

Nature Kids

Make your own flying-Chimney-Swift! paper plate Armadillo

Armadillos are really cool animals that live here in Texas. Here is a way you can make your own armadillo.

Materials:

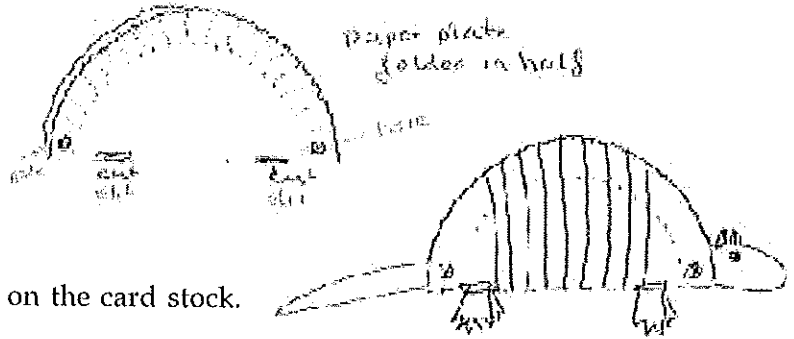
1 paper plate (the cheap kind)

1 piece of card stock

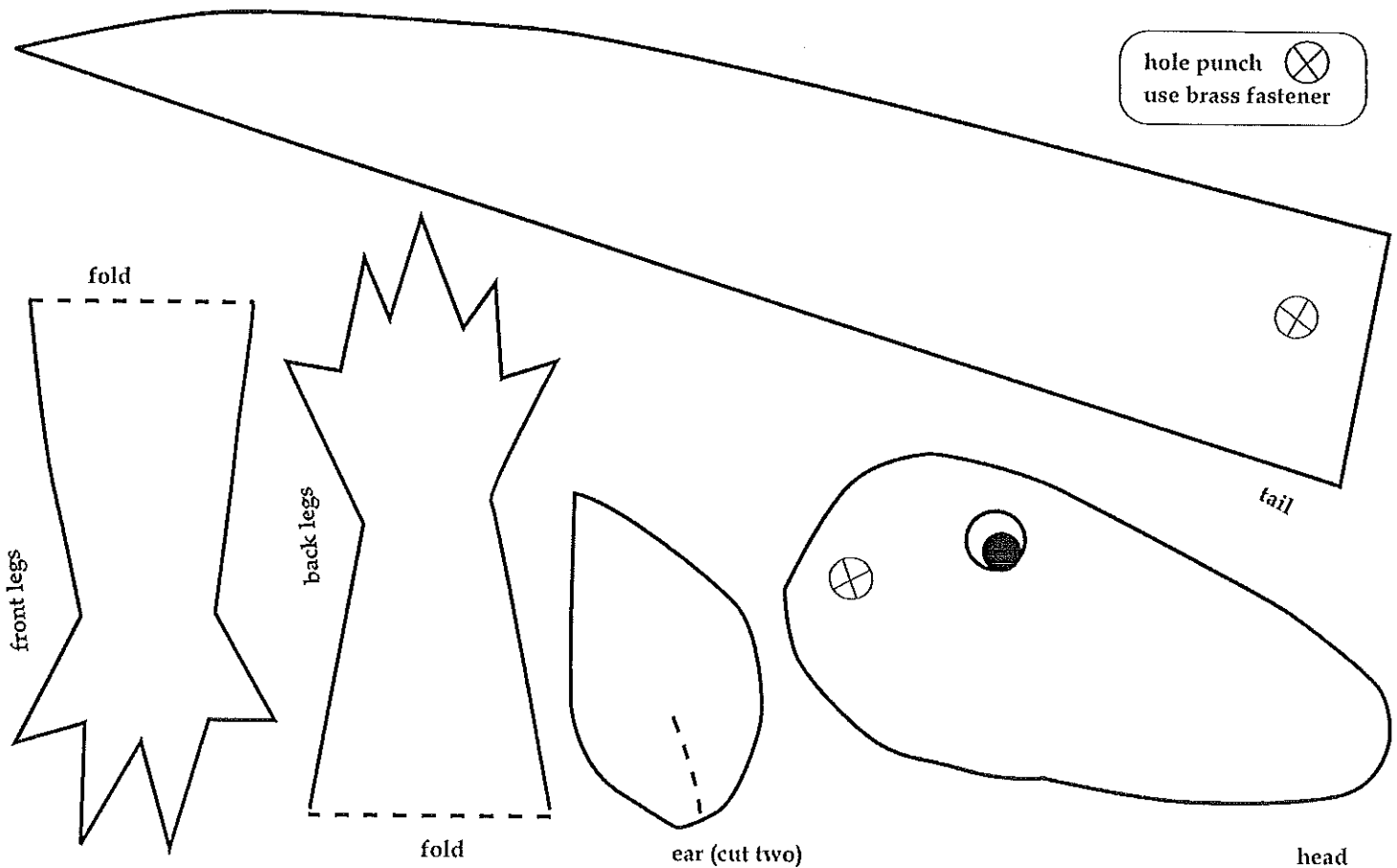
2 googly eyes (optional)

2 brass paper fasteners

Stapler, hole punch, scissors, pencil, markers or paint, glue.



