



Nature Walks

Andrea Mynard dons her wellies and sets out to explore the spring countryside with her daughter

Exploring new ways of drawing children into an enjoyable intimacy with the natural world can be wonderful at any time of year. But because Spring is a time of such change, it's a particularly exciting time to get outside and enjoy nature walks. Whether setting out on a meander around a nearby park or field, or an expedition into ancient woodland, there are all sorts of signs of Spring to spot, including newly green trees, catkins, wildflowers and birds' nests. And while nature walks can help children learn about science, understand the world around them and be beneficial to their health, they're great fun too – for parents as well as kids!

According to a recent National Trust survey there shouldn't be too much reluctance amongst our children to join us on nature walks – seventy seven percent of children aged 5 – 12 say they would like to go on more outdoor adventures. Den building and sleeping under the stars featured high on wish lists.

Bearing in mind these aspirations, it seems a shame that only 27 percent of children say they go on lots of outdoor adventures and that 17 percent rarely or never go on them. The National Trust has been helping to entice families outside with programmes such as Wild Child and a walking festival with a focus on families. Activities at National Trust properties involved in these programmes include seaside safaris, building bug hotels, pond dipping and Easter Egg hunts. Lisa Gledhill of the National Trust feels it's good to "create opportunities for children to play and explore outside in a very unstructured way". A Natural Play Trail at Box Hill in Surrey is an example of how a walk in the woods has turned into an exciting

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experience for children of all ages who are encouraged to climb trees, balance on stepping stones and cross log bridges.

getting prepared

Preparation for a nature walk can help build anticipation and add to the fun. Whether encouraging children to think about what they may need in their own backpack (paper bags to collect interesting leaves in, snacks and maybe a magnifying glass to examine treasures) or using crayons to draw maps of the planned route, there are many ways to prepare. Maps might include a large oak tree that they know, a stile, stream or area of woodland, and discussing the route will help build excitement about

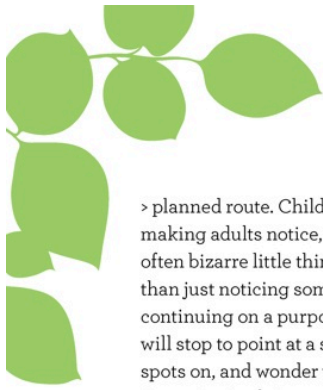
the adventure ahead. As will talking about the sorts of things that they might hunt for. School age children may enjoy making a Sensory Hunt sheet with boxes to tick when they spot things like a tree with new leaves, a bee or a worm. There could also be boxes to tick when they hear things such as a bird chirping or leaves rustling. And finding something that feels warm from the sun or cool in the shade will also encourage children to engage with their surroundings.

On a recent expedition into the woods with my four year old daughter and two of her friends, I talked to them as we walked towards the woodland about the sorts of animals who might live there. They suggested a squirrel, a fox and a rabbit and I then suggested they pretend to be these creatures as we went towards the wood. Not surprisingly, the fox chased the rabbit into the wood, but the particularly nifty rabbit was faster than the fox and hid amongst a fallen tree. The squirrel, fox and rabbit all soon forgot about their new identities when they became distracted by climbing over the tree trunk and then noticing some of the small details around it. Fungi and moss growing on the fallen wood caught their attention and, of course, poo. Rabbit droppings in this case, but they'd already spotted plenty of sheep dung before entering the wood.

looking deeper

Finding that children are distracted by small details from the activity they set out on is obviously a common theme of nature walks, particularly with pre-school age children. And it can often lead to the most enjoyable and interesting times. Whether walking along a river or exploring a wood, it's often great to linger in a small area, rather than trying to continue on a >





> planned route. Children are great at making adults notice, and think about, the often bizarre little things around us. Rather than just noticing some fallen wood, and continuing on a purposeful walk, children will stop to point at a stick with orange spots on, and wonder what has caused it. An ancient oak tree won't just be noted and walked past; there will be questions about the holes in it and who lives there. It's easy to stimulate the natural curiosity of children on nature walks and often makes us more observant as parents too.

If you feel children do need encouragement to look closer, you can organise a 'micro-hike' with a few pieces of string and a magnifying glass. Talk about the sorts of small creatures that might live in the area you're in - maybe spiders, beetles or ants. And discuss what it might feel like to be a tiny creature moving slowly through long grass, or through leaves. Now give each child a piece of string and encourage them to imagine what kind of path a spider, for instance, would take, and to lay their string along this path. They might want to follow this path themselves, thinking about what it would feel like to be a spider and what you would see. Their magnifying glass will come in handy here to look at the tiny details.

springtime fun

Looking for signs of the creatures that may live in the area you're walking in can be fun too, and encourage children to think about the other creatures we share our natural environment with. Birds' nests are great to look for in spring, but children may enjoy looking for other 'homes' that animals have made. And poo will obviously feature again. At the National Trust's Snowhill Manor in Gloucestershire, children can actually follow a Poo and Paws trail. If your children have ever wondered what badger poo looks like, how big a fox's paw print is or how many spines a hedgehog has, the answers are to be found in Snowhill's wooded hillside garden. Models of the animal droppings and paw prints are part of the trail, but they will probably prompt children to look for the real thing. While hunting for bat droppings, owl pellets and badger prints, children can learn fascinating facts about animals and birds, many of whom only come out at night but leave their droppings and prints behind.



