



REDDING NATURE EXPLORERS

SEPTEMBER ACTIVITIES & CHALLENGES

Mark Twain Library, New Pond Farm Education Center, and conservationist John McLeran continue to partner on exciting nature adventures for you and your family to enjoy. Since many of you have been taking advantage of our splendid open spaces, we have developed a series of activities to enhance your explorations in the natural world. This ongoing program is easy to follow and is designed to help you discover and appreciate our rich selection of local flora and fauna. While the program is geared for parents with children between the ages of four and nine, adults and children of all ages can take pleasure in these activities.



RED-TAILED HAWK

This large raptor is quite common in our area and can be spotted spiraling skyward up in the morning sun to catch thermal updrafts that will allow them to glide for hours. Its broad wings are a trait shared with other Buteos like our Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks. On a lucky day there will be two or more hawks performing some, not to be missed, spectacular aerial acrobatics.

Activities

Learn to recognize their distinctive “kee-eeee-arr” call and watch one of their flights. Learn about their favorite foods and the special adaptations which make them successful predators, including their vision, talons, and razor-sharp beaks.



GOLDENROD

There are over 50 species of goldenrod in New England and nearly all of them have cheery yellow flowers. These common roadside residents grow two to four feet high and their heavy pollen is consumed by a wide variety of our pollinators. The nectar from these blossoms has a major influence on the taste and smell of fall honey, making it more pungent and darker in color. Note: Ragweed, the source of many allergies, because of its light wind-blown pollen, grows nearby. Goldenrod is often unfairly blamed for fall sneezes.

Activities

As you pass a stand of goldenrods see how many species you can spot, based on the blossom and leaf shape. Count how many different pollinators are enjoying an individual plant at the same time — beetles, bees, flies, butterflies — what a popular restaurant!! Also, take a smell, some are very fragrant.



WOOLY BEAR CATERPILLAR / ISABELLA TIGER MOTH

In the fall, these beautiful bristly caterpillars are often seen scurrying off to what appears to be a very important meeting. They are actually seeking out a safe winter shelter, preferring to hibernate under fallen leaves or logs. In the spring, they will spin a brown cocoon of silk and bristles, in which they will be transformed into delicate Isabella Tiger Moths. The length of the black and rust colored bands is said to be a predictor of the severity of the coming winter.

Activities

Look for them in your back yard or almost any place with leaves. You can often find them while you rake leaves into a pile – which children love to jump in. Take a look to see if there are more black or rust bands and if different caterpillars have different width bands. Place them gently on the ground and see how long it takes them to travel 12”.



STRIPED SKUNK

These beautiful members of the weasel family, are famous for the musk glands at the base of their tails. They are not confrontational and prefer to quietly go about their business of searching for grubs in your lawn or insects at the base of decaying trees. Skunks need protein and they will use their long front claws to dig a yellow jacket nest out of the ground to eat the larvae and adults. Their fur is so thick they are not much bothered by the stings. We think baby skunks rank near the top of the “cutest of all mammals” list, especially when they waddle in a line after their mother and raise their tails simultaneously as warning flags when spooked. Note: Skunks do not spray unless they are cornered or provoked. If one comes across your path at night, just let it pass by and admire its unique pattern. Their black and white colors serve as a warning to other nocturnal animals, saying, “Stay Away!” Great Horned Owls have a poorly developed sense of smell and are one of the few predators that ignore the warning and famously dine on skunks.

Activities

Peak out in the morning to see if there are any signs of digging in your lawn. Perhaps as you hike along a trail you will see scrapings on rotting logs or the remains of a yellowjacket nest. Note – don’t get too close, there may still be some lingering members of the colony.



WOODCHUCKS

This is one of our true hibernating mammals! As a large member of the rodent family, it has awesome opposing (and ever-growing) front teeth that are perfect for clipping and eating a wide variety of plants. These clever neighbors have an elaborate underground den complete with a bedrooms, a bathroom, blind tunnels to fool predators like foxes, and several exits for safety. September is the perfect month for woodchuck watching—they are eating as much as they can in our yards, gardens, and along roadsides, building up a healthy layer of fat that can be used for energy during their months of slumber.

Activities

Learn about the fabulous teeth of woodchucks, beavers and other rodents. What are CT’s three hibernating mammals? What is hibernation? What are CT’s catnapping mammals and how do they behave differently than hibernators during the winter?



ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

If you have enjoyed researching and observing our recommendations above, continue on with the below listings. They will take more time to find and observe, but well worth the effort.

HAWK MIGRATIONS ARE STARTING!

Keep your eyes to the skies, especially on clear days right after a storm. If you are lucky, you may see dozens, hundreds, or thousands (yes—thousands) of hawks circling high overhead in “kettles”. Sharpen up your hawk identification skills. Register for updates through Connecticut Audubon: ct.audubon.org/hawkwatch

WILD GRAPES

You may actually be captivated by the sweet scent of ripened grapes before you see their vines. They may be found almost anywhere in town. Note that there are a number of varieties with different shaped leaves. All varieties make very good grape jelly, but have never produced what would be considered a good wine. From bears to box turtles, discover the wide variety of wildlife that devour this fall harvest.

