

Outside With Nature

Tired of being cooped up indoors? Do you need some fresh air and sunlight? Have an adventure outdoors and calm the winter doldrums with some free activities that you can do alone or with your family.

Scientific studies have shown that connecting with nature improves problem-solving skills, increases self-esteem, compassion and understanding for others, as well as our planet. Exploring the outdoors can take place anytime of day, allowing you to learn about yourself and the world around you. So bundle up and get going!

Sunrise Spectacular

Task: Find out the next day's sunrise time. Set your alarm clock and get outside while it is still dark. You may want to make a thermos full of hot cocoa to enjoy as you are watching the sun come up.

Bonus Challenge:

- Find a spot where you can sit quietly so that the birds can forget you are there. Count how many birds you hear.
- Once inside, write a nature haiku about your sunrise experience - think about the colors, animals, birds, sounds, what did you feel for your poem.
 - Haiku are poems that contain three lines. The first line contains five syllables, the second line contains seven syllables, and the final line contains five syllables. Use your imagination; it's harder than you think.
 - A Haiku is a traditional form of Japanese poetry that usually has a focus on nature.



Early Morning Sun

1, 2 3,4 5

Bright pink and orange, freezing

1 2 3 4,5 6,7

Drinking hot cocoa

1, 2 3 4,5

Buried Treasure

Supplies:

- small "treasure" box such as a shoebox or tin mint candy box
- paper
- pencil or marker
- compass - optional



What's more fun or adventurous than finding buried treasure? Many animals in the wild bury "treasure" as a means of survival. Squirrels and other rodents stash nuts and seeds for the winter when food is harder to find.

Blue jays are known for hiding acorns and forgetting where they hid them. Most of the oak forests in North America have been grown from these forgotten acorns. This practice of burying food is often called caching.

Task:

- Find a small item to place in your "treasure" box or write a message to the finder.
- Next, go outside and bury your box in a secret spot.
- Then, draw a map for someone to follow to locate the "treasure."
 - Draw the landscape to where the treasure is located. Include landmarks such as trees or buildings.
 - Consider counting the steps it takes to get from a specific starting point and writing on the map how many steps to take in each direction.
- Mark the treasure on the map with a large X.
- Do it again, and this time the other person buries a treasure and makes the map.



Fir

Conifer Search



Pine

Task: Winter is a good time to search for conifers. We often call these trees pines, spruces, firs, and evergreens. Many people call all of these trees the same thing, but in fact there are hundreds of different kinds of conifers.

As you walk outside, see if you can pick out the differences by looking at the color shade of the leaves/needles, shape of the needles, height of the tree, and the cones. These are all good indicators to the different type of trees.

See if you can spot five different kinds of conifers. The Highland Park Arboretum is a good place to find many conifers, and the trees are each labeled as to the kind of conifer you have found.

Tips: There is a quick way to tell these three common conifers apart. Look for the number of needles that come out of the same spot on a twig. If a twig has needles in groups of two, three, or five, you can call it a pine. If the twig has its needles as only one, it's a good bet you've got a fir or a spruce. Pull off a needle and roll it between your fingers and thumb. Pine has round needles, fir has flat needles, and spruce has square needles.

How to Remember:

Pine-pairing of 2,3,5 round needles.

Fir-Flat, friendly needles.

Spruce-Sharp, spiny, square needles.



Spruce

Snow Fort

Supplies:

- snow
- water
- milk jug, shoe box or other block maker

Task: Plan this activity right after a big snowfall and get the whole household outdoors to build the fort or an igloo.

- Make snow blocks in a box or jug by packing in snow.
- Dump out the block.
- Wet them down gently and let them freeze overnight.
- The next day pile them up to build your own fort.
- If you do a roof, be careful so it doesn't cave in.
- If you don't have enough blocks for a whole fort, at least build one wall.

The Inuit people live in the Arctic regions and their word "iglu" means "house" no matter what the house is made out of. Igloos are mostly made from snow and are dome shape.

The Pawnee on the Great Plains built their earth lodges similar to the igloos in a circular, dome-shape, but much larger with a timber framework covered by layers of branches, grass, and earth or mud. People used what was available in nature to make their homes.

Igloo



Earth Lodge





Frisbee Obstacle Course

Supplies:

- frisbee or tin pie plate

Task: Create a frisbee obstacle course built with snow, which you can pack and form into spaces and places the frisbee must land as you move through each task. The parentheses indicate how to score at each task.

Your course might consist of:

- a mini-snowman (clip it)
- a snow circle or snow angel (land in it)
- snow cones (land in and around them, extra point if your frisbee stays on the top of the cone)
- a snow arch (go through it)
- and a snow wall (fly over it)

Half of the fun will be creating the course; the other half is playing it.

No snow? Find items from your backyard, like sticks & leaves. If using items from inside your house, ask permission first to take items outside, to include in the obstacle course.

The frisbee had its origins in the tin pie plate. The Frisbie Baking Company (1871-1958) sold many pies to college students in New England. It didn't take long for the college students to discover a creative use for the empty pie tins, flinging them at friends and flying them to and fro.

An inventor named Walter Morrison later created the first actual frisbee from plastic, calling it the Pluto Platter (1955) and selling the design to Wham-O in 1957, who changed the name to Frisbee.

Destination Exploration



Supplies:

- blindfold or stocking cap

The destination you are exploring is your own backyard. Some of the best nature finds can be right out your back door. If you don't have a yard, discover things near your home. Try a little bit of everything--from watching birds to tracking growth and life in a particular tree. Trees can clean our air and protect our drinking water, as well as provide homes and food for animals.

Keep a journal of what you find from nature in your own backyard throughout the year and note any changes such as to how much a tree has grown or what types of birds and animals have visited.

Nebraska is home of Arbor Day, which was started in 1854 by pioneer J. Sterling Morton. He was an agriculture enthusiast and immediately saw the need for more trees on the prairie when he moved to Nebraska. By 1872, he had convinced the State Board of Agriculture to promote a day for everyone to plant trees "both forest and fruit." The first Arbor Day was celebrated that year with more than a million trees planted in Nebraska alone. Nebraska's early homesteaders planted so many trees, the state was originally known as the "Tree Planters' State."

Challenge: As you are out exploring your own backyard, play a game of "which tree was it?" with two or more people.

- One person is blindfolded or closes their eyes and are spun around a couple of times
- Then carefully lead them to a tree; be kind, tell them if they have to step over or around something
- Let them smell and feel the tree all over
- Lead them back to the starting point and spin them around a couple more times
- See if they can pick out the correct tree they touched
- Switch people and do it again



Moonlight Walk



Task: A cold, crisp evening walk can feel almost magical under the winter evening sky. Plan a moonlight walk when the moon is full and bring along a flashlight for each walker.

- Take time to stop and look at the sky. You could make it a contest to see who will be the first to spot a star as they are harder to see in the moonlight.
- Are there shadows present? Seek them out, as your body or trees block out the light reflected by the moon. The moon does not actually shine, but is actually reflecting sunlight.
- Gaze at the moon and seek out its craters
- Listen to the night sounds

Many animals begin their day when night falls. Nocturnal is the term used to describe this behavior, but many of these same animals are hibernating during the cold winter months. Talk about some species that are active at night, such as bats, owls, coyotes, nine-banded armadillos, and raccoons and why they might be more active at night. Keep a special journal, documenting what birds and animals you experience in nature at night.

Journal entries are sometimes called field notes and include the date and time, the weather, and the location of the animal or bird. These notes can include a detailed description of what you are seeing, such as its color pattern and the activity of the animal. You can also make a quick drawing or take a picture.



coyote



nine-banded armadillo