in, 10
   potential hurdles to, 18–19
   for real scientific research, 9–10
Citizen Science Central, 17, 20, 153, 170
Citizen science lessons, xiii, 5
   adaptation of, 17
   alignment with A Framework for K–12 Science Education, 15–16
   Animated Maps for Animated Discussions, 26–27, 93–100
   Bird Migration Patterns in My Area, 101–112
   computer access for, 18
   connections to Common Core State Standards, 17–18
   field access for, 18
   Flight of the Pollinators: Plant Phenology From a Pollinator’s Perspective, 131–141
   Habitat Matters: YardMap Your School Yard! lesson, 113–118
It’s Been a Hard Day’s Flight, 65–75
mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201–202
mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
Ozone Bio-monitoring Garden Study, 143–147
Signs of Spring: Earthworm Inquiry, 85–91
Terrestrial Invertebrates, 77–83
time required for, 18
Tree Squirrels: Narrators of Nature in Your Neighborhood, 185–197
Turtle Trackers, 149–154
use of BSCS 5E Instructional Model in, xiii, 15
Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to Study Marine Food
Webs, 173–183
Wetland Discovery, 165–170
Whale Song Project, 3, 57–64
Who’s Out There? A Calling Amphibian Survey, 155–163
Winter Twig Investigation, 50, 121–129
Citizen science projects
citizen scientist activities in, 3
data collection and analysis for, xiii, 1, 2, 3, 8 (See also Data collection and
analysis)
definition of, 1, 59, 67, 97
global, xiii, 2, 5, 24, 41, 85, 137
inquiry and, 27–30
integrative approach to, 49–54
Internet resources for, 5, 20, 30, 39, 46–47, 54, 62–63, 71–72, 100, 110, 139,
153–154, 162, 170, 183
rationale for, xiii
scope and time frames for, 2
topics of, 2
uses of data from, 4–5
Classroom BirdScope, 26
Climate change, xiii, 2, 49–50, 54, 79, 110, 123
amphibian populations and, 160
bird migration patterns and, 49, 50, 101, 103, 106, 107
habitat effects of, 50
insect pollinators and, 49, 50, 131, 137
lessons mapped to topic of, 50, 203
monitoring of, 49–50
spring earthworm sightings and, 50
wetlands and, 50, 166
Coforth, Jennifer, 113–118
Common Core State Standards for English language arts and mathematics,
17–18, 20
Communication, 11, 13, 16  
lessons mapped to practice of, 199, 203  
of research results, 11, 13  
Computational thinking, 16, 199. See also Mathematics  
Computer lab access, 18  
Connecting With Students Through Birds case study, 23–30  
from data to modeling, 26–27  
going beyond, 29  
	 inquiry and citizen science, 27–29  
from inquiry into action, 30  
	 learning with citizen science data, 24–26  
Conservation studies, 2, 4, 16, 52, 54  
Amphibians and Reptiles case study, 46  
Animated Maps for Animated Discussions lesson, 93–100  
Connecting With Students Through Birds case study, 23–30  
Flight of the Pollinators lesson, 131–139  
Habitat Matters lesson, 113–118  
lessons mapped to, 202, 203  
lessons mapped to topic of, 203  
Mysteries of Monarchs case study, 33–39  
Turtle Trackers lesson, 153  
Wetland Discovery lesson, 165–170  
Constructing explanations, 11, 16, 17  
lessons mapped to practice of, 199  
Cooper, Caren, 1  
Coral Reef Fish Count website, 178  
Cornell Lab of Ornithology, xi, 9, 26, 28, 29, 30, 62, 93, 97, 100, 101, 107, 110, 113  
Critical-thinking skills, 11, 65, 93  
Cross-curricular connections, 7–8, 33  
Crosscutting concepts, 16, 201–202  
lessons mapped to, 201  
Curley, Liam, 23–30  