LITTLE BLUESTEM GRASS

Once the major grass of the prairies, it is still quite common in open fields (Saugatuck Falls – Fred Schroeder Meadow, Brinkerhoff Preserve) here in Redding. In the spring it is greenish purplish and grows in bunches. By September it has transitioned to the most beautiful light - earthtone reddish brown. Caught on a late September afternoon, in the right light, a mass of these grasses will take your breath away.

To catchup on past activities, nature treasure hunts, stories and videos relating to Redding’s plants and animals, please click here.

To find out about New Pond Farm Education Center memberships, please click here.

How It Works

Each month you will receive a list of hands-on activities to enjoy either around where you live or in one of our many open spaces. All the animals and plants have been carefully chosen because they are relatively common to our area and are more easily found in that month. We encourage you to guide your child/children to respond to what they see/hear/smell; they may wish to draw a picture of, write about, or take a photo of their discoveries. We would love to share their work on our social media sites: send to sarah@marktwainlibrary.org or info@newpondfarm.org

OR tag us on Facebook, Instagram @newpondfarm or @marktwainlibraryct, or on Twitter @newpondfarm or @mtlredding

Email any of your nature questions to:
askanaturalist@newpondfarm.org

The library will have a list of children's books that relate to the creatures featured each month.

Before You Go

Picking, picking up what you have found. In Town open spaces, all plants and animals are protected by Town ordinances so please enjoy things with your exploring eyes. Members of New Pond Farm Education Center are invited to explore their 102-acre property, following the same guidelines.

Poison Ivy: We advise you and your children to stay on the trails and to learn to recognize this common neighbor; "leaves of three let it be."

Ticks are out and about, but staying on the trails lowers your risk. Living in Fairfield County, we should all be doing regular tick checks at the end of each day.

Who else is out there? Yes, bears, bobcats, and coyotes are occasionally seen in Redding. There are no recorded interactions between these animals and people in Redding that have caused injury. Consider carrying whistles.

Masks: Please have masks with you, in case you encounter other explorers out on the trail.

What to Wear: Hats, long, light colored pants (easier to see ticks), and sneakers are okay. No need for boots unless you plan to veer off the trail into a swamp or stream.

What to Bring: Water, a basic first aid kit, bug spray (hopefully, the family friendly variety). If you plan to take advantage of Redding trails, we recommend borrowing or purchasing The Book of Trails from the Mark Twain Library. NPPEC members, please reach out to info@newpondfarm.org if you'd like a digital copy of our Trail Map.

Dear Parents — A Few Thoughts On How To Organize & Enrich Your Outdoor Experience

- Focus your child's attention at the start of your venture. Ask questions, suggest things to look at and listen for.
- A sense of joy and excitement on your part will set the tone. Children key off the attitude of their parents.
- Allow each discovery to unfold at your child's pace — this can be challenging, but worth the effort. Be ready to move on or discontinue an activity when your child has lost interest.
- No need for lots of facts, it's more important to express your feelings — "Wow, isn't that blue flower beautiful". Tease out your children's thoughts too.
- Be receptive to sounds and smells, allow time to pause quietly and to listen while on the trail.
- Bring along a note pad with a soft pencil. Encourage a drawing or a few reflections and observations. Not only will this enhance your child's observation skills, it may also generate a cherished keepsake, and broaden skills learned in school.
- Magnifying glasses are recommended for explorers of all ages. We suggest a 2.5-3 inch glass magnifier in a slipcase, these work well for small hands. Plastic can scratch quickly & glass usually has better resolution. 2-4 power works well. Consider buying 2, they tend to disappear. EBAY, Amazon both have a selection. Should not cost over \$5-9.

Resource Guide:

FOR KIDS (* - AVAILABLE AT MARK TWAIN LIBRARY)

National Audubon Society first field guide.

Insects / written by Christina Wilsdon*

A visual guide to the natural science of insects which includes information on the ten most common orders, pollination, and life-cycles; also works as a field guide.

National Audubon Society first field guide.

Wildflowers / Susan Hood.*

Forest explorer: a life-size field guide / Nic Bishop*

Depicts in detail several different deciduous forest habitats, with field notes about the insects and animals shown, as well as tips on how to explore a real forest.

Look up!: bird-watching in your own backyard /

Annette LeBlanc Cate.* A conversational, humorous introduction to bird-watching featuring quirky full-color illustrations portray dozens of birds chatting about their distinctive characteristics, including color, shape, plumage, and beak and foot types.

FOR ADULTS (* - AVAILABLE AT MARK TWAIN LIBRARY)

A field guide in color to insects / by Jirí Zahradník*

Trees / Allen J. Coombes ; photography by Matthew Ward.*

National Audubon Society the Sibley guide to birds / written and illustrated by David Sibley.*