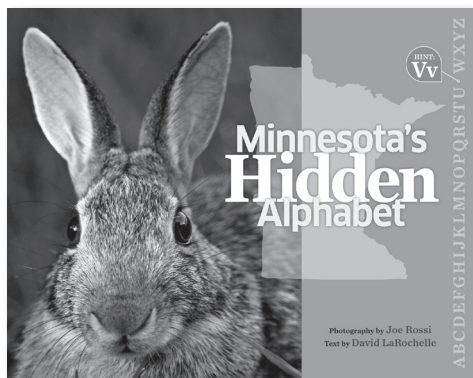




Teachers' Guide for Minnesota's Hidden Alphabet

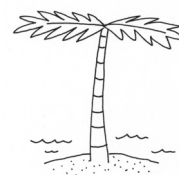


Photographs by **Joe Rossi** • Text by **David LaRochelle**
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Minnesota's Hidden Alphabet

is a collection of stunning photographs depicting letterforms found within the state's great outdoors. The rhyming text encourages readers to take a closer look at nature, and the informational sidebars provide interesting facts about each photo. The book can be used with students of many ages, from kindergartners learning the alphabet to older students studying Minnesota's indigenous plants and animals.

**"All across this wondrous state,
Letters A through Z await . . ."**



Sharing the book with your students

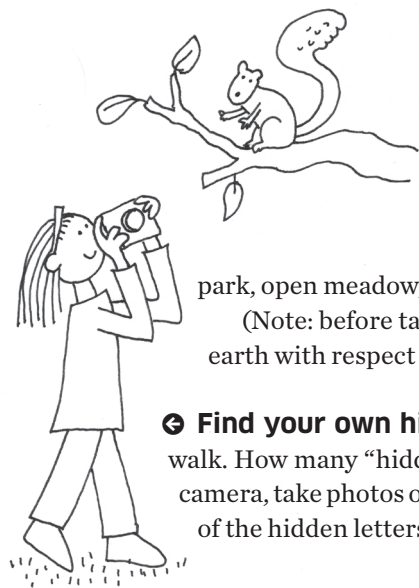
Read the title aloud and show the front cover. Can your students think of ways that an alphabet might be hidden? Point out the "hint" on the right side of the cover. How might the letter "V" relate to the photo of a rabbit?

Show the three photographs on the back cover. Explain that this is a book of alphabet letters formed by natural elements found throughout Minnesota.

Depending on the age of your students, you may wish to read this book all at once or over several sessions. As you read the rhyming text the first time, encourage your students to spot the alphabet shape in each photo. Point out that each line of the poem begins with the letter depicted in the photograph. You may wish to explain some of the higher-level vocabulary found in the poem (see list at the end of this guide).

On your second reading, focus on the brief informational sidebars. Which of these items have your students seen in person? Can your students think of other natural objects that form letter shapes (a tree trunk forming an I, a winding river forming an S)? If someone were to create a "hidden alphabet" book for another state such as Hawaii, what would be different?

The last page of the book lists where each photograph was taken. If you have a large state map, locate as many of the places as possible. Many of the photographs were taken at state parks. Which state park is closest to your school? Allow students time to share some of their own experiences camping, hiking, or visiting a favorite outdoor area.



Exploring nature with your class

As noted by Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, children who spend time outdoors experience less stress, have longer attention spans, and develop a deeper respect for the natural world. Even if you don't live near a forest or lake, here are ways that you and your students can explore nature at a nearby

park, open meadow, or grassy patch of your schoolyard.

(Note: before taking your class outside, remind them to treat the earth with respect and never harm any plants or animals they find.)

- ➡ **Find your own hidden alphabet.** Take your class on an outdoor walk. How many “hidden” letters can they find? If you have access to a camera, take photos of your discoveries, or have students draw pictures of the hidden letters they saw when they return to the classroom.



