

How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book

Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



Grade Levels: 3rd - 5th

Setting: Classroom

Duration: 45 min —1 hour

Standards Addressed:

3rd Grade

° Science—Life Sciences:
3.a

° Science—Investigation and
Experimentation:
5.a, 5.b, 5.d, 5.e

° Listening & Speaking:
1.3

4th Grade

° Science—Life Sciences:
2.b

° Science—Investigation and
Experimentation:
6.a, 6.c, 6.d, 6.f

° Listening & Speaking:
1.1, 1.2

5th Grade

° Science—Life Sciences:
2.c

° Science—Investigation and
Experimentation:
6.a, 6.g, 6.h

° Listening & Speaking:
1.1, 1.2, 1.3

Vocabulary:

3rd Grade

predator, prey, incisor,
canine, molar, orbit,
nasal passage, pelt, palate

4th—5th Grades only

carnivore, omnivore,
herbivore, auditory bullae,
nocturnal

Introduction:

Welcome to the Rangers in the Classroom—How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book presentation. This program introduces students to the concepts of predator and prey. Through an examination of animal skulls and teeth, students will understand what and how animals eat and what senses they rely on for obtaining food.

Objectives:

After completing this program, 3rd and 4th grade students will be able to:

1. Name at least three different animals living in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.
2. Identify incisor, canine, and molar teeth in a skull.
3. Describe the purpose of incisor, canine, and molar teeth.
4. Determine if an animal is predator or prey from orbit (eye socket) size, eye placement, and teeth.
5. Find the auditory bullae (ear holes) on a skull.
6. Determine if an animal eats plants, meat, or both from an examination of the animal's teeth and lower jaw movement.

Materials:

- ° Laminated images of animals (bobcat, mountain lion, mule deer, coyote, black bear)
- ° Animal Materials:
 - ° Bobcat skull (two) and bobcat pelt (one)
 - ° Mountain lion skull (two)
 - ° Mule deer skull (two), Mule deer pelt (one) and antler (one)
 - ° Coyote skull (two) and coyote pelt (one)
 - ° Black bear skull (two) and Black bear pelt (two)
 - ° Real black bear skull (one)
- ° Mystery Skull Worksheet copies for students
- ° Park maps and student fee waivers



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Lesson Plan



Presentation:

Introduction

Every skull has a story to tell. Have you ever watched a crime scene investigation show? Scientists rely on clues to solve mysteries. Like scientific investigators, we will look at clues that skulls give us — about how an animal might see, hear, or smell — in order to piece together the mystery of the skull. We will look at several skulls and learn to identify the types of animals they belong to.

A. Mystery story of a skull

1. Every story needs a setting and characters. Our setting is Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and the characters are some of the animals living in the parks.
2. Imagine you were walking through the park and came upon a skull. How could you tell what animal it was?
 - a. First, you need to know what animals live the park. It helps to narrow down the options.
 - b. Do you think you would find an elephant, crocodile, or monkey skull in the parks?

B. Animals found in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (The skulls are replicas; the pelts are real.)

1. Bobcat (picture, pelt and skull visual aides)
 - a. Solitary hunter: hunts mostly at dusk and dawn.
 - b. Carnivore (4th grade)/meat eater (3rd grade): eats rodents, rabbits, and other small animals.
 - c. Size: males are twenty-eight to forty inches long from nose to tail. Females are slightly smaller. Both adult males and females stand around twenty inches at the shoulder. This is about twice the size of an average house cat.
 - d. Weight: average around twenty-two pounds (some males grow to thirty pounds).
 - e. Distinctive feature: short “bobbed” tail that gives the cat its name.
 - f. Spotted coat and pointed ears with little black tufts of fur.
2. Mountain Lion (a.k.a. Cougar, Puma, Panther) (picture and skull visual aides)
 - a. Solitary hunter: hunts mostly at dusk and dawn.
 - b. Carnivore (4th grade)/meat eater (3rd grade): eats primarily mule deer, but will eat other, smaller animals including foxes, raccoons, coyotes, and even porcupines.
 - c. Size: males six to eight feet long from nose to tail. Females are slightly shorter. Both adult males and females stand around two to two and a half feet at the shoulder.
 - d. Weight: males one hundred and ten to two hundred or more pounds. Females weigh eighty to one hundred and thirty pounds.
 - e. Distinctive feature: long tail tipped with black fur.
 - f. Very shy and secretive. It is rare to see a mountain lion.
3. Mule Deer (picture, hide, antler, and skull visual aides)
 - a. Males: buck. Female: doe. Young: fawn.
 - b. Foragers: young mule deer forage together; bucks forage alone or with other bucks.
 - c. Herbivore (4th grade)/plant eater (3rd grade): have multi-part stomach. The first two chambers act as storage bins; they eat and then hide from predators to chew the cud.

