

child's curiosity well into the middle school years, providing captivating descriptions and intriguing photography that set the foundations for an interest in natural science early in life.



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The three books reviewed below are intended for children ages 4 to 9. The publisher, Sylvan Dell, has designed them to be used primarily in grades P–3. Each book has 32 pages, and the last 4–6 pages are enrichment information and activities. In addition, the publisher has set up a website ([www.SylvanDellPublishing.com](http://www.SylvanDellPublishing.com)) devoted to enhancing the use of these books. There is a “Teacher Activity Guide,” which includes a wealth of cross-disciplinary teaching strategies such as a vocabulary, math, science, and geography activities. Elementary classroom teachers and home-school instructors need go no further than this site to build learning experiences based on this book for their students. Additional website resources include reading, science, and math quizzes; a list of related websites; and alignment of the content of these books to science and math standards by state and national standards. In addition, there is an eBook version with auto-flip and auto-read with selectable English and Spanish text and audio.

**Habitat Spy.** By Cynthia Kieber-King. 2011. Sylvan Dell Publishing. (ISBN: 9781607181224; paperback: 9781607181323). 32 pages. Hardcover: \$16.95. Paperback: \$8.95.

This book invites young children to observe the world with a focus on 13 particular habitats. The author begins with the backyard in what appears to be a suburban community in the eastern United States. Robins, rabbits, goldfinch, and gray squirrels are found in the illustration. The reader is then taken to 12 different habitats: meadow, pond, forest, river, swamp, cave, bog, plains, mountain, desert, beach, and ocean. The director of education at the National Wildlife Federation verified the content of the book.

Each habitat is shown on two pages with a child looking through binoculars.

The children portrayed in each habitat are different, reflecting the diversity of the U.S. population. Supporting the text are colorful, realistic illustrations by Christina Wald. However, there are more organisms in the illustrations than are listed in the text for each habitat. For example, the text for the ocean pages reads: “Let’s spy in the ocean... seaweeds drift, jellyfish sway, gulls glide, dolphins play.” Besides those animals mentioned in the text, the illustration shows sea otters, a whale, a starfish, several kinds of fish, and anemones. Many of these could not be seen with binoculars and are not mentioned in the text. Although this book is listed as appropriate for ages 4 to 9 (grades P–3), this reviewer suggests that this book is more appropriate for 4- to 6-year-olds. However, teachers of older children could use the book to introduce the idea of habitat, then use the last four pages, the “For Creative Minds” section, to enhance the students’ understanding.

The “For Creative Minds” section consists of a description of habitat followed by questions about the nonliving things in the habitat and the interactions that occur between living and nonliving components. This page is followed by “Adaptations and Basic Needs: True or False Questions.” Here there are descriptive statements about behaviors and body parts (explained as adaptations) that the reader must identify as true or false. One example is “All animals raise their young in burrows, nests, or dens.” In addition, there are illustrations of various body parts and behaviors that could be used to help the reader with the statements. These illustrations include a beaver lodge, school of fish, fish gills, beak, or mouth. The page that follows contains an illustration of a desert energy pyramid and food chain. Entitled “Food Chains and Webs: Circle of Life,” the page contains vocabulary such as *carnivores* and *predators* – sophisticated language for 4- to 6-year-olds. The last page is entitled “Odd One Out: Classification and Habitats.” Here there are six rectangles. Each rectangle consists of a question and drawings of four different organisms. For example, in one box is “Which of these animals would you not find in a forest?” The illustrations that accompany this question are of a fox, mussels, a rabbit, and an owl.

The publishers have an excellent website (<http://www.SylvanDellPublishing.com>) that uses the book to incorporate cross-disciplinary activities. One activity provides the count of the organisms shown in each of the habitats illustrated in the book. This is a good counting activity for very young children.

For older children, the “Map Activity” uses maps provided by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s “All About Birds” website ([www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org)) that show where certain species of bird live during particular seasons of the year. Questions asked about the maps include “Which birds live in the same area as you?” and “Which birds have the greatest range and distribution?” The list of related websites includes a site on which you can hear the prairie chicken “booming.”

There appears to be some incongruity between the content within the text and the expectations in the section “For Creative Minds.” The text is simple but the enrichment pages significantly more advanced. The illustrations are the most useful in this book, if the teacher were to use it as an introduction with older children.



**Big Cat, Little Kitty.** By Scotti Cohn. 2011. Sylvan Dell Publishing. (ISBN, hardcover: 9781607181248; paperback: 9781607181347). 32 pages. Hardcover: \$16.95. Paperback: \$8.95.

Cat lovers will enjoy sharing this book with a child. The book is designed to be used by parents or within a classroom setting. The large-print text is written for children ages 4 through 9 (grade level P–3). Clear, bright, colorful illustrations by Susan Detwiler provide vivid images of both the wild and domestic cats discussed in the text. The cover image of a tiger and a domestic cat should raise the question: Would you expect to find a “big cat” (wild cat) near a “kitty” (domestic cat)? The domestic-cat drawings are designed to complement the wild-cat illustrations as well as the story line. The curator at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park reviewed this book for accuracy.