Advice from an expert

Joe Rossi gives these five tips on photographing your own hidden alphabet:

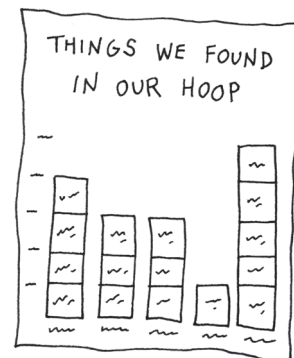
- 1.** The great thing about digital photography is that you're not paying for film or processing, so if the photos don't turn out, they can be deleted. Don't limit yourself to shooting only a couple of pictures.
- 2.** Try a variety of angles and views. For example, when looking at a tree, look at the entire tree, but also look at the branches, the roots, the bark, and the leaves or needles to see what other letters you can find. If a woodpecker has made a hole in the tree, does that shape make a letter?
- 3.** Don't be in a hurry. Walk slowly; look carefully. Don't try to shoot the entire alphabet in a week. It took me 18 months to complete the project. What new letters can be found as the seasons change?
- 4.** If you are going to a state park or nature center, talk to the park naturalist to find out what plants are out or emerging. Find out the points of interest in the park and explore those. And keep looking the whole time, even on the way back. It's amazing what we can miss the first time we look at something.
- 5.** Nature is all around you. Besides trees and plants, look for insects, rocks, clouds, animals, reptiles, or birds that could form a letter. And not only the creatures themselves, but also look at what they make. Can you find a letter in a bird's nest or a spider's web?



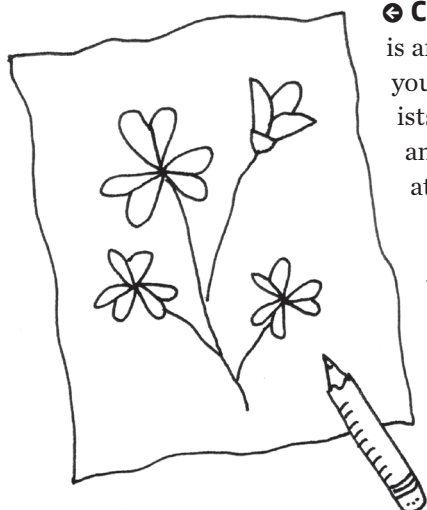
- ➡ **Send your students on a micro-safari.** Working alone or in small groups, students can study the contents of a hula-hoop placed in the grass. If you don't have hoops, seven-foot lengths of string tied in a loop work just as well. Have students keep track of their observations in a notebook. Encourage them to be as descriptive as possible (“yellow grass with three-inch, rough blades” is more precise than “grass”). Look closely, and bring along magnifying glasses if they're available. Even the most ordinary-seeming piece of ground will reveal surprises!

When you return to the classroom, allow your students to share their find-

ings. As a follow-up activity, they can classify their discoveries into categories (by color, or by plants/bugs/non-living objects). They can then practice their math and graphing skills by creating bar graphs of the various categories. Or have your students write a story pretending to be a miniature explorer searching through a grassy jungle. Their story can include how they shrunk, what they found on their adventure, and how they grew to their normal size again.



➤ **Chart the seasons.** Set aside a few minutes each morning to record your students' observations about the changing seasons. Encourage them to keep an eye out for changes in their backyards, on the way to school, and around the playground. Keep track of their discoveries on large sheets of chart paper, using a new sheet for each month. As the year progresses, not only will your students become better nature detectives, you'll create a permanent record of nature's seasonal cycles. For more information about phenology (the study of seasonal changes), check out this great website from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources: dnr.wi.gov/eek/nature/season/pheno.asp.



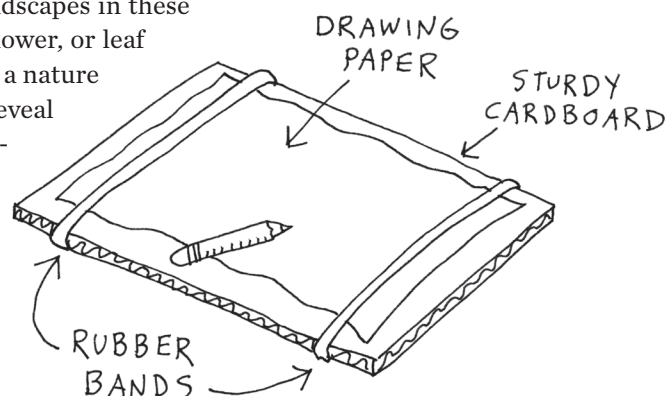
➤ **Create art outdoors.** Drawing outside is an excellent way to study nature. Before heading outdoors, you may wish to expose your students to the work of artist/naturalists such as Maria Sibylla Merian, Beatrix Potter, and Andy Goldsworthy. Examples of their work (and a gold mine of nature-related learning activities) can be found at John Caddy's wonderful website: morning-earth.org.

