

Leave no child indoors: Rediscovering Backyard Camping

Remember the wilderness of your childhood backyard? Remember how everything from a toad in the grass to a hollow shell of a cicada on a tree represented a major natural discovery? As kids, we loved investigating the wilderness outside our home. It



sparked our natural curiosity. The fact is, each moment spent outdoors in the natural world as children guides and influences our developing attitudes and behavior toward the world around us—including the natural world.

Unfortunately, far too few children today spend enough time outdoors doing what children have done for ages, which is to explore and discover the natural world. It's an essential influence that, in some cases, is being missed by an entire generation.

Admittedly, we live in a distraction-filled world today, with many of us— young and old—continually focused on the ceaseless demands of our indoor diversions and electronic devices. For many parents, taking the time to head outdoors for traditional family recreation would seem to be an impossible luxury of time.

The fact is, we are all busy. And we're not always busy by choice. In these challenging times, overworked parents report having little time to take their children fishing, hiking or camping—even in a nearby state park. In response to this troubling trend, DNR is continually developing easier, simpler ways to get the youth of Illinois into the outdoors through local fishing programs, apprentice-hunter opportu-

nities, and after-school and weekend nature programs. For those digitally inclined: A wealth of online resources is available at our new and evolving Web site dnr.illinois.gov.

But let's not forget the experiences of our own youth and how we all managed to discover nature in our backyard.

Some of my earliest wilderness adventures as a boy happened just a few feet from the back door of my childhood home and on my grandparents' farm. I spent many nights camping in the backyard.

Sometimes the best—and easiest—opportunities to experience the great outdoors are right outside our door. Bravely sleeping in a tent or pop-up camper was preparation for some of the most important outdoor-education experiences of my youth. Readers might recall a time when such expeditions were a rite of passage among all children.

I can remember a cool breeze and the nighttime sounds carrying through unzipped tent flaps. A chorus of crickets would accompany my footsteps in the dew-covered grass as I stepped from the lounge chair to the tent after gazing up at the stars. In this unfolding state of nature awareness, I would notice the hoot of an owl or the howl and yip of a coyote. I felt I was actually a part of nature—alert, engaged and alive.

I was fortunate that there were many opportunities to camp, hike and bike as a child in the outdoors, but it wasn't always convenient for my parents. Allowing me to sleep in our own backyard was all they had to do to provide an opportunity for growth, wonder and discovery.

Sometimes, all we have to do is introduce children to the outdoors, and then leave the rest to nature.

Marc Miller, Director

