



# Nature-Oriented Parenting

A guide for parents and grandparents to teach their children about the natural world

## Seek Out The “Natural” Around Your Home...



Participants at a naturalist program at CFIA campground Carolina Hemlocks in N.C.

Do you feel eager to get your child or grandchildren to appreciate the world outside but don't know how to begin? It's as simple as opening up your back door! The knowledge of trees, snakes, bugs and trails comes naturally with time. The point is to begin! Start the journey with your child by noticing one simple thing a week around your home and record it! Identifying species can be tricky, and no one expects you to be Marlon Perkins overnight, but taking that little bit of time can do wonders for your overall knowledge of outdoor life. Here's a few ideas of where and when to observe nature around your home. At the end of a rainstorm, check your yard for earthworms and beetles. They're escaping the flooded ground and will usually be snatched up quickly by robins and certain woodpeckers. Dusk is always a perfect time to spot bats, deer, bear, owls and other *crepuscular* (active at dawn and dusk) and nocturnal animals looking for a meal. Midday is great for spotting insects, including *argiopes* (writing spiders), butterflies and the beautiful praying mantis. Morning is the time to check out the bird feeders and brush up on your local bird species. Turn your yard, no matter how large or small, into a wonderland of exploration by seeking out the “natural”!

## Wildlife Spotlight: Black Bear

Few thoughts trouble a wilderness hiker or camper more than a 300lb. campsite visitor that demands something to eat and refuses to leave anything in return. What a black bear (*ursus americanus*) lacks in manners it makes up for in wonder and fascination as one of the U.S.'s largest and most misunderstood mammals. **Myth:** bears are aggressive, ferocious creatures that prey on lone hikers and look for any way possible to get into trouble. **Fact:** bears are shy, easily frightened and will only come into contact with humans if absolutely necessary. **Myth:** a bear would rather eat humans and small dogs that venture too far from home. **Fact:** bears regulate what they eat. A normal meal consists of insects, berries, grubs, roots, small rodents and even various plant leaves. **Myth:** bears must have bad eyesight and sense of smell to have to stand up like that when something approaches. **Fact:** bears have eyesight equal to a human, but have a nose that is 7 times more sensitive than a bloodhound. They stand up to take sniffs of the air around them and adequately determine exactly who or what they are dealing with. They are so accurate that they can tell the difference between people and animals by sniffing a footprint in the dirt. **Myth:** like other mammals, bears hibernate because of the return of freezing temperatures. **Fact:** bears hibernate because of the dwindling food supply. If need be, they could easily survive freezing conditions thanks to their thick fur, but a lack of all the foods that they rely on means shutting down for the season and storing energy. **Myth:** females will have their babies at the same time as other mammals-in the spring. **Fact:** yes, female bears will become pregnant in late spring and early summer, but have a unique system that holds off development until the right time. When she packs on enough pounds to survive an entire winter, her body will naturally develop and give birth to the babies while she hibernates! 1-3 cubs will nurse from the mother through the entire winter and continue to grow and gain weight while mom sleeps. She wakes only long enough to clean the newborns after birth. The small family will emerge in spring, ready to explore and claim their territory throughout our forests of North America!



# Family Nature Activity: Real or Imaginary?

Every once in a while, nature throws a few “curveballs” in the plant and animal world. As an organism’s environment changes, the organism must either move, change or die off. Luckily, most of these organisms are able to **adapt**, or change over time to become more suited to their environment. So find a comfortable chair, read out these oddball descriptions to your children or grandchildren and try to figure out which ones are the real plants and animals that adapted to their unusual surroundings. Answers on page 4!

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- European Water Spider** - Swimming is no problem for this arachnid. They create an air-filled sac and leave it under water in order to have a place to rest and take a breath while doing a little fishing.
- Hoatzin** - A bizarre South American bird whose newly-born young prefer to climb around on trees using hooks on their wings.
- Honey Guide** - An African bird that feeds on beeswax and “guides” the native Pygmies to the closest honey stash.
- Thorny Devil** - This unique desert lizard has a network of ridged scales which collect dew and funnel it directly into its mouth.
- Bottle Tree** - This arid species of tree has a very large trunk that acts as a self-contained reservoir that stores all the water it will need during long, dry spells.
- Satin Bower Bird** - At breeding time, the male of this species will decorate his nest with shells, feathers, jewelry, flowers and anything else that strikes his fancy. He will then “paint” the inside of the nest with berry juice or sticks of charcoal.
- Jack-O-Lantern Mushroom** - This bright orange fungus has special gills at the base which are capable of glowing at night.
- Nudibranch** - A very crafty mollusk indeed! The nudibranch can transfer the stinging components of its prey onto its own skin and use them to protect itself.
- Bolas Spider** - A very finicky arachnid that catches and eats only male moths by swinging one line of silk through the air.
- Brown-Headed Cowbird** - Some wildlife adaptations negatively affect other wildlife. Cowbirds lay their eggs in the nest of another songbird - even one twice as small. After hatching, the babies then systematically push the remaining youngsters out of the nest and become “adopted” by the perplexed parents.