A clipboard makes a good outdoor drawing surface. You can also cut sturdy cardboard into pieces slightly larger than your students' drawing paper and slip a rubber band around each end; students can tuck their paper beneath the bands to hold their drawings in place.

No need to tackle vast landscapes in these sketches; a single tree, wildflower, or leaf can make a great subject for a nature drawing. Even weeds reveal their beauty when exam-

ined closely. Remind your students of the artist's rule of thumb: *Spend at least as much time looking at your subject as you do looking at your paper.*

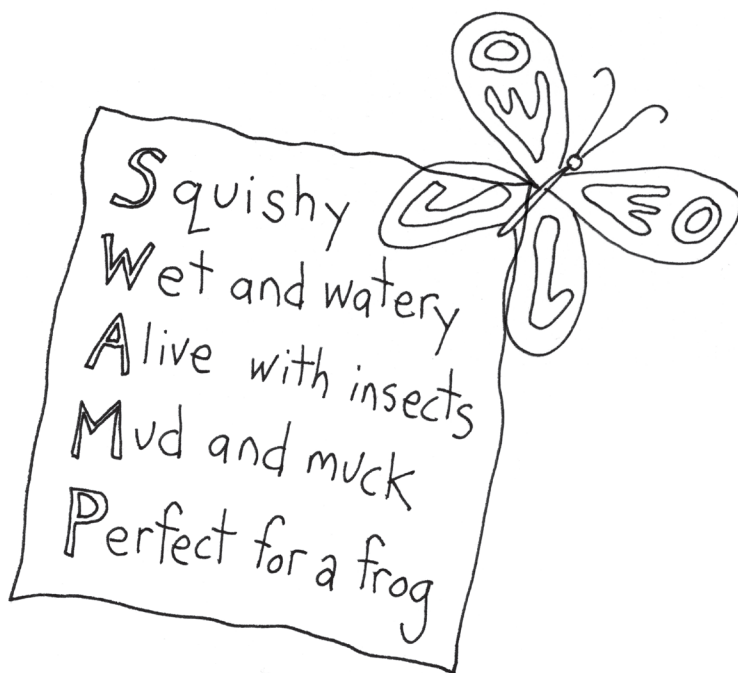
Back in the classroom students can outline their drawings with thin black markers and/or shade them with colored pencils. Finished drawings can be displayed on a bulletin board or mounted on pieces of cardstock folded in half to make one-of-a-kind note cards.



The writer's toolbox

- **Good writers know the importance of using *sensory details*.** "Quietly these letters lie" and "velvet soft beyond belief" are descriptions from *Minnesota's Hidden Alphabet* that reflect the senses of hearing and touch. Take your students on a sensory search while on a nature hike around your school. As they gently touch the natural objects they encounter, what words would they use to describe the various textures? Smooth? Prickly? Cool? Brittle? Have your students close their eyes and listen. Even in a busy city they might notice the whoosh of the wind, the creak of a tree branch, or the caw of a passing blackbird. Try rubbing a leaf or pine needle between your fingers—can your nose detect any interesting smells? In your classroom create a list of sensory words from your walk. Encourage your students to apply all five senses in whatever they write.
- **Wonderful words.** Another way authors strengthen their writing is through alliteration (using words that begin with a similar sound). "Blowing blades," "forest floors," and "looped on leafstalks" are examples of alliteration from *Minnesota's Hidden Alphabet*. Read the text again and see if your students can spot more examples. Challenge your students to use alliteration in a nature sentence of their own (*I took a summer stroll beneath the peaceful pines*). Or your class might want to create some super-alliterative nature tongue twisters (*The teeny tiny turtle tried to travel up the twisted two-ton tree trunk*).