The publisher describes the book as a way to support the learning of the days of the week. The weekday thread is a nice way to tie the information together but is not an essential part of the book. Each day is introduced with a different wild cat on two pages followed by a domesticated cat on the next two pages. For example, the tiger is paired with the domesticated tiger-striped cat. The text describes a behavior and/or habitat of the individual cats. Each set of four pages follows the same pattern. On the first page, the day of the week is identified, followed by a description of the environment and an interaction between the wild cat and another animal in the habitat. The following

two pages have a similar interaction, but this time it is a domestic cat and its environment. Seven wild cats are introduced: tiger, cheetah, lion, snow leopard, cougar, jaguar, and bobcat.

The last four pages of the book are entitled “For Creative Minds.” The first page of this section discusses classification. The next page presents a map with small drawings of each cat in its geographic location. Below the map is a description of the wild cat. The reader is asked to match the site on the map by name of cat with the description presented for each cat. The third page is a discussion of cat senses and adaptations. The last page contains 15 true–false statements about cats. The answers to the map questions and the true–false questions are presented upside-down below the questions on each page.

In addition to these four pages, the publisher’s website (<http://www.SylvanDellPublishing.com>) enhances the use of this book. The website’s resource list includes a site on which you can view webcams of specific wild cats. Elementary teachers could use the high-interest content in a language arts lesson in which compare-and-contrast is the focus of instruction. This reviewer has a concern about how students would relate the comparison of the wild cat to the domestic cat. The teacher needs to spend some time asking students about these comparisons. Upper elementary school and middle school teachers may find this book useful as an introduction to a lesson on biological classification or animal behavior. The online resources provide many useful tools, especially the website list, for this approach.



**Deep in the Desert.** By Rhoda Lucas Donald. 2011. Sylvan Dell Publishing. (ISBN, hardcover: 9781607181255; paperback: 9781607181354). 32 pages. Hardcover: \$16.99. Paperback: \$8.95.

Do you want a different way for children to learn about desert life? This book uses familiar songs and poems to relate information about the interactions of living things in the desert environment. The book is written for ages 4 to 9 (grades P–3) but has the potential for use with older children. Everyone remembers the childhood song, “I’m a Little Teapot,” but the author of this book uses the melody and changes the words to “I’m a Javelina.” The physical description and behavior of this desert

animal is carefully crafted to fit the tune, and the illustrations by Sherry Neidigh reflect the text content and are colorful drawings. Other animals described include bats, meerkats, desert tortoise, fennec fox, Gila monster, ostrich, and camels. Cactus and the desert habitat are also portrayed with separate lyrics. Naturalists who work in such places as Big Bend National Park provided verification of the biological content. There are also online teacher resources to support the teacher in developing lessons that use this book across the curriculum. Sheet music for the songs used is found at <http://www.SylvanDellPublishing.com>.

The last six pages of the book are titled “For Creative Minds.” The first page consists of descriptions of different kinds of desert habitats: tropical, polar, coastal, and cold-winter deserts. The next page, entitled “Desert Fun Facts,” reinforces some of the content found in the poetry of the earlier pages. At the bottom of this page is a set of questions about the location of either deserts or organisms. The readers are directed to the map that is found on the next two pages. The answers are found upside-down at the bottom of this page. The images of the animals on the map are somewhat difficult to see in some cases. However, the deserts are clearly indicated and can be used to demonstrate that deserts are found on every continent. The map is somewhat confusing because of the various font sizes. Continents are identified in the largest bold font. The deserts are identified by lower-case non-bold font, but the words “Europe” and “Arctic” are the same font and size as the word “Sahara.” Some specific places are identified on the map, but there does not appear to be a rationale for the choice. For example, the United States and Canada are identified on the map, but not Mexico; Russia, but not China. The last two pages of this section consist of descriptions of desert adaptations. There are drawings of the identified plants and animals that might have the described characteristics. The reader is to match the description with the appropriate plant or animal. The answers appear upside-down on the last page.

Although this reviewer did have some difficulty matching the new lyrics of “Out in the Desert” to “Over the River,” most of the lyrics work very well and provide a fun and interactive way for adults and children to learn about adaptations of plants and animals for desert living. Some of these lyrics could be used as models for older children and high school students to develop

their own lyrics about adaptations found in organisms in other biomes. This approach not only helps students to focus on key ideas but can also be used as an assessment by teachers to determine what the students have found important.



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**Meet the Planets.** By John McGranaghan. 2011. Sylvan Dell Publishing. (ISBN 9781607181330). 32 pages. Paperback. \$8.95.

*Meet the Planets* introduces children to the planets and some of their basic traits. It begins with the “host” Pluto telling the reader that there will be a competition to see which one will be named favorite planet. It then goes on to introduce each of the planets. For example, Jupiter is introduced by saying “There’s no rocky surface on this planet – he’s all gas. But with a surface temperature of  $-235^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit ( $-150^{\circ}$  Celsius), he’s not blowing hot air.” Then there is Mars: “If he looks a little red-faced, that’s because his iron-rich soil gives him a red rusty color.” John McGranaghan does a wonderful job of creating a unique way to learn about the planets. Children will be drawn into the cute story while at the same time learning fun-filled facts about the planets. Elementary school teachers will find the resources for this book exceptional. They incorporate math and science in a way that will teach while the students have fun.

As a teacher and mother to two young children, I see the value of this book both in the classroom and at home. It makes learning about the planets fun. Laurie Allen Klein’s illustrations are a wonderful complement to the text. There are so many details in the illustrations that children will spend quite a bit of time studying them. McGranaghan’s unique presentation makes a somewhat dry topic fun and interesting.



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