



REDDING NATURE EXPLORERS

JANUARY 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.



BLUEJAY

These beautiful crested birds are common to our back yards and you often hear their noisy call before you see them. Some people think they sound like the opening of a rusty gate. Members of the crow family, jays are intelligent and travel as a family. Fond of bird feeders, they take over and steal the show when they arrive. They can mimic other birds, especially hawks, and in our area they are fond of mimicking the red-shouldered hawk.

Activities

Bluejays are fun to observe, frequently appearing to be rowdy, and sometimes pompous. When you hear their call it may be a sign of impending danger, such as a lurking hawk or cat. See if you can find what they are making a fuss over. Read about the true color of their feathers!



DARK-EYED JUNCO

These small, slate-gray visitors from the north usually arrive in late October and stay with us until late April. They often travel in flocks and if they find the right habitat and food, they are likely to stay all winter. If you take a walk on a snowy day, you are likely to hear their plaintive but reassuring twitter.

Activities

They are easily identified by their gray coat with a whitish belly. When they fly away you will see the two white bands on either side of their tail. They are dedicated ground feeders and seem to be constantly chasing another so they can snatch yet another bite – usually a seed.



TUFTED TITMOUSE

Yet another attendee at the birdfeeder, this crested gray bird appears to have eyes a little too large for their heads. As year-round neighbors, they often travel as a small family and feed in a very small territory, like your back yard. As insect and seed feeders, these perky birds can be observed pecking at a leaf, or branch, perhaps because a tasty insect is overwintering inside.

Activities

Check out their repetitious song, sometimes lasting 5 minutes or more. If you go online you will be able to hear the variety in their songs, the most common of which is, “Peter, Peter, Peter!”



GRAY SQUIRREL

While the gray squirrel is our most commonly seen squirrel, our woodlands are also home to nocturnal flying squirrels, and when evergreens are present, our red squirrels. You may have seen gray squirrels busily burying assorted nuts in the fall. But did you know that they mark them with a special scent and can relocate them by smelling that scent even under a foot of snow? At this time of year, the guard hairs of a gray squirrel's outer coat are tipped with white, helping to soften its color against the frosty ground.

Activities

Watch a squirrel's tail and how they use it. We can count at least four uses. As you hike along a trail, look up in the trees for what looks like a big bird's nest – rounded and built out of leaves. That is most likely a squirrel's nest left over from last summer.



RED FOX

We think of them as red, which they usually are, but they can also be black, gray, brownish, or yellow. We also have a tree climbing gray fox, always with a black tipped tail, while a white tipped tail identifies the red fox. While both foxes are nocturnal, they will sometimes hunt during the day. They are truly a treat to watch, if you get a chance. They are every bit as wily as they are written about. Their diet is extremely varied despite their reputation for catching small rodents. When the hunting is good, a fox will bury "or cache" its extra food — perhaps under a woodpile, into a rock crevice, or under the snow — saving it for later.

Activities

When you have snow, look for their tracks – doglike (with claw marks showing), but in a single line. You may also hear their doglike bark late at night.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

If you have enjoyed researching and observing our recommendations above, continue on with the listing below.



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

One of our smaller hawks, 10"-14", this agile and furtive bird is able to track and catch its prey, dining on small mammals, like mice and voles, and songbirds. These small accipiters are fairly common in our area, and when food is difficult to find, they may start spending time around your birdfeeders. If you find a small bunch of feathers on the ground, it might well be all that is left after the hawk departs.

Activities

This is not a bird you are going to sit and watch for, but if you take pleasure in observing the small birds near where you live, it is likely they will make a brief appearance at some point over the winter.



BIRDFEEDING

Perhaps you have been considering this popular activity. For helpful tips, visit Audubon.org and Birds.cornell.edu. You will be amazed at the variety of songbirds that will visit your feeders. Here are just a few: black-capped chickadee, white-nuthatch, downy woodpecker, red-bellied woodpecker, tufted titmouse, house finch, blue jay, northern cardinal, Carolina wren, and mourning dove. A field guide, such as *A Field Guide to the Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson, and a good pair of binoculars will enhance your experience considerably.

Note: If you have cats that roam outdoors, this may not be the activity for you. You and your family will take pleasure in viewing what shows up at your feeder(s)

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.*