Bliss traces the tracks coming from a squirrel hole in the snow. Below is a drawing of a Sparrow Hawk from Christopher's nature journal.

''tester'' for the program.

''We had kid committees and we told what we liked and didn't like,'' he said. ''My favorite (unit) was probably the birds because we got to do experiments with coloring. It's kind of amazing how some birds are so bright or how woodpeckers can stay on a tree.''

''You could watch nature programs and stuff, but, with this, you get to do it live,'' he added. ''You can see it up close and not on your TV screen.''

Another ''tester,'' Bliss Hotchkiss, vouched for the value of that.

A 12-year-old from Falconer, she said, ''I've just always liked nature since I was really little and I've always liked being in the woods. There's a woods by my house and that's where my spot is.''

Spot?

''We had to choose an area where we studied and drew sketches from or wrote about,'' she explained, before noting how much she ''loved to write.''

As designed by Ms. Nelson, the curriculum includes regular opportunities for children to write, draw and make scientific observations as they work through eight activity booklets.

While some of the subjects covered – such as birds and habitats – typically are included in schools' science curricula, the booklets also aim, first and foremost, to teach youngsters how to *observe* the living things and processes at work in their surroundings.

''Learning how to see is something that's not always taught,'' Baldwin said. ''Once you acquire the skills and the techniques, you don't have to be seeing a sunset over the Grand Canyon.''

''It's all about observation,'' Carol Birtzer, assistant director of education at RTPI, agreed. ''If you have heightened observation skills, everything you see has value.''

Including something as seemingly mundane as a rotting tree stump.

That's what Christopher frequently studies on outings to his neighbor's back yard. Although fenced in and tiny, he finds plenty of things to investigate in that patch of the world.

''Sometimes when I have no clue what something is and I don't think it's important, it turns out to be something really neat,'' he said of his investigations.

Baldwin could understand fully.

''There are scientific questions that no one has answered right in your own back yard,'' he said. ''There are organisms right in your soil that no one has discovered.''

If that's the first lesson of the ''My Place'' program, the last may be one of two things, according to RTPI staff.

First, it is hoped that children will develop an intimate ''connection'' with a place – the sense of ownership that the program name implies. Baldwin remembers his own childhood experiences.

''I can easily conjure up the places now and map them in my mind. I considered certain places to be my places. I didn't even think any adults knew they existed.''

If children today can make those connections, Baldwin and Ms. Birtzer said they might grow up to have a better understanding of environmental issues and ''not be what Roger Tory Peterson called instant environmentalists,'' who support environmental legislation but have no real sense for its implications.

''Helping children to hone these skills is really essential to their making choices as adults,'' Ms. Birtzer said. ''How can an adult even possibly comprehend the interactions in a rain forest if they don't understand the interactions in a forest near their house?''

Bliss, for one, is already on her way to making that next set of connections.

''We affect nature in a lot of ways by everything we do,'' she said. ''When we overhunt or pollute things, we break up the chain and it's ruining nature in some ways, slowly. But in some ways we're still good for nature, too.''

For further information about My Place activities for children, contact the Roger Tory Peterson Institute at (716) 665-2473. The program is free with a family membership.