Western Meadowlark

Discuss ways birds are the same and different, and make a stand-up paper Western Meadowlark.

OBJECTIVES
Students will understand:
1. there are many different birds in Kansas
2. all birds share certain similar characteristics: they fly and they have feathers, plumage and beaks
3. the Western Meadowlark is the state bird of Kansas
4. the Western Meadowlark has certain unique characteristics that make it different from other birds

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK
CD
   “Meadowlark Song”
Worksheet
   #2 – Meadowlark Model
Graphics
   #4 – Western Meadowlark
   #5 – Plumage
   #6 – Bills
   #7 – Feet
Object
   Western Meadowlark stuffed toy

OTHER MATERIALS
• Card stock, scissors, glue, colors or markers
• Equipment to play a CD audio recording

TEACHER PREPARATION
• Copy worksheet #2, the Meadowlark Model, onto cardstock, one copy per student.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
In 1925 the Kansas Audubon Society conducted a statewide election involving school children to choose a state bird. The western meadowlark won the election with nearly 125,000 votes. The bobwhite and the northern cardinal took second and third places.
respectively. In 1937 the Kansas legislature made it official. The Western Meadowlark is the state bird of Nebraska and Wyoming too! Many other species of birds may have deserved recognition as well since there is an abundance of different species in Kansas. In fact, a good percentage of all birds found in North America are found in Kansas sometime during the year. The focus here is not to introduce all the different species but instead to use the Western Meadowlark to teach bird characteristics and encourage an awareness of the variety of birds around us.

There are two types of birds your students may see in local zoos: those that fly and those that do not fly. Ostriches, rheas, and penguins do not fly. The reason that ostriches and rheas do not fly certainly has something to do with their large size, but more importantly they are lacking a keel, which is an extension of a bird’s sternum. This connects a bird’s ribs together and allows the powerful chest muscles needed for flight a place to connect to the skeleton. Notice the keel the next time you carve up a turkey.

The majority of birds fly and all birds native to Kansas fly. This is possible because they have wings and feathers. Wings come in four basic shapes and each shape affects flight in different ways. To understand how wings work, take an 8 ½” x 11” piece of paper and hold it along the sides with both hands about two inches from the front edge. Bring the paper up near your mouth and blow across the top of the paper. You would think that this would force the paper down, but instead the paper rises! This is because air flows faster over the top of the paper than the bottom. This reduces the air pressure pushing down on the paper while the air pressure pushing up on the paper remains the same or is lowered, thus the paper is “lifted.” Wings on birds work the same way (so do wings on airplanes)! It is the curved shape of the wing that makes this work. The top of the wing is “longer” than the bottom of the wing. This creates less pressure on the top of the wing thereby lifting it. It is this force called “lift” that allows a bird to get off the ground.

Some of the characteristics used to classify birds are plumage, songs, bills and feet. Feathers give birds their own unique plumage. Plumage is the color pattern of the bird. For example, blue jays are blue and cardinals are red, but often birds are more than one color. The western meadowlark is multicolored. Its chest, upper neck or throat, and part of its face is yellow. Dividing its upper neck from its chest is a black V-shaped patch. Its back is a combination of black, brown, and buff-colored feathers. Its chest is divided from its back with a white section that has black-brown spots in it. A bird’s plumage helps us to tell one type of bird from another.

Another characteristic that helps us identify a bird is its song. Some songs, like the blue jay’s redundant “jay, jay, jay” can be quite annoying while other songs can be quite melodic and pleasing. The song of the meadowlark is such a tune. Its flute-like quality and range of melody conveys to the listener a pastoral scene of prairie grasses and clear blue skies on a warm June day in Kansas. It is this quality alone that probably won the Western Meadowlark the statewide election.
Bills are another indication of a bird’s classification. Bills come in a variety of shapes and styles and allow different birds to feed on different food supplies. For example, eagles and hawks have sharp, hook-like beaks for catching prey. Pelicans have large deep bills for catching fish. The meadowlark has a long, pointed bill for catching grasshoppers, caterpillars, and beetles.

You can also tell a lot about a bird by looking at its feet. A number of different foot styles exist among birds. Ducks, for example, have webbed feet for swimming, and hawks and eagles have claws for catching small animals like mice. The foot of a meadowlark has three long toes that can be used both for walking on the ground and perching on a tree or a fence post. This is often where meadowlarks are visible as people drive through Kansas.

Different birds build different types of nests. Some birds build nests that hang from limbs on a tree. Others build nests of twigs that sit perched on top of a tree’s limbs. The meadowlark builds its nest on the ground in a clump of grass. Although they are on the ground, meadowlark nests are very hard to find.

