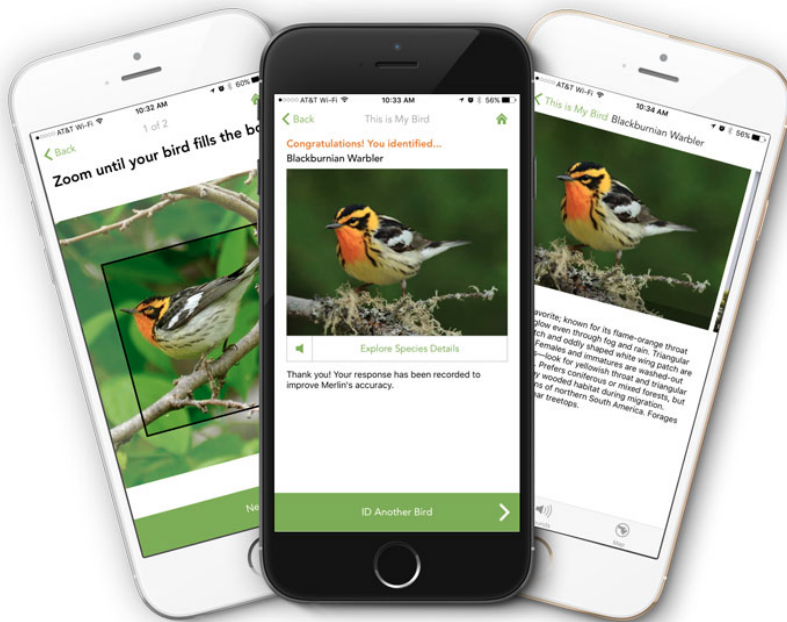# PLACE-BASED APPS
FOR OUTDOOR EDUCATION

By Brigitte Cattell

Getting Students Excited about their Backyard

It has already been scientifically proven that getting outside helps students learn in a number of ways that benefit their performance in and outside of the classroom:

- Mental health
- Exercise
- Clears the mind
- Physical well being
- Increased concentration
- Connection to place
- Appreciation for the environment

Technology and the Outdoors

In today's world, technology plays a huge role in students' lives and is increasingly being used in the classroom. There are many benefits to technology but it is important to find a balance. More and more, young people are hiding behind screens and not experiencing life for themselves. One way to promote the outdoors while incorporating technology in a way to keep students interested is through a healthy combination of the two. Place-based apps is a great way to do this. After having explored quite a few I have found that there are many free, easy-access apps that do a great job of engaging students with their surroundings while providing educational information that can cross multiple curriculums and allow for many multi-modal learning opportunities.

Merlin Bird ID

Developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 2014, Merlin Bird ID is an app designed for everyone from beginning to intermediate bird watchers, or simply to solve the mystery of "what's that bird?", for any curious passers-by. Drawing it's data from eBird, a birding site also developed by the Cornell Lab, the app hosts over 3000 species of birds based on millions of views worldwide. Once you discover your own bird based on the app's help, the data is added to the app for future birders and more accuracy.
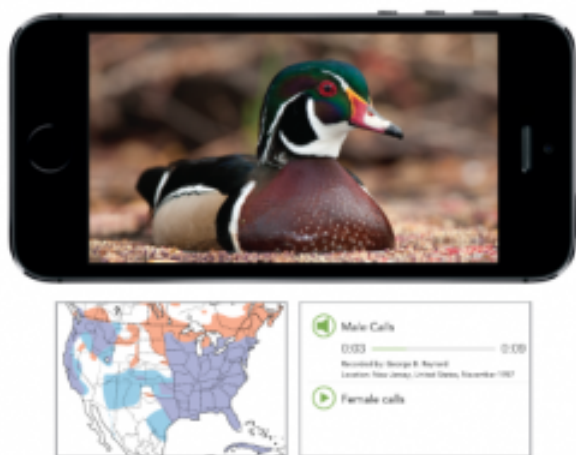
This app is a great way for students to make their own discoveries and teach them how to be observant and really look at their surroundings. The feature that allows identified birds to be added to the database gives students the ability to be a part of something larger than themselves and contribute to a place where their discoveries have value in real world context. There are many ways to incorporate the app in a science classroom, as well as language, and even social studies. The information in the app contains descriptions, sounds and geographic statistics that can teach students about species and the environment in real life context. This is just one of many apps that can be used in this way, to engage students in the outdoors and their surroundings, with the modernity of using tech and their phones to enhance the experience.

Picture Mushroom

Similar to Merlin Bird ID, and many more in the category of identification is Picture Mushroom. There are so many mushrooms on the pacific coast which makes it an easy target for students to learn about the biodiversity in their area. In subjects like outdoor ed, art, and science, this app allows students to explore the benefits of local flora, understand colour theory as it works in nature and engage with science material from the curriculum in a real, visual way. There are also fun ways to engage students through friendly competition to add that positive reinforcement of taking part in a game, to find the most species or a specific range of colours, as a way to get them excited about their discoveries.

Identifications, constellations, plant properties, tidal patterns...

There are so many apps out there that cover a broad range of topics, some in more depth than others, that have the ability to become a great companion in any classroom and any subject. It is important for students to get outside, have a good understanding of where they are, and why place is important for multiple reasons. It is also important to understand that tech is developing in ways that can be a bit frightening if used too much or to replace things that should not be replaced by tech. We cannot, as teachers, move forward without an open mindset about technology and an understanding of its value in the classroom, but we also need to retain that balance of what else is important, especially if it is something that students are losing sight of. By combining technology and the outdoors, students are able to navigate familiar, current and exciting territory while engaging with their outdoor surroundings, getting exercise and fresh air, and hopefully learning the value of both components of education as the two work together to create a holistic, positive, learning experience.