How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book

Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



- d. Size: average—forty one inches at the shoulder and eighty inches nose to tail.
- e. Weight: males one hundred fifty to three hundred pounds. Females are one hundred to one hundred seventy-five pounds.
- f. Distinctive feature: large, mule-like ears.
- g. Bucks have forked antlers. They shed them every year after the rut (mating) season and grow them once more in the spring.
- h. Antlers are not the same as horns. Horns are permanent. In some species, both the males and females have horns (e.g. bison).
- i. Why do the males have antlers? To fight other bucks for the opportunity to mate with females.

4. Coyote (picture, pelt, and skull visual aides)

- a. They travel in small packs, but usually hunt in pairs. A typical pack consists of six closely related adults, yearlings, and young.
- b. Omnivore (4th grade)/plant and meat eater (3rd grade): prefers to eat meat (small animals and domestic pets) but will eat fruits, vegetables, and even garbage.
- c. Opportunistic eater: it will eat what it finds.
- d. Size: forty-two to forty-eight inches nose to tail.
- e. Weight: average fifteen to fifty pounds.
- f. It has large ears. It can hear better than domestic dogs.
- g. Member of the canis/dog family.
- h. It can run up to forty-three miles per hour. Next time you are driving with your parents, ask them to let you know when they are going this fast, so you get an idea of how this speed feels. How great would it be to be able to run so fast?

5. American Black Bear (picture, pelt, and skull visual aides)

- a. They are solitary except during mating season and when a sow has her cubs for their first two years.
- b. Omnivore (4th grade)/plant and meat eater (3rd grade); not really hunters, bears prefer to eat plants and insects (berries, grasses, grubs, ants) but will take fawns in the spring and eat carrion.
- c. Opportunistic eater; it will eat what it finds, which can cause problems when bears develop a taste for human food.
- d. Weight: males up to three hundred and fifty pounds and females up to one hundred and fifty pounds in Sequoia and Kings Canyon.
- e. Coloration: blond, cinnamon, brown, and black.
- f. They are smart and curious.

C. The Language of Skulls (pass out the Mystery Skull worksheets)

1. Orbits/eye socket

- a. Size in relation to skull size
 - 1. Large orbits indicate of sharp eyesight, perhaps including the ability to see at night (a nocturnal animal)
 - 2. Cats have large eyes in relation to the size of their skulls.
- b. Placement in the skull
 - 1. Forward vs. side facing. This helps determine if the animal is a predator or prey.

How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book

Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



2. Predator/Carnivore orbit placement is forward.
 - a. The overlapping field of view from both eyes gives the animals binocular vision, which provides excellent depth perception for hunting and killing prey.
3. Prey orbit placement is to the side.
 - a. The side placement gives the animals a wider field of view to see predators coming from all directions.
- c. Quick demonstration of the difference between forward and side facing orbits
 1. How big is your field of view?

Directions:

1. You need three volunteer students—two will be the prey and one will be the predator.
2. Have the two prey volunteers stand back to back with each covering their right eye.
3. Have the predator stand facing the prey (encourage them to act as a predator with a menacing look, growls or stalking).
4. Tell the predator and prey that they cannot turn their heads during the activity.
5. Walk in a large circle around the predator and prey asking if they can still you at different points as you circle them.

**The goal is to demonstrate how much larger the field of view is for prey/animals with orbits on the side of their skull.

2. How important are forward facing eyes and depth perception for predators?

Directions:

1. Have the two prey volunteers take their seats and have the predator face you.
2. Take a crumpled piece of paper and have the predator try to catch it.
3. Have the predator cover one eye and toss the crumpled paper again. It should be harder to catch the paper with only one eye.

**The goal is to demonstrate how predators/hunters need both forward facing eyes to judge distance/depth perception.

3. How does it feel to be the predator or the prey? Threatened? Safe? Powerful?

2. Nasal Passages

a. Size in relation to skull size

1. Large nasal passages are generally indicative of a keen sense of smell.
2. Inside the nasal passages look for bony, web-like structures called nasal turbinates. These provide the framework for the membranes that sense odor.
3. Dogs generally have long nasal passages with a complex turbinate bone structure giving them a keen sense of smell.
4. Cats have shorter nasal passages and less complex turbinate bone structure, indicating that they rely more on other senses for hunting.
3. Compare skulls with our short, human noses.

3. Teeth—Incisors

- a. Imagine biting into an apple. Which teeth did you use? Front teeth = incisors.
- b. Carnivore (4th grade)/meat eater (3rd grade): incisors are usually less developed

How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book

Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



and used for grooming.

c. Herbivore (4th grade)/plant eater (3rd grade): incisors are well developed and used for cutting plant material.

1. Some herbivores (mule deer) do not have upper incisors.

Instead, they have a hard palate on top that is used like a cutting board.

d. Omnivore (4th grade)/plant and meat eater (3rd grade): incisor development will depend on whether the animal prefers meat or plants.