D  
Data collection, analysis, and interpretation, xiii, 1, 2, 3, 8  
for authentic student investigation, 5, 7, 10–11, 12, 13, 19, 44, 173  
doubts about student capability for, 18–19  
interpretation, 11–12  
lesson mapped to practice of, 199  
level of student participation in, 20  
math skills for, 8  
online tools for, 5, 7, 11, 19  
for real scientific research, 9–10  
volume of data submitted, 9  
Data utilization, 4–5
Demetrikopoulou, Melissa K., 173–183
Designing solutions, 16
  lessons mapped to practice of, 199
Disciplinary core ideas, 15
Don’t Be A Buckethead website, 62
Ducks Unlimited Canada, 169

E
Earthworms. See Signs of Spring: Earthworm Inquiry lesson
eBird, 4, 5, 9, 12, 19, 23–30, 50–51, 54, 101–105, 107, 110, 112, 118
  animated maps, 93–100
Ecosystem dynamics, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Endangered species or habitats, 51–52, 54, 62, 166, 167
Energy and matter, 16, 202
  lessons mapped to concept of, 201
English language arts, 8. See also Writing activities
  Common Core State Standards for, 17
Environmental monitoring projects, 2, 3, 8
  amphibians and reptiles, 9–10, 41–47
  climate change, 49–50
Eubanks, Elizabeth, 29
Explanations from evidence, 11, 17

F
Fee, Jennifer, xi, 23–30, 93–118
Field guides
  for birds, 107
  class creation of, 149, 153, 162, 169
  for plants, 135
  for reptiles and amphibians, 46, 150, 159
  for wetland habitats, 166
Fitzpatrick, John, 9
5E Instructional Model, xiii, 15. See also specific lessons
Flight of the Pollinators: Plant Phenology From a Pollinator’s Perspective lesson,
  50, 131–141
  background information for, 132–133
  big idea of, 131
  citizen science connection of, 131
  conducting activity for, 133–138
  extensions of, 138
  learning objectives of, 132
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 131
resources needed for, 132, 138, 140–141
time required and location for, 131
FrogWatch USA, 155, 159, 161

G
Geography studies, 2, 8, 11, 19, 33, 50, 79, 87, 151, 157
Gerstman, Liron, 9, 12
Giles, Charmaine, 33
Global citizen science projects, xiii, 2, 5, 24, 41, 85, 137
integrative approach to, 49–54
Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 53, 77–79, 143
Greene, Harry, 9
Griffin, Norma, 23, 27–28
Growth and development of organisms, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Gund, Susannah, 33–34, 37–39

H
Habitat, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Habitat Matters: YardMap Your School Yard! lesson, 113–118
  background information for, 114
  big idea of, 113
  citizen science connection of, 113
  conducting activity for, 114–118
  extension of, 118
  learning objectives of, 113
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
  overview of, 113
  resources needed for, 114
  time required and location for, 113
Haggerty, Brian, 131–141
Hall, Debra Taylor, 57–63
Hands on the Land, 2, 19, 53, 54, 77, 79–80, 83, 143, 146
Healey, Sara, 131–141
Healthier kids and healthier planet, 8–9
Hove, Alisa, 131–141
Humason, Katie, 24
Hypothesis generation and testing, 2

I
Implementing citizen science teaching, 15–20
  alignment with A Framework for K–12 Science Education, 15–16
connections to Common Core State Standards, 17–18
finding the right fit for, 19–20
potential hurdles to, 18–19
use of 5E Instructional Model, xiii, 15
using online data visualization tools for, 5, 7, 11, 19
Inquiry-based teaching, 7, 15, 18, 20
citizen science and, 27–30
Integrative approach, 49–54
to aquatic habitats, 52
to climate change, 49–50
to invasive species, 50–51
to rare and endangered species, 51–52
Internet resources, 5, 20, 30, 39, 46–47, 54, 62–63, 71–72, 100, 110, 139, 153–
154, 162, 170, 183
Invasive species, 4, 30, 50–51
It’s Been a Hard Day’s Flight lesson, 65–75
background information for, 66–67
big idea of, 65
citizen science connections of, 65
conducting activity for, 67–70
extensions of, 70–71
learning objectives of, 65
mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 65
resources needed for, 66, 71, 73–75
time required and location for, 65
Izaak Walton League of Save Our Streams Program, 3, 5

J
JellyWatch, 3, 5
Journey North, 4, 5, 33–35, 39, 50, 54, 65, 71, 85, 87, 88.90

K
K-W-Q-L chart, 87, 89
Kahler, Phil, 24, 29
Kenney, Leo, 166
Killian, Pat, 28

L
Life cycles, xiii, 4, 7, 12, 50, 85, 88, 122, 131, 153, 160
lessons mapped to topic of, 16.203
Lincoln-Petersen Index formula, 44
Listen for Whales project, 60, 62
Literacy skills, 17. See also Writing activities
Literature review, 11
Lost Ladybug Project, 3, 5, 51–52, 54

M
Macaulay Library of Animal Audio and Video Recordings, 62
Maliakal, Sanjiv, 26
Maps, 5. See also Animated Maps for Animated Discussions lesson
Marchand, Danielle, 165–170
Marine food webs. See Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to
Study Marine Food Webs lesson
Massachusetts Turtle Atlas, 149
Mathematics, 5, 8, 16, 17–18, 29, 33, 38, 178
   Common Core State Standards for, 17
   lessons mapped to, 199
Mazer, Susan, 131–141
Migration, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Modeling, 7, 15, 16, 26–27, 59–60, 93–95, 99, 202
   lessons mapped to practice of, 199, 201, 205
Monarch butterfly studies, xiii, 4
   building butterfly gardens, 36, 71
   It’s Been a Hard Day’s Flight lesson, 65–75
   Monarch Larva Monitoring Project, 4, 5, 39, 72
   Monarch Monitoring Project, 33, 38, 39, 72
   Monarch Watch project, 33, 35–37, 39, 65–74
   MonarchLab, 71
   The Mysteries of Monarchs case study, 33–39
Morales-Santos, Araceli, 41
Morris, Lee G., 173–183
Motivating students, xiii, 10, 24, 29
The Mysteries of Monarchs case study, 33–39
   cross-curricular connections of, 33
   deep understanding developed by, 37
   doing it by the numbers, 38
   improving habitat, 36
   monitoring marked monarchs, 35–36
   the power of many, 34–35
   social nature of science and, 38–39

N
NASA, 110, 179
National Audubon Society, 1
National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 63, 123
National Park Service, 145
Natural history data, 2, 4, 7–8, 26, 49, 51, 151, 153
INDEX

Nature’s Notebook, 2, 49, 54, 131, 132, 135, 137, 141
Neighborhood Box Turtle Watch, 153
Nest boxes, 30, 118
Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), xiii, 5, 7, 15
North American Amphibian Monitoring Program (NAAMP), 4, 41, 42, 47, 155–158
North American Pollinator Protection Campaign, 139
Nova Scotia Vernal Pool Mapping and Monitoring Project, 165
Nugent, Jill, 85–91, 149–163

O
Ohio Vernal Pool Partnership, 165
Online data visualization tools, 5, 7, 11, 19
Oscarson, D. B., 169
Otto, Patricia, 121–129
Ozone Bio-monitoring Garden Study lesson, 143–147
  background information for, 144
  big idea of, 143
  citizen science connection of, 143
  conducting activity for, 144–147
  extension of, 147
  learning objectives of, 143–144
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
  overview of, 143
  resources needed for, 144
  time required and location for, 143

P
Parks as Classrooms project, 77, 143
Patterns, 16, 201
  lessons mapped to concept of, 201
Phelps, Laurel, 131–141
Phytoplankton. See Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to
  Study Marine Food Webs lesson
Pillot, Howard, 30
Planning and carrying out investigations, 16
  lessons mapped to practice of, 199
Pollination. See Flight of the Pollinators: Plant Phenology From a Pollinator’s
  Perspective lesson
Project BudBurst, 2, 8, 121–126
Project FeederWatch, 4, 23, 30, 50, 51, 54
Project Squirrel, 3, 185–193
Protection of species or habitats, 4, 9, 30, 49, 50, 51
### Index

**Animated Maps for Animated Discussions lesson**, 94  
**Flight of the Pollinators lesson**, 139  
**Turtle Trackers lesson**, 149, 150–151  
**Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to Study Marine Food Webs lesson**, 181  
**Wetland Discovery lesson**, 169  
**Whale Song Project lesson**, 58, 62  
**Who’s Out There? A Calling Amphibian Survey lesson**, 157  

