

Animal Field Guide Web site — a one-stop resource



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So, your third-grader was given a homework assignment to write a report on common loons.

In the olden days — the pre-Internet world, that is — the third-grader could have asked his mother to take him to the public library where he could peruse volumes of big, heavy books called encyclopedias. If he was lucky and a bit lazy, he could just check the set of home encyclopedias some salesman suckered his parents into buying.

If his home library happened to include the 1974 version of Encyclopaedia Britannica, as the IR library does, he would have been out of luck. Not only is "common loon" not listed, but "loon" is curiously absent between the entries for London and Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian zoologist credited with founding modern ethology. If he was a creative child, he could have pieced together something from the entry under "bird," which starts with these words, "Birds are numerous, conspicuous, and widespread."

But, the final days of 2003 is a good time to be a third-grader. The Internet is at his fingertips and he can get most of the information he needs from the Animal Field Guide Web site, a collaboration between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Montana Natural Heritage Program.

Once at the site, which can be accessed from www.fwp.state.mt.us/

fieldguide and also nhp.nris.state.mt.us/animalguide, your third-grader can take several routes to finding the information he needs. He can follow the path of several links or he can simply type the words "common loon" into the search box.

From there, he's taken to a page filled with facts on the common loon in Montana including a general description, range, habitat, reproductive characteristics and management methods. The page even provides a link to a sound file that plays the call of the common loon.

Of course, the information isn't useful only for third-graders.

"It's good for school kids, biologists and anyone with an interest in wildlife," said John Carlson, NHP zoology program manager.

And of course, the common loon is far from being the only animal on the Web site.

According to Carlson, there are 639 vertebrate species on the site and the information is updated as soon as new information is available.

FWP Information Services Manager Janet Hess-Herbert said the exciting thing about this Web site is that the information is easily accessible, free to the user and never out-of-date.

The NHP and FWP project took about two years to come together and was paid for mostly by a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services and also from funding from the Bureau of Land Management.

Folks who worked on the project collected data from several different references and synthesized it into this one resource, said NHP Director Sue Crispin.

"There's no other place where all this information comes together," Crispin said. "It's pretty exciting for us to get it out there."

But you'll have to go to dictionary.com to find out the meaning of ethology. It's also not in the 1974 edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica.