



# REDDING NATURE EXPLORERS

## FEBRUARY 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.



### WHITE-THROATED SPARROWS

You can recognize this small-ground feeding sparrow by the white bib below its beak and the yellow feather patch between its beak and eyes. While white-throats are known to nest in our area, most are winter visitors and will head north to their nesting sites around the middle of April. The white-throat has a plaintive song that can be heard at this time of year.

#### Activities

Look for white-throats along field edges, in low underbrush, and on the ground beneath your feeders. They frequently feed with other small songbirds. If you check out their calls online you will be ready to listen for, "Old Sam Peabody, Peabody" or "Oh, Sweet Canada, Canada!" White-throats have color morphs: some have black and white stripes on their heads while others have black and tan stripes -- see if you can spot the two morphs feeding together. If you are a bird enthusiast, read about these morphs and the unique behaviors that go along with them!

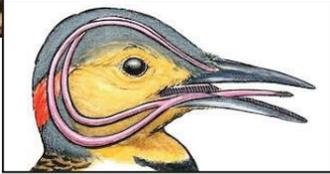
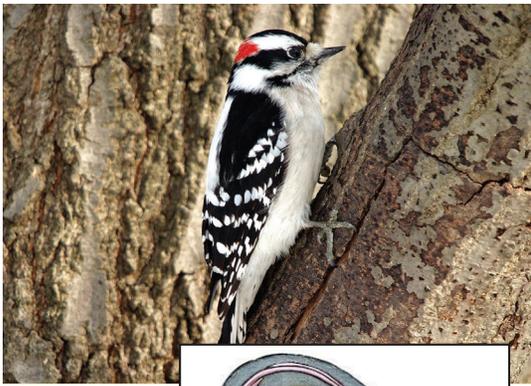


### MOURNING DOVES

Often overlooked, these elegant birds should be appreciated for their subtle beauty. You might describe them as "tan" but look closely. When seen in the right light, the iridescent feathers on their necks reflect rainbows of pink, blue, and yellow, their breast feathers are tinged with peach, light blue skin makes up the orbital rings surrounding their dark eyes, and their feet are rosy red. Between these colors, the soft tan edging on their dark primary feathers, and the black spots on their wing coverts, they are truly works of art. Mourning Doves are named for their mournful "Coo". Sometimes people unknowingly think they are hearing an owl during the day!

#### Activities

Spread millet under your feeders and watch them eat. You will be amazed! They seem like ravenous teenagers, eating nonstop. They are actually filling their crops (enlarged part of their esophagus) with hundreds, even thousands, of seeds before carrying them off to a quiet perch for uninterrupted digestion. Listen for the characteristic whistling of their wings as they take off!



### DOWNY WOODPECKERS

Our smallest woodpecker (6.5”) may be found at our feeders, in backyards, and on the edges of our woodlands. Males have a red patch on the back of their heads. Like their fellow woodpeckers, their adaptations for survival will amaze you. Here are just a few to think about as you watch them: •their beaks are shaped like chisels so they can chip away bark and excavate holes in trees •depending on the species and their specific diets, their long tongues may be sticky or barbed, and the tips may be flattened, spear-like, or brush-like •When not in use, these retractable tongues curl around the back of the head in a sheath between the skull and skin and anchor in the right nostril (WHOA!!) • between their strong neck muscles and the spongy skulls that cushion their brains, they are designed to avoid concussions •their strong tail feathers prop them up against trees as they are pecking •their long toenails enable them to hang onto tree bark, and their zygodactyl feet have two toes pointing forward and two toes pointing backward which help with tree climbing. They are awesome creatures!

#### Activities

Redding’s aging woodlands are home to many types of woodpeckers — as you hear tapping on the trees see if you can spot our downy, hairy, red-bellied, or our pileated woodpeckers. When the weather warms you can add northern flickers and yellow-bellied sapsuckers to this list! Notice the shapes of their holes — depending on the shape, you may find feeding holes or nesting holes. Learn their various calls online, they are unmistakable, then you will know who is watching you from the tree tops! Put out a suet feeder or orange slices and watch the Downy’s adaptations at work!



### BLACK BIRCH TREES

Also called cherry, sweet, or mahogany birch, this common forest tree is identifiable by its wintergreen smell when you break a small branch, and by its close, lustrous mahogany-red/gray bark. While used for furniture making, it takes 150 years to grow large enough to interest a lumberman. Look for this tree along gently pitched hillsides where it finds rich loam soil. It is frequently found near small streams. One clue: look for bark ridges or “mustaches” above the branches.

**Activities** When you find a small tree, scrape the bark on a twig and savor the heady aroma. Native Americans reportedly used the wintergreen flavored twigs as natural toothbrushes. In late winter/early spring, the female flowers will be dropping their seeds. When these fall on the snow, their pattern may remind you of a miniature flock of birds in flight.



### SPRINGTAILS OR SNOW FLEAS

On a sunny day, when the snow is still on the ground, keep an eye out for dark patches at the base of a tree or even in a footprint. Look closely and you may find hundreds of tiny creatures (one tenth of an inch) called springtails. This is a perfect name for them because they have two spring-like prongs that are held in place beneath their abdomen by two hooks. When needed, the hooks are released and they spring away — hurdling several inches! Even though they seem to jump like fleas, they are not at all related. Springtails eat decomposing vegetation, like leaf litter, so they are wonderful woodland recyclers! Note: Although they have six legs like insects, other physical characteristics (like soft bodies, hidden mouthparts, and lack of wings) put them into a special subclass of hexopods called Collembola.

#### Activities

When you find a mass gathering of springtails, if you are feeling brave, put your hand near them and watch them hop on. As you raise your hand, they will mysteriously disappear as they release their springs. Once you know where to look for them you will find that they are quite common. They are totally harmless and a useful part of our woodland food chain. (You might have fun exploring woodland food chains and food webs!)

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](mailto:sarah@marktwainlibrary.org) or [info@newpondfarm.org](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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.\*