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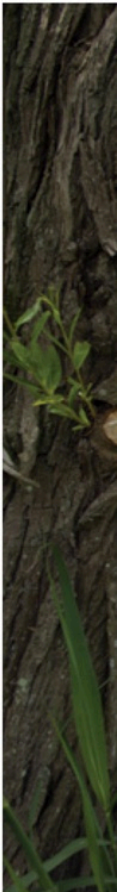
Tips for nature walks

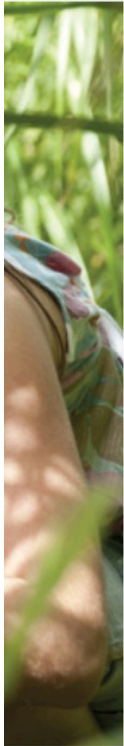
- **CHANGE THE NAME** - Don't call a walk a walk, call it an adventure and it will become one
- **GET COUNTING** - Pre-school age children love counting (trees, birds spotted, types of wildflowers)
- **GO AFTER DARK** - Go on a bat walk as it gets dark
- **GAMBLE WITH YOUR ROUTE** - Try a penny hike. Simply decide if heads or tails is left or right, and at every junction flip the coin and see where you're sent
- **COLLECT TREASURES** - Take a children's magnifying glass and tubs or bags for collecting treasures
- **KEEP IT CHILD LED** - Games and hunts can be great fun but don't be rigid about sticking to your plan - when children lead the way it often becomes more interesting.

While pre-school age children often only need long grass or some woodland to have great outdoor adventures, older children sometimes need an exciting challenge to get them interested and you may need to be more creative. Spring activities at National Trust properties aimed at the whole family include 'Nature Detectives' at Runnymede, Berkshire, where you can walk through native woodlands with the dappled sunlight revealing swathes of bluebells. At Avebury in Wiltshire, 'Flock Around the Rocks' will indulge (or cultivate) an interest in all things avian. National Trust Rangers will guide a walk in search of farmland birds, followed by activities in the farmyard.

treasure hunting

The National Trust has also introduced Geocaching to many of their properties, a high-tech treasure hunt for the whole family which may encourage an interest in outdoor adventures even for those children who like their fun digital. At many Trust properties you can borrow a GPS unit and go treasure hunting during your visit - seeking out a geocache of treasure. The geocache is a small waterproof treasure box hidden outdoors and most have a log book for you to leave a message in. The satisfaction of finding the box is a reward in itself but often you will find a strange array of trinkets that people have left to swap. This can range





from a small toy to a pine cone or a pretty pebble and it's important to remember that if you take a treasure out of the box, you should leave something else in its place. Sometimes there may even be a clue leading you on to more hidden treasure.

At Wicken Fen, the UK's oldest Nature Reserve, four caches are hidden on a trail where you can see Konik ponies and Highland cattle grazing and perhaps spot kingfisher, roe deer or cuckoos. Each cache has a wildlife or habitat themed box, with a family-friendly activity to do such as mini-beast hunting or cloud-spotting. While at the Clent Hills, near Birmingham, four caches have been hidden to provide a family-friendly ramble that takes in woodland and meadows.

getting creative

Whether the family has been on a Geocaching hunt or rambled around a field, the fun can continue when you get

home from nature walks too. Warmed by hot chocolate, children may be inspired to make dens in their own garden with leaves and sticks. They may be busy examining treasures collected or even want to make bird feeders by sticking birdseeds to large pine cones – fat is used for the 'glue' and they can be hung from trees or fences in your garden. Owl masks can be cut from old cereal boxes and decorated with feathers and leaves. And scrapbooks can be compiled with drawings or paintings

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of the expedition and interesting leaves glued in. You can even encourage children to make 'paint' for their illustrations by adding water to materials collected outdoors such as mud, crushed leaves or flowers. And children able to write may produce great creative writing if they're particularly inspired by their adventures.

Hopefully children and parents will all feel better, physically and mentally, from outdoor adventures too. According to Lisa Gledhill, "Various studies show that children get a lot of physical as well as mental benefits from just being outdoors – even five minutes outside a day has been shown to have an impact." And with government guidelines recommending that adults walk 10,000 steps a day for health, a nature walk could be a great way for busy parents to enjoy an environmentally friendly work-out while appreciating our natural surroundings – and having fun with our children.

USEFUL RESOURCES

woods.org.uk and naturedetectives.org.uk - great printable play packs with ideas for outdoor adventures. nationaltrust.org.uk/walkingfestival and wild-child.org.uk for further information about National Trust events and ideas for outdoor adventures generally.

FURTHER READING

- Run Wild!: Outdoor Games and Adventures *Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield* tinyurl.com/runwildbook
- Spring Nature Activities for Children *Irmgard Kutsch* tinyurl.com/springnatureacts
- Earthwise: Environmental Crafts and Activities with Young Children *Carol Petrash* tinyurl.com/earthwisecrafts
- The Rhythm of Family: Discovering a Sense of Wonder Through the Seasons *Amanda Blake Soule* tinyurl.com/rhythmsoffam
- *Andrea lives in rural Gloucestershire with her partner and four year old daughter, Ruby, combining freelance writing with life as a full-time mum. She enjoys an outdoor life with her family, whether growing organic vegetables or heading off for adventures in the surrounding countryside.*