

# ARBOR SLEUTH

## BEFORE 1: WISHTREE

**VA Standards Addressed: English (2017):** 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 6.4, 6.5, 6.9, 7.4, 7.5,7.7, 7.9, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9

### Lesson Preparation & Safety:

Check for safety hazards on the grounds prior to conducting classes outdoors. Teachers are encouraged to make their own observations before teaching the activity. You may want to consult with an expert for identification of the trees & shrubs in your schoolyard.

### Instructional Strategy:

1. Outside: Students choose a tree or other organism to observe then record their observations.
2. Students read an excerpt from *Wishtree*. Ask: What do we know about “Red”?
3. In pairs, diagram information about the character “Red” into “fact” and “Character” (or participant developed sort).
4. Use discussion to draw connections between fact and character development – how is background information collected?
5. Instruct: Now that you have read the excerpt, return to your tree and silently make more observations – note physical appearance, behavior, and attributes of the organism. Look for interactions with other organisms. Work with your partner to think more deeply, what do you wonder about this organism that could be answered through research or testing? Next, begin to develop character traits and personality based on your observations.
6. Return to the classroom. Students develop a short story about their organism based on the observation sessions.



# ARBOR SLEUTH

I'm not just a tree. I'm a home. A community.

Folks nest on my branches. Burrow between my roots. Lay eggs on my leaves.

And then there are my hollows. Tree hollows-holes in a trunk or branch-are not uncommon, especially in trees like me who've been around awhile.

Hollows can be small enough for tiny salt-and -pepper chickadees or a family of deer mice. Or they can be quite large, big enough for an open- minded bear.

Of course, I'm a city tree. We don't get a lot of bears around here, unless they're of the teddy variety. But I've hosted more than my share of raccoons, foxes, skunks, opossums, and mice. One year I was home to a lovely and exceedingly polite porcupine family.

I've even sheltered a person. Long story. (I have lots of those, stored up the way a squirrel hoards acorns.)

Hollows happen for many reasons. Woodpeckers. Fallen branches. Lightning. Disease. Burrowing insects. In my case, I have three hollows. Two medium-sized ones were made by woodpeckers. The largest one happened when I was quite young. I lost a large branch that was weakened by wet snow during a nor'easter. It was a big wound, slow to heal, and my spring leafing that year was paltry, my fall color pale (and, frankly, embarrassing).

But eventually the hole healed, widened with the help of insects, and now, about four feet off the ground, I have a deep oval hollow.

Hollows offer protection from the elements. A secure spot to sleep and to stash your belongings. They're a safe place. Hollows are proof that something bad can become something good with enough time and care and hope.

Being a home to others isn't always easy. Sometimes I feel like an apartment complex with too many residents. Residents who don't always get along.

Still, We make it work. There's a lot of give-and-take in nature. Woodpeckers hammer at my trunk, but they also eat annoying pests. Grass cools the earth, but it also bickers with me over water.

Every spring brings new residents, old friends, and more chances for compromise. This spring in particular has seen quite the baby boom. Currently, I am home to owl nestlings, baby opossums, and tiny raccoons. I am also visited regularly by the skunk kits who live underneath the front porch of a nearby house.

This is unprecedented. Never have I sheltered so many babies. It just doesn't happen. Animals like space. They like their own territory. Normally, there would be arguing. Perhaps even a stolen nest or a midnight battle.

And certainly, there've been some disagreements. But I've made it clear that eating your neighbors will not be allowed while I'm in charge. Me, I don't feel crowded at all having so much company.

Making others feel safe is a fine way to spend your days.



# ARBOR SLEUTH

It's hard to talk to trees. We're not big on chitchat.

Trees do talk to some folks, the ones we know we can trust. We talk to daredevil squirrels. We talk to hardworking worms. We talk to flashy butterflies and bashful moths.

Trees have a rather complicated relationship with people, after all. One minute you're hugging us. The next minute you're turning us into tables and tongue depressors.

Perhaps you're wondering why the fact that trees talk wasn't covered in science class, during those Mother Nature Is Our Friend lessons.

Don't blame your teachers. They probably don't know that trees can talk. Most people don't.

Nonetheless, if you find yourself standing near a particularly friendly-looking tree on a particularly lucky-feeling day, it can't hurt to listen up. Trees can't tell jokes.

But we can certainly tell stories.

And if all you hear is the whisper of leaves, don't worry. Most trees are introverts at heart.

As you've probably noticed, I'm more talkative than most trees. This is new for me. I'm still getting the hang of it.

Nonetheless, I've always known how to keep a secret. You have to be discreet when you're a Wishtree. People tell trees all kinds of things. They know we'll listen.

It's not like we have a choice.

Besides, the more you listen, the more you learn.

Bongo says I'm a busybody, and I suppose she has a point. She's my best pal, a crow I've known since she was nothing but a pecking beak in a speckled egg.

We disagree sometimes, but that is the way of all friends, no matter their species.

I think Bongo is too pessimistic for such a young bird. Bongo thinks I'm too optimistic for such an old tree.

It's true. I am an optimist. I prefer to take the long view on life. Old as I am, I've seen both good and bad. But I've seen far more good than bad.

So Bongo and I agree to disagree. And that's fine. We're very different, after all.

Bongo, for example, thinks the way we trees name ourselves is ridiculous. As is the custom with crows, Bongo chose her name after her first flight. It may not be her only name, however. Crows change names on a whim. Bongo's cousin, Gizmo, has had seventeen names.

Sometimes crows adopt human names; I've seen more Joe Crows than I've seen sunny days. Sometimes they name themselves after things that catch their fancy: Poptop, Jujube, DeadRat. They'll name themselves after aerobatic maneuvers: DeathSpiral or BarrelRoll. Or after colors: Aubergine or BeetleBlack.