Public participation in research, xiii, 1  
Publication of research results, 11

### R

Rabkin, Michelle, 185–197  
**Rare species**, 1, 51–52, 81, 166  
**Reading skills**, 17  
**Real-world connections**, xiii, 7, 12, 24, 29  
REEF project, 173, 178

### S

Sachs, Susan, 77–83, 142–147  
**Save Our Streams (SOS) Program**, 3, 5  
Scaglione, Margaret, 23  
**Scale, proportion, and quantity**, 16, 202  
  lessons mapped to concept of, 201  
**Science notebooks**, 87–88, 89, 122, 124, 126  
**Science process skills, lessons mapped to**, 205  
**Scientific argumentation**, 16, 17, 44, 61  
  lessons mapped to practice of, 199  
**Scientific habits of mind**, 15  
**Scientific method**, 7, 29  
**Scientific practices**, 7, 15–16, 77, 160  
  lessons mapped to, 199  
**Scientists**  
  encouraging student identification as, 12–13, 27  
  stereotypes of, 12  
SciStarter, 17, 20, 153, 170  
**Sea of Sound curriculum**, 62  
**Signs of Spring: Earthworm Inquiry lesson**, 50, 85–91  
  background information for, 86  
  big idea of, 85  
  citizen science connection of, 85  
  conducting activity for, 86–89  
  extensions of, 89–90  
  learning objectives of, 85  
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201  
  mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 85
resources needed for, 86, 90–91
time required and location for, 85
Skill building, 10
Social nature of science, 38–39
Squirrels. See Tree Squirrels: Narrators of Nature in Your Neighborhood lesson
Stability and change, 16, 202
  lessons mapped to concept of, 201
Statistics, 17, 37
Structure and function, 16, 202
  lessons mapped to concept of, 201
Students
  benefits of citizen science for, 7
  developing an appreciation of nature, 8–9
  doubts about research capability of, 18–19
  encouraging identification as scientists, 12–13, 27
  engaging in authentic investigations, 5, 7, 10–11, 12, 13, 19, 44, 173
  level of research participation by, 20
  motivation of, xiii, 10, 24, 29
  real scientific research by, 9–10
  role as citizen scientists, xiii, 1
Sullivan, Steve, 185–197
Systems and system models, 16, 202
  lessons mapped to concept of, 201
T
Teale, Edwin Way, 85
Technology, 8
Terrestrial Invertebrates lesson, 53, 77–83
  background information for, 78–79
  big idea of, 77
  citizen science connection of, 77
  conducting activity for, 79–82
  extension of, 82
  learning objectives of, 77
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
  overview of, 77
  resources needed for, 78, 82, 83
  time required and location for, 77
Texas Turtle Watch, 149, 154
Thompson, Wesley D., 173–183
Tomasek, Terry, xi, 155–163, 165–170
Transdisciplinary approach to teaching, 7–8
Trautmann, Nancy M., xi, 23–30, 49–54, 113–118
Tree Squirrels: Narrators of Nature in Your Neighborhood lesson, 3, 185–197
  background information for, 187
  big idea of, 185
  citizen science connection of, 185
  conducting activity for, 187–192
  extensions of, 193
  learning objectives of, 185
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
  overview of, 185
  resources needed for, 186, 193, 194–197
  time required and location for, 185
Turtle Survival Alliance, 154
Turtle Trackers lesson, 149–154. See also Amphibians and Reptiles case study
  background information for, 150
  big idea of, 149
  citizen science connections of, 149
  conducting activity for, 150–153
  extensions of, 153
  learning objectives of, 149
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
  overview of, 149
  resources needed for, 150
  time required and location for, 149
U
Ulrich, Jane, 121–129
U.S. Forest Service, 139, 166
Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to Study Marine Food Webs lesson, 173–183
  background information for, 174–175
  big idea of, 173
  citizen science connections of, 173
  conducting activity for, 175–181
extensions of, 181–182
learning objectives of, 173
mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 173
resources needed for, 174, 182, 183
time required and location for, 173