Sources:
*The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*
Squire, Lorene. *The Meadowlark.* (Bird Lore, 1927)
Thompson, Max C. and Charles Ely. *Birds in Kansas.*

**VOCABULARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avocet</td>
<td>Shore bird found in the wetlands of Kansas. Known for orange head and a very long bill that curves upward.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bald Eagle</td>
<td>Large bird of prey that feeds on other animals. Has dark or black body with white head and hooked beak. Bird is rarely seen but is best spotted in Kansas along river valleys in late winter.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue Jay</td>
<td>Common bird found in Kansas even in city neighborhoods. Mostly blue with some small white and black patches.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Bird that can swim and dive in water. Has webbed feet and a flat bill. Its song is most commonly described as a “quack.” There are many different types of ducks in Kansas with very different plumage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hawk</td>
<td>Large bird of prey that feeds on other animals. Usually mostly brown in color. Has a hooked beak. Many different types of hawks live in Kansas.</td>
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Marsh | Low, wet land. Grasses and reeds grow in marshes.
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Northern Cardinal | Common bird found in Kansas even in city neighborhoods. All red with a crest on the top of its head.
Plumage | The color pattern of a bird which is created by the color of its feathers.
Red-winged Blackbird | A marsh bird found near water. Solid black except for red patch on the upper wing.
Symbol | Something that stands for something else. Symbols are used to communicate words, emotions, directions, etc.
Wetland | Land or area containing much soil moisture such as a marsh.
White Pelican | Very large wetland bird found in Kansas in the fall. Solid white except for a patch under each wing that can be seen clearly when flying. Has a very large bill with a deep pouch for catching fish.

**ACTIVITY**

1) Ask students to listen closely as you play the recording of the “Meadowlark Song” singing. Explain that you want them to guess what they are listening to.

   Hold up graphic #4, the Western Meadowlark the source of the bird song they just listened to. Explain that many years ago children across Kansas voted for the meadowlark to be the state bird of Kansas; it is a symbol of Kansas. Ask the class what a symbol is.

2) As the class looks at the picture of the Western Meadowlark, ask them what different colors they see.

   Explain that a bird’s color is called its plumage.

3) Explain that there are many different types of birds in Kansas, not just meadowlarks, and that all birds have certain things in common. Have the class think about the wild birds they can remember seeing in Kansas. Ask them to name some things all of these birds have in common. (Their list should include feathers, feet, and beaks.)

   Next, ask the class to list ways the wild birds are different from one another. (Their list
should include colors and the types of feet and beaks.

4) Explain to students that they can use the ways birds are the same or different to help identify them.

Hold up graphic #5, Plumage and have the class compare the different colors of the four birds pictured.
- **Blue Jay** – Mostly blue with some white on its wings and some black parts.
- **Northern Cardinal** – All red (with a crest on its head).
- **Red-winged Blackbird** – All black except for red on the upper wings.
- **Western Meadowlark** – Bright yellow throat and chest with a black “V” between them. Some yellow is also found on its head. The rest of the meadowlark is made up of brown, black and white spots.

Show students graphic #6, Bills and have them compare the different bills of the four birds pictured. Discuss that the type of beak reflects what each type of bird eats.
- **White Pelican** – Large bill with huge bottom jaw used for catching fish.
- **Bald Eagle** – Hooked beak used for catching mice and other small animals.
- **Avocet** – Long, thin beak for digging in the mud of a river bank or lake for insects.
- **Western Meadowlark** – Long, pointed bill used for catching grasshoppers, caterpillars, and beetles.

Have class look at graphic #7, Feet, and compare the different feet of the three birds pictured. Discuss how the type of feet a bird has reflects the environment it lives in or what it eats.
- **Duck** – Webbed feet for swimming in water.
- **Hawk** – Clawed feet for swooping down and catching mice and other small animals.
- **Western Meadowlark** – Three long toes for walking and perching on tree limbs and fence posts.

5) Hand out worksheet #2, the Meadowlark model, and explain that each students will create a meadowlark. (Place graphic #4, the Western Meadowlark where it can be easily seen while students work on their worksheet.) Have the class follow the
instruction below to create their own Western Meadowlark.

- Color the Western Meadowlark on the worksheet to resemble the bird in the picture.

- Cut out the model making sure to leave the blank squares below the bird’s feet attached to the model.

- Fold on the dashed lines (below each foot and down the center of the bird’s back and tail).

- Overlap the two blank squares below the bird’s feet to provide a base for it stand on. Glue or tape these together.