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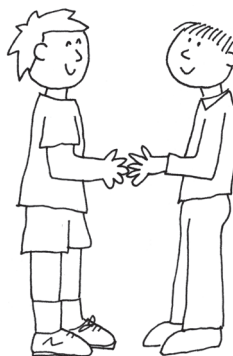
- ❶ **Nature acrostics.** Acrostics are a fun, easy, non-rhyming poetry form that lends itself well to nature descriptions. Write a word vertically down the side of the paper. Students can choose something encountered on a nature hike, a favorite plant or animal, or an image from *Minnesota's Hidden Alphabet*. Next think of descriptions relating to that object, one beginning with each letter in the object's name. Try including alliteration or sensory details. Combine these poems with classroom nature photos and drawings to create your own book celebrating the beauty of the outdoors.

Alphabet activities

- ❷ **Get your students up and moving by having them form a living alphabet.** Call out a letter and have your students bend their bodies into that shape, as in the Village People's *YMCA*. Some letters such as H and W might require a partner. Make sure your students have plenty of room!



K



H

Once they've had practice making letters, divide your class into two teams. Secretly give one team a word to spell out as a group. Start with simple words, then move on to vocabulary or spelling words. Can the rest of your class guess the mystery word?

- **You can make a unique classroom alphabet poster by taking pictures of your students posed in the shape of all twenty-six letters.** Or use the photos to spell out a classroom sign such as: Mr. Johnson's class is awesome!

Read all about it!

Here's a sampling of other books that celebrate the natural beauty of the state:

Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night, written by Joyce Sidman, illustrated by Rick Allen, Houghton Mifflin, 2010. All the creatures featured in these beautiful poems are native to Minnesota. Be sure to check out Joyce's other poetry books as well, including *Song of the Water Boatman* and *Butterfly Eyes*.

Big Belching Bog, written by Phyllis Root, illustrated by Betsy Bowen, University of Minnesota Press, 2010. A fascinating description of a unique ecosystem, from two of Minnesota's finest children's book creators.

Wild About Minnesota Birds: A Youth's Guide to the Birds of Minnesota, by Adele Porter, Adventure Publications, 2007. A treasure trove of information for bird watchers of any age. A must-have if there's a birdfeeder outside your classroom window.

You and your students can discover more "hidden alphabets" in these unique ABC books:

The Butterfly Alphabet, by Kjell B. Sandved, Scholastic, 1996. In an undertaking requiring more than twenty-five years, Kjell discovered all the letters of the alphabet in the patterns found on butterfly wings.

Alphabet City, by Stephen T. Johnson, Viking, 1995, and *The City ABC Book*, by Zoran Milich, Kids Can Press, 2001. In these two books, alphabet letters are hidden in the shapes found within a city.

A Fabulous Fair Alphabet, by Debra Frasier, Beach Lane Books, 2010. Debra is another well-respected Minnesota author/illustrator; most of the photos from this book were taken at the Minnesota State Fair.

Vocabulary power!

These words from *Minnesota's Hidden Alphabet* may be unfamiliar to some of your students. Review them with your class either before or after reading the text.

Bogs – Wet, spongy ground with soil composed of decaying matter

Camouflaged – Hidden

Conceal – To hide something

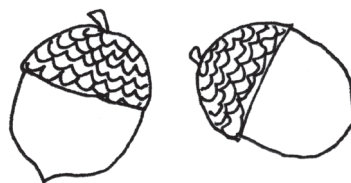
Deftly – Skillfully

Gritty – Sandy

Kinks – Sharp twists or curves

Roving – Wandering

Wondrous – Wonderful, remarkable, amazing



About the book's creators



Joe Rossi is a former newspaper photographer with more than thirty years' experience in the field. He is a Master Naturalist who enjoys canoeing, taking walks in the woods, and exploring the great outdoors. He, his wife Judy, and their horse live in northern Minnesota. Examples of Joe's work can be seen at joerossiphotography.com.



David LaRochelle is a former elementary school teacher and the author or illustrator of over twenty-five books for young people, including *The Best Pet of All* and *1 + 1 = 5 and Other Unlikely Additions*. As a member of the State Parks Passport Club, David has traveled to all sixty-six state parks throughout Minnesota. When he's not writing, drawing, or visiting schools, he loves to carve fancy jack-o'-lanterns, which you can view at his website, davidlarochelle.net.