## The Community Connection

In these especially hard economic times, one of the best things that you can do is to rally together to support local organizations, stores, grocers and small business owners. These are the people that truly make up a “community”, no matter the size of the town, city or burg. So what are the advantages of supporting your community? First and foremost, the dollars you spend in a local hardware store, thrift shop, or café stay within the business and don’t travel hundreds of miles to a corporate headquarters. This means more money for the business to expand, creating job opportunities and allowing more variety and services for customers. Sure, it’s sometimes easier, or more fun, to travel 20 or 30 miles to go to a special store or particular business. After all, getting there is half the fun, right? But what about the few (or many) dollars that you could spend right in your own community? These small businesses tend to suffer during the winter months - especially if the town tends to be a high-traffic vacation destination. They don’t have the influx of funds that a larger name business might have to sustain them during the down times. Local businesses rely on us! And because they want your business, these retail owners are doing whatever it takes to make sure that your hard-earned dollars are spent, and kept, in your community. “Collaboration” is the hot topic nowadays between these small businesses. By taking a few minutes to look at advertisements or fliers, you can find clubs, events and special deals going on between these businesses. All in the effort to keep your dollars in-house. So what are some ways that you can help support your community? **1) Ask your local businesses if they offer discounts or clubs. 2) Volunteer for a local non-profit organization. 3) Attend fundraising events. 4) Dine at least once a month at a community restaurant. 5) Look for produce that is “locally grown” in supermarkets or local grocers.**





# Family Outdoor Activity: Winter Tree I.D.



Sure, it's easier to identify species when they do little things like sit still, bloom, show fantastic colors, fruits and so on. But during the winter it's a whole different story. Birds wear duller colors, flowers lose their blooms, and trees drop every scrap of foliage that they worked so hard to grow all summer long. You're walking along a wooded path, see a beautiful, fully-grown tree and wonder what it could possibly be so you can share the knowledge with you family. It's possible to check out the twigs, buds and other relevant characteristics. But the easier and quicker way to winter tree identification is to learn the different types and textures of tree bark. It comes in all shapes, sizes and colors, and is the all-important "skin" of each and every living tree. Throughout the trunk are very thin layers which act as a type of elevator to help nutrients and water travel up and down the trunk, allowing for growth. Whether smooth, shaggy, scaly or grooved, tree bark is an important and easily overlooked way to establish exactly which trees you have in your backyard. Take this quiz, test your knowledge and check page 4 for the answers!

A. Eastern Red Cedar

C. Red Maple

E. Shagbark Hickory

B. American Beech

D. Northern Red Oak

F. Yellow Poplar



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.

# Family Outdoor Activity: Winter Home Search

While we get cozy on the couch and settle in for a fireplace-warmed winter, animals are busy creating a home for themselves that will protect them from the elements. Sometimes you see them, sometimes you don't, but these crafty creatures may use anything they can in the wilds of a nature preserve or your own back yard to keep their family warm. Sticks, mud, dirt, leaves, caves or a rotten tree are all acceptable means of keeping snow, sleet or cold rain off of wintering wildlife. So grab your jacket and get your children or grandchildren to the nearest patch of woods and try to identify a few of these easy-to-find winter homes. See how many you can find, ask the children to draw the winter homes and use the drawings as a reference around your backyard!

**Rock Piles** - Doesn't seem like much, but this safe retreat may house lizards, smaller snakes, toads or cotton rats.

**Burrows** - Whether natural or dug out by paw, burrows are perfect for coyotes, bear, cottontail rabbits and raccoons.

**Tree Cavities** - Natural holes in old and dead trees are extremely important to breeding owls, bats, raccoons and bear.

**Bird Houses** - When breeding season is over, bird houses may then be used by flying squirrels and screech owls.

**Crevices or Caves** - Caves offer plenty of space and protection for bear, bats and coyote.

**Debris Piles** - Pile up those old branches and twigs and make the perfect spot for whitetail deer, coyote and rabbit.

**Underneath Rocks and Logs** - Lifting these up in the woods can give you views of salamanders, frogs and lizards.

Please remember to respect the habitat.

Never disturb a hibernating animal or allow their home to be moved or destroyed!

## Answers to Real or Imaginary?

It may surprise you to find out that all of the plants and animals in the quiz are *real*! These strange and unique life forms use the environment around them to their advantage and have adapted, over time, to become an important species in their habitat. All plants and animals have the ability to change, and what is more important than changing to make your life easier? Take a few minutes to find out what species may change around your own house in order to find food, hide from predators or to attract a mate. You may be surprised how many unique life forms are out there!

## Answers to Winter Tree I.D. A.4, B.5, C.1, D.6, E.2, F.3

The bark of the **Eastern Red Cedar** (*Juniperus virginiana*) tends to be reddish brown, thin and fibrous which may peel into thin shreds as it ages. This contrasts the **American Beech** (*Fagus grandifolia*), which holds a light gray-colored bark which remains very smooth for the life of the tree. Also light gray is the **Red Maple** (*Acer rubrum*), which will develop what looks like “cracks” in the bark over time. A big change in appearance comes to the **Red Oak** (*Quercus rubra*), which will be smooth and gray when younger and darker gray and deeply grooved as a mature tree. Some say the bark looks like a series of ski slopes. **Shagbark Hickory** (*Carya ovata*) may be the oddest-looking bark of all! Light gray strips of bark will begin peeling away from the tree as it matures, giving the appearance of a head of shaggy hair. Finally, the bark of the **Tuliptree or “Tulip Poplar”** (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), may be colored a lighter yellow/gray to light gray and have deeper grooves, similar to the Red Oak.

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