



REDDING NATURE EXPLORERS

DECEMBER 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.

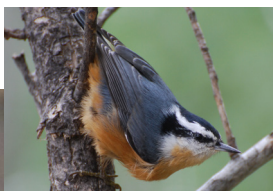


BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Unapologetically, our favorite year-round resident and one of the most common throughout the northeast. Jaunty and inquisitive, they will often appear to be observing your outdoor activities. Chickadees, named for their winter call, often feed as a family flock during the winter. These tiny birds are beautifully insulated with $\frac{1}{2}$ " of downy feathers. Even on the coldest days they maintain a body temperature of 100 degrees, and they conserve energy at night by dropping their temperature to about 82 degrees. To manage all of this they eat voraciously throughout the day. Thankfully, in the fall, chickadees cache enormous amounts of seed across their territory which their highly developed memories allow them to find, even months later.

Activities

Look for this bird in your back yard and surrounding woodlands. Listen for their persistent "Chick-a-dee-dee" call. Note: when they are distressed, their calls contain additional "dee-dee-dees." By mid-January the males begin their territorial "Fee-bee" song, bringing joyful awareness that spring is on its way. You might do some research on their nesting cavities and materials, and look for likely cavity entrances in tree branches and trunks as you hike through the woodlands. If you feed the birds, with patience, a brave chickadee may even land on your hand and take a seed.



WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH

As if painted with the same paintbrush as the chickadee, and often seen together, this long billed local acts more like a woodpecker, shunting up and down tree trunks in search of insects and seeds. Listen for their nasal, "Yank, Yank, Yank". Like chickadees, they cache their food so watch as they leave your feeder with seeds in their beaks, stocking up for later! Our common nuthatch is the white-breasted, but the more northern red-breasted nuthatches often make their way down to our feeders during harsh winters. Look for their reddish breast and black eye stripe.

Activities

Watch a nuthatch creep up and down a tree with ease. This is thanks to its relatively large feet and specialized back "toe" or hallux which allows it to get a secure hold on the bark. These forest birds never fly very far. You can watch them flit from one tree to another without losing sight of them.



CEDAR -WAXWING

While this beautiful bird is not common, it is well worth searching for especially where you see red cedars, crabapples, hawthorns, and other fruit-bearing trees and shrubs. Once you recognize their unmistakable high-pitched trills, you will know when they are in the area! Flocks of waxwings, also called “ear-fulls” or “museums,” feast on berries, even-fermented ones. These crested gray-brown birds have black masks edged with white, lemon-colored undersides, waxy red-tips on their secondary feathers, and a yellow band at the tip of their tails. (Note: Because of their fondness for berries belonging to an invasive honeysuckle, some of the birds have an orange band at the end of their tail.)

Activities

When you are out in an open area, keep your eyes and ears out for a flock of robin-sized birds that are trilling. If you see them through binoculars, you will agree that you have seen something very special.



RED CEDAR

The red cedar is one of the first trees to appear after a field or meadow has lain fallow. They, along with assorted birches and aspen, will remain the dominant residents until the taller hardwoods and conifers form the overstory, twenty to thirty years later. This explains why you will find dying or dead cedars still around as you hike the town woodland trails. Once called the “Pencil Tree”, this durable tree is still used for pencils, fence posts, and cedar chests.

Activities

While you can still find red cedars in most of our open spaces, they are most common in the Saugatuck Falls Natural area. Look for them in the Old Field (B) area. You will find fragrant berries, and fragrant needles. If you’re lucky, you might also see a flock of berry loving birds like the cedar-waxwings or bluebirds.



BLACK BEAR

Yes, Redding has a small – year-round population of resident bears. Females -sows- range from 110-250 pounds and males -boars- can be 150-450 pounds! While black bears may disappear into their dens during the coldest months of the year, they do not truly hibernate. While they are sleeping from December through February, they live off the layer of fat they accumulated during the summer and fall while eating foods like nuts, seeds, berries, insects, small animals, and carrion. Their keen sense of smell often brings them to garbage cans, barbeque grills, and birdfeeders. While they are called “black” they can appear to be dark brown in color and they have a tan muzzle. Litters of cubs, ranging from 1-4, are born in January and February, they are weaned at seven months, and stay with their mom until their second summer.

Activities

While there has been no reported injurious interaction between a bear and a human being here in Connecticut in recent years, these animals must be treated with caution. Our Redding open space manager has been hiking the Town open spaces for 47 years and has never seen a black bear in the woods. See CT DEEP Bureau of Natural Resources for recommended bear do’s and don’ts. They also ask you to report your sightings to: www.ct.gov/deep/blackbear or 860.424.3011.



GROUND PINE

Once common to our area, it was picked as a holiday wreath accent to the point where it is fairly rare in Redding. We have a preserve here in town called the Ground Pine Preserve acquired in 6/73 that apparently had a population of ground pine. You can still find a few specimens there and in other preserves, Gallows Hill and Stormfield Preserves, but it is no longer common. Historic fact: 250 million years ago these plants grew to more than 100 feet. Around the turn of the century, the spores of the plants were gathered for “flash powder” to use in fireworks and old-time cameras.

Activities

Look it up – (gobotany.org) and see if you can find a few specimens. you might even find one of the three species, right in your back yard.

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.*