1. Incisors will be well developed in animal that prefers plants over meat.

4. Teeth—Canines

a. Imagine biting into a piece of beef jerky. Which teeth did you use? Canine teeth.

b. Carnivore (4th grade)/meat eater (3rd grade): canines are well developed. Long and pointed for piercing and holding prey.

c. Herbivore (4th grade)/plant eater (3rd grade): canines are usually less developed and resemble incisors in form and function.

d. Omnivore (4th grade)/plant and meat eater (3rd grade): canine development depends on whether the animal prefers meat or plants.

1. Canines will be long and pointed in animals that hunt.

5. Teeth—Molars

a. Imagine eating a piece of bread. What teeth do you use to chew the bread? Molars.

b. Carnivore (4th grade)/meat eater (3rd grade): molars are pointed.

1. Usually top molars overlap lower molars creating a shearing action like scissors. The overlap prevents side to side movement of the lower jaw.

2. Carnivores do not chew their food (no side to side movement of lower jaw); they tear meat to shreds and swallow it whole

3. The bite-tear-gulp style of eating without chewing leaves their teeth clean and unstained by food debris.

c. Herbivore (4th grade)/plant eater (3rd grade): molars are usually flat and are used for grinding and chewing up plant material.

1. Flat molars do not overlap. The lower jaw moves side to side for chewing action.

2. Result of chewing/grinding food on flat molars leaves teeth stained by food debris.

d. Omnivore (4th grade)/plant and meat eater (3rd grade): molar development depends on whether the animal prefers meat or plants.

1. Some animals that eat both meat and plants have some molars that have high crowns with sharp edges for shearing meat and some with wider crowns for crushing bone and plant material.

6. Ear holes/Auditory Bullae

a. These are the bony portions of the skull that hold the inner and middle ear.

b. Generally, the larger this structure relative to skull size, the better the sense of hearing.

c. Cats have relatively large ear holes and very acute hearing.

d. Mule deer have relatively small ear holes indicating more reliance on other senses to locate predators.

c. Animals' ears move to pick up sound.

How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book

Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



d. Give a quick demonstration on how ears help pick up sound.

Directions:

1. Have students shape their hands into the letter “C”
2. Have the students hold their hands in front of their ears with the “C” shape pointed backwards (essentially covering their ears) and ask them if they can hear better now or before they put their hands up.
3. Have the students switch the position of their hands with the “C” shape cupping their ears (essentially making their ears bigger) and ask them if they can hear better now or with their hands in front of their ears or without any hands involved at all.

**The goal is to demonstrate how large ears can pick up sound

Solve the Skull Mystery Activity

Directions:

1. Divide the students into groups of about four to six students.
2. Have them flip over their worksheet to the chart entitled “Mystery Skull Worksheet.”
3. The first skull the students solve will be their own—the human skull.
4. Have students write their answers for the human skull in line ten.
5. Work through the questions with the entire class.
6. Once you have worked through the questions using the students’ own skulls, pass out one animal skull to each group.
7. Each group of students will examine their animal skull and work through the questions just like they did with their own skulls.
8. Using the clues/answers to each of these questions, the students should be able to determine whether their animal was predator, prey, or both and figure out the animal the skull belonged to.
9. Once every group has solved their skull mystery, go around to each group and in front of the entire class, review one or two of the questions they answered that helped them determine what kind of skull they had.

Conclusion

All of these features—orbital ridges, nasal passages, teeth and ear holes—tell us about how an animal lived, hunted, or obtained food, what senses it relied on and whether it was a predator, prey or both. Encourage the students to visit the park, explain the student fee waiver and leave the waivers and park maps for the teacher to hand out.

How to Read a Skull Like an Open Book

Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



Vocabulary

3rd and 4th Grade

Predator—noun—an animal that kills other animals for food

Prey—noun—an animal that is eaten by other animals

Predator and Prey—noun—an animal that eats other animals, but can also be eaten by other animals (e.g. If a cat kills a mouse, it is the predator. If the cat is eaten by a coyote, the coyote is the predator and the cat is the prey)

Incisor—noun—teeth at the front of the jaw used for nipping

Canine—noun—located between the incisors and molars; usually large and pointed in meat eating animals; used for holding and killing prey

Molar—noun— also known as cheek teeth; the rear teeth in the upper and lower jaw

Orbit—noun—the bony socket that holds and protects the eyeball

Nasal Passage—noun—nose; bones holding a web-like structure of smaller bones (nasal turbinates), which form the framework for the membranes in the nose that sense odor

Palate—noun—the roof of the mouth

Pelt—noun—the skin of an animal with the fur still on it

4th Grade only

Carnivore—noun—an animal that eats only meat; it does not have the ability to move its lower jaw from side to side in a chewing motion

Omnivore—noun—an animal that eats both plants and meat; it usually prefers one more than the other — e.g., black bears are omnivores that prefer plants, while coyotes are omnivores that prefer meat

Herbivore—noun—an animal that eats only plants

Auditory Bullae—noun—the bony structures in the skull that encase parts of the inner ear

Nocturnal—adjective—most active during darkness

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Rangers in the Classroom—Presentation
Lesson Plan



Bibliography

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