

June - Week 4

The Amazing Cattail

Cattails are very common plants in areas with wet soil. Most people are familiar with these “hot dog on a stick” plants. Despite being quite common, cattails are very interesting plants. The flat, strap-like leaves of a cattail plant can be so very long- up to 10 feet. It is amazing that a non-woody plant has such long and sturdy leaves! The internal structure of these leaves distributes stress within a leaf, so it doesn’t break on a windy day. When a cross section is cut into one of these leaves, you can see long, air-filled cellular tubes inside. These tubes carry oxygen down to the base of the plant, which help the roots live underwater.

Did you know that cattails have two different parts on the spikes? The lower, more obvious “hot dog” creates the many fluffy seeds that float away to start new plants. Above that, but on the same spike, is the less obvious part that creates the pollen. This pollen floats down to pollinate the lower part. Once the pollen is distributed, the upper part becomes less conspicuous.

Find and examine a cattail plant in some detail. You can often find cattails growing around local ponds and wetlands or even in shallow road ditches and swales where water gathers. If you are not able to access a plant, a photo of a cattail will work as well. Examine a leaf, noting the detail of the subtle changes in its shape from base to tip. Measure the length of the leaf. If possible, cut a cross-section of a leaf towards the base and look at the internal structure. Consider how the leaf shape and internal structure help such a slim leaf to stand so tall without breaking. Examine the spike, including the flower parts (the hot dogs). Can you see evidence of the higher, pollen making flower? What stage is the seed making flower in? Is it distributing the fluffy seeds yet? In your journal, draw and label a leaf and a spike with flower parts. Be sure to record things you know about how this plant is successful in surviving and reproducing.