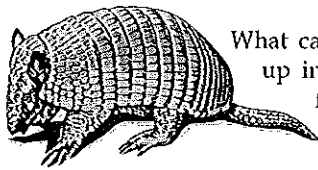
1. Trace and cut out the head, legs, tail and ears on the card stock. (remember to fold the card stock for the legs)
2. Fold the paper plate in half.
3. Cut two slits in the fold of the plate, one for each pair of legs (see illustration)
4. Punch a hole at each end of the plate, near the fold (see illustration)
5. Assemble: fold the ears and staple to the head, attach the head and tail with the paper fasteners, slide the legs through the slits, glue the folds of the plate together.
6. Paint or color with markers. You can put nine bands on the back to make the kind of armadillo we see here.



To find out more about armadillos, read the Teachers' Corner in this issue
or It's an Armadillo! By Bianca Lavies.

Teacher's Corner

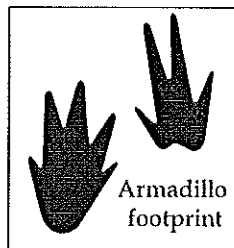
Awesome Armadillo



What can roll into a ball, jump straight up in the air, dig a burrow, and eat fire ants? The one and only, Texas State Mammal - the armadillo!!

Actually, there are about 20 species of armadillos, ranging in size from the 7 inch long, Fairy Armadillo, to the 3-foot long, 120-pound Giant Armadillo. There are some fossils of prehistoric armadillos that were as large as a small elephant. One was found right here in Houston, along Brae's Bayou in 1955 and is now in the Museum of Natural Science.

Armadillos and their close relatives: sloths and anteaters, all come from South America. Only our state mascot, the nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*), has ventured into the U.S., and only then in the last 130 years. Records show that in the 1870's, nine-banded armadillos, or "peba" were found in the United States only in the lower Rio Grande Valley; 20 years later they had moved as far north as Austin. The earliest record of armadillos in Louisiana is around 1925, and by the 1930's they had reached Oklahoma. Now they have spread into the southeast as far as Florida and Georgia.



Armadillo footprint

Their northward movement is limited by their ability to survive in cold weather. Although they are warm-blooded mammals, they don't hibernate and cannot endure extended periods of freezing temperatures.

Armadillos are famous (or notorious) for their digging ability. Each individual may dig several burrows within its range. Burrows can be up to 15 feet long and delve as much as 4 feet under ground. Most burrows have several entrances and are sometimes shared by two or more armadillos. Other animals, including raccoons and opossums, quickly use empty burrows.

In general, armadillos are nocturnal animals, spending their days sleeping and their nights exploring for food. However, in the northern reaches of their range, they will sometimes reverse that pattern in the winter, hunting for food during the day when temperatures are warmer. Their diet consists primarily of insects



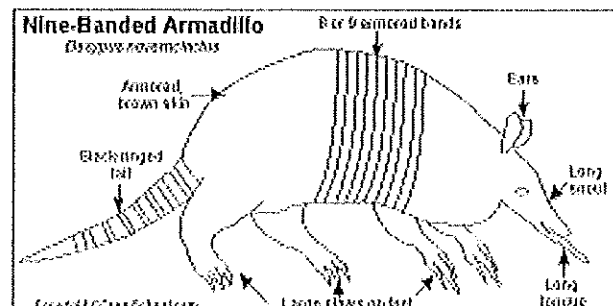
earthworms, spiders, and snails, with the occasional berries or juicy roots. Beetle larvae (grubs) and ants, including fire ants, are reputed to be favorites. They hunt primarily by smell. According to Bianca Lavies, they can, literally, sniff out the trail of a cricket. Like their anteater relatives, they have long sticky tongues that they use to lap up their food. They do have teeth, 28 -32 small & flat molars, but they don't appear to use them much, if at all.

The armor from which they get their name "el armadillo" (Spanish for the little armored one) is actually hardened skin, unlike the shells of turtles which are extensions of their skeleton or the exoskeletons of invertebrates. In spite of its reputation, really is not so tough that a coyote or bobcat couldn't bite through it. But it is great for scrambling through briars and brambles where its predators can't go. As such, armadillos tend to like living in areas with dense, scrubby undergrowth. In addition to their protective armor, they can run surprisingly fast when frightened. And they JUMP! straight up in the air, all four legs splayed out, wispy fur flying, before they bolt off into the underbrush.

Interestingly, Armadillos are the only other animals (besides people) that can contract leprosy. Because of this, they are used extensively in treatment research. However, this does not mean that they are a danger to us. As in humans, leprosy is rare among armadillos, and it is not a very contagious disease. The chances of contracting leprosy even from a pet armadillo are very, very small; from a wild one, even less.

Our nine-banded armadillos always produce quadruplets. They mate in late summer or early fall and give birth in the spring. The "pups" are active almost from the moment they are born. Their armor is soft and waxy feeling. As they grow, it hardens.

The pups stay in the nest, nursing, for about two months. Then they will venture forth with their mother, learning to hunt for tasty grubs, ants, and other treats. Soon they will go their own way, wandering the woods and scrublands, hunting for food and digging their burrows, peaceful, unobtrusive, but fascinating, animals.



See the "Nature Kids" page for instructions to make your own awesome armadillo!