V
Venn diagrams, 94–95, 126, 160
Vermont Vernal Pool Mapping Project, 165, 170
Vernal Pool Association, 165, 169, 170
Vernal pools. See Wetland Discovery lesson
Victoria Experimental Network Under the Sea, 63

W
Water quality monitoring, 3, 173, 179, 181
Wetland Discovery lesson, 50, 165–170
  background information for, 166
  big idea of, 165
  citizen science connections of, 165
  conducting activity for, 167–169
  extensions of, 169–170
  learning objectives of, 165
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
  mapped to primary location and season, 207
  mapped to science process skills, 205
  mapped to scientific practices, 199
  overview of, 165
  resources needed for, 166
  time required and location for, 165
Wetlands, lessons mapped to topic of, 203
Whale FM project, 3, 59
Whale Song Project lesson, 3, 57–64
  background information for, 58
  big idea of, 57
  citizen science connection for, 57
  conducting activity for, 58–62
  extensions of, 62
  learning objectives of, 57
  mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
  mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 57
resources needed for, 58, 62, 64
time required and location for, 57
Whales, Dolphins, and Sound website, 63
Who’s Out There? A Calling Amphibian Survey lesson, 42, 155–163
  background information for, 156
  big idea of, 155
citizen science connections of, 155
  conducting activity for, 156–160
  extensions of, 160–162
  learning objectives of, 155
mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 155
resources needed for, 156, 162, 163
time required and location for, 156
Wildlife Sightings, 181
Wildlife Watch, 181
Winter Twig Investigation lesson, 50, 121–129
  background information for, 122
  big idea of, 121
citizen science connection of, 121
  conducting activity for, 122–126
  extensions of, 126–127
  learning objectives of, 121
mapped to crosscutting concepts, 201
mapped to key science topics, 203
mapped to primary location and season, 207
mapped to science process skills, 205
mapped to scientific practices, 199
overview of, 121
resources needed for, 122, 127–129
time required and location for, 121
World Water Monitoring Challenge, 173, 181
Writing activities, 8, 70
  in Flight of the Pollinators lesson, 137, 138
  in Habitat Matters lesson, 115, 118
  in It’s Been a Hard Day’s Flight lesson, 69
  in Ozone Bio-monitoring Garden Study lesson, 145
  science notebooks, 87–88, 89, 122, 124, 126
in Using Inland and Coastal Citizen Science Opportunities to Study Marine Food Webs lesson, 175, 181
in Wetland Discovery lesson, 168
in Whale Song Project lesson, 61
in Winter Twig Investigation lesson, 124, 126

X
Xerces Society, 139

Y
YardMap project, 4, 36, 53, 54, 113–118
"Observing the life cycle of monarch butterflies and following their remarkable migratory journeys between Canada, the United States, and Mexico..."

"Tracking climate change by recording the dates of first leaf, flower, and fruit of local trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses..."

"Discovering which bird species migrate, where they go, and when..."

"Exploring life cycles and population dynamics of frogs, toads, and other animals in nearby ponds..."

"Citizen science projects such as these gather data through public collaboration in scientific research... We invite you to dig in and become part of this exciting and rapidly growing movement. Your students will not only learn science, but they will also be scientists, and their projects will bring biological and environmental science to life in your classes."

— from the preface

The editors of this book have a straightforward goal: to inspire you to engage your students through public collaboration in scientific research—also known as citizen science. The book is specifically designed to get you comfortable using citizen science to support independent inquiry through which your students can learn both content and process skills. Citizen Science offers you the following:

- Real-life case studies of classes that engaged in citizen science and learned authentic scientific processes and the habits of mind associated with scientific reasoning.
- 15 stimulating lessons you can use to build data collection and analysis into your teaching.
- Plenty of flexibility. You can use the lessons with or without access to field or lab facilities; whether or not your students can collect and submit data of their own; and inside your classroom or outside through fieldwork in school yards, parks, or other natural areas in urban or rural settings.

You do not need an advanced degree in science to guide your students in productive participation in a variety of citizen science projects. As the editors note, “Such involvement can scaffold teachers’ entry into facilitating student investigation while connecting students with relevant, meaningful, and real experiences with science.”