

Youth events through Sycamore Land Trust help kids get outdoors

By Laura Gleason Special to the Hoosier Times
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From school to softball practice, from karate to scheduled screen time, modern children's lives are notoriously booked up. That's one of the reasons the staff at Sycamore Land Trust, a local nonprofit dedicated to preserving wild areas of Indiana, believes that spending time in nature is so important.

The world is on such a mad course that we don't stop, think, listen and observe too much in a peaceful setting. We're in such a rush, so we encourage people to slow down and listen and expose their kids to that, too, said Carroll Ritter, who has been the land trust's environmental education coordinator for eight years.

Ritter, a former high school chemistry teacher, leads a variety of nature-themed events for young people throughout the year, many of them school-based, like a recent water quality testing expedition he helped lead at Leatherwood Creek for students at Bedford-North Lawrence High School.

Other events are geared toward getting local families outdoors.

The Lil Hikers Club, a group for children 12 and younger and their families, is one of the most popular ongoing events. Marcin Zalewski, a computer scientist at Indiana University, found out about the club when his son Aditya was less than 1 year old, and his family has been attending ever since.

Until he turned 2, he spent most of the time in the carrier; we would take him out occasionally. Nowadays, he loves going by himself. He has his hiking boots, his backpack and his water bottle; he just loves it. Sometimes he's a little tired at the end, but he really wants to do it, Zalewski said.

Through the programs, Ritter hopes the young participants internalize how important nature can be in their own lives, and how it functions, the knowledge of what is going on in nature, life cycles, tree growth and development, how life really works in the natural setting.

Zalewski is pleased with how much his son has learned about nature through Ritter's on-the-fly tutelage. Aditya's always interested in what Carroll has to say, he said.

An added perk of participation is that some of the hikes take place on private land trust property where hikers rarely venture, Zalewski said.

Sycamore Land Trust has a list of nature preserves that they have, but some of them are not usual parks with advertised entrances to them, he said.

They're very nice, unexplored places that people might not know about otherwise, he added.

Families that attend the children's events are encouraged to make a \$10 donation to the land trust through a donation. If they are already members, though, the events are free.

It's a really good way for people to invest in Sycamore Land Trust, Ritter said.

The next Lil Hikers outing is scheduled for Nov. 16 (RSVP by Nov. 14). Don't be afraid of winter; our son was not even 1 year old; if you dress them warmly enough you can go out in winter, even with small children, Zalewski said.

The spider hike, an event led by Earlham College biology professor Leslie Bishop each August, is another reliably popular event.

When the darkness is there and you're hiking along the boardwalk at Beanblossom Bottoms with headlights shining out, you can see the lights shining from the spiders' eyes and they look like little diamonds, Ritter said.

Kids often pitch in at land trust workdays, too. It's really fun to see them pitch in with shovels and rakes and spread gravel and use wheelbarrows and post-hole diggers. A lot of the time we have work projects that kids can do and feel really connected to the development of something that's going to be there as a permanent thing, that other people will then follow and use, Ritter said.

One upcoming event that Ritter is especially looking forward to is a free children's photo workshop scheduled for the last Sunday in April.

All they have to show up with is a camera. It can be a little, simple camera, or something more sophisticated, and we teach them to take better photos of nature than they ever thought of doing, Ritter said.

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