

# Nature Study—A Time for Wonder

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My parents gave me two gifts for which I am deeply grateful. First, they provided me ample access to good books. Second, my mother sent the whole “kit and caboodle,” as she called us, outdoors for long periods of time. I and my four siblings were allowed to roam the woods and fields at will, often only checking back for dinner, then out again for a game of kick-the-can before bath and bed. It was a good way to grow up.

While good books are as available as ever to the enterprising parent....outdoor time is another matter. Family life has changed radically since I grew up and few children have the luxury of roaming without adult supervision.

## **Nature is good for children**

This seems fundamental and hardly necessary to point out. Yet, in recent decades parents have little by little eliminated unstructured outdoor time for their children. They opt instead to carpool to team sports, martial arts classes or other pastimes that do not involve direct experience with nature.

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, says that children spend approximately 15 minutes outdoors each week. Louv points to the rise in attention-deficit disorders and suggests that corresponding decrease in outdoor time may be part of the problem. Why is it so important for children to be outdoors?

Children spend an average of 6.5 hours a day with television, computers and video games. A child is 6 times more likely to play a video game than ride a bike.

## **Truly seeing**

What is the cure for this epidemic? In a phrase: “Study nature, not books.” The noted naturalist, Louis Agassiz coined this phrase. He wanted children to spend time in nature actually seeing the things at which they looked. Charlotte Mason called this “discriminating observation” (*Home Education*, p. 49). It is the skill of seeing closely and recalling the details perfectly. What parent would not want such a skill for their child?

Truly seeing in Nature Study results in delightful, sometimes profound discoveries. These discoveries become a lasting part of the child’s makeup.

The goal of Nature Study is careful looking. Albert Einstein said, “All great science begins with a close observation of nature.” Nature Study is one of the keys to a living books education because it develops keen powers of observation. Charlotte Mason taught that time spent in the outdoors is a “balm and a blessing” for children, not only when they are young, but also when they are grown and must deal with the stresses and strains of adult life.

Nature Study also nourishes a capacity for wonder. Rachel Carson, the seminal naturalist who called the nation’s attention to the harm of chemicals to our natural world, said:

*If a child is too keep alive his inborn sense of wonder ... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.*

## What if I don't know anything about Nature Study?

A homeschooling mom wrote me:

*I realized a fear I have is teaching my children ... about nature. My fear is that I need to outsource this since I do not have a lot of information to teach the children in my brain already. What is your advice?*

Anxious feelings about teaching Nature Study or going outdoors to learn, is very common. In fact, (besides grammar) it's the most reported fear of homeschooling moms who are learning to use the Charlotte Mason method. Nature Study is really simple. BUT, to say it's really simple doesn't help. Most moms don't have a sense of what *it* is.

In my studies of the history of the Nature Study Movement in the United States I came across a turn-of-the-century nature study guide, *Nature Study by Grades*, by Horace Cummings (American Book Company, 1908).

Cumming's book is very useful and can be easily found on Google books as a download. From it I gleaned four ideas which I have adapted. Applying them faithfully will ensure success with your children.

1. *Begin with what your child is already familiar.*

If a child is very young the world of grass or sand box is the place to start. What is *in* the grass? Or, under it? What creatures live because of the grass? What are their names and habits? If a somewhat older child already has spent time outdoors, *still* take the ordinary and learn from it. A child may know what bark is on a tree, but have he really looked and expressed to you the differences in bark? Done a rubbing for his nature journal? Identified the tree according to its bark? Peeled off a slightly older piece and seen the insects growing underneath?

2. *Give abundant observations, few inferences.*

In others words, model for your child how to look and express what you're seeing by saying something like, "I see the tiny, thin anthers of the ant waving at us" or "I see the brown, rough bark grows up and down in ridges". Not, "The ant is waving its anthers to sense you." or "The bark grows in vertical ridges because of the type of capillary action of this tree." The second type of response makes you the teacher rather than a fellow naturalist on a journey of discovery.

3. *Study a subject under natural conditions.*

If you have a topic you want to study, such as spiders, make sure the richly illustrated library books come out *after* you have observed the creature in its natural surroundings. The goal is close looking and keen observation. The revelation of a principle at work comes after many "looks".

4. *Discovery of a principle is strengthened by oral expression.*

Narration, telling back, is the key to memory. When enough experience and impressions are expressed orally, connections are made. Allow your child plenty of time to talk about what he sees or hears or smells. Over time he will be able to discover the principles and that will bring him great joy.

## Tackling *Handbook of Nature Study*

I once joked to a group of moms that I used *Handbook of Nature Study* by Anna Botsford Comstock as a door stop. It's true that the book can be daunting just looking at its size. However, nothing could be easier to use. This consummate guide to nature study and is far more than a reference book for looking up the name of a bird or plant. It is a guided exploration into almost any of nature's wonders of which you can think. Each topic has an overview, suggestions for observation, a "leading thought" which explains what your child (and you!) should grasp from your study and suggestions for follow-up questions and activities.

When planning your once or twice a-week Nature Study, read ahead of time about the particular topic, or simply take the book with you. Use the index to find the topic you need. Comstock's book is remarkably universal even if you do not live in a temperate zone, as many of the studies are of nature plants and animals found the world over (dandelions, slugs, birds, stars, etc.).

Living Books Curriculum has a 36-week school year; each of the four terms has a particular focus drawn from *Handbook of Nature Study*. There is a systematic arrangement of the topics so that each term will have its own focal point and will not be repeated again, yet takes you and your children through the entire book.

### **Nature Study for city, suburb, and countryside**

Are you at a loss to make a parking lot interesting for science? One of my favorite books is [Ten-Minute Field Trips](#) by renowned educator Helen Ross Russell. In it she describes more than two hundred short, close-to-home field trips that explore new dimensions of familiar spaces and objects. Brick walls, rocky outcrops, lawns, broken pavement, weeds, and trees are all targets for exploration. The book is organized in a way that makes it easy to read and use; each chapter is devoted to a specific area of science: animals, plants, interdependence of living things, physical science, earth science, and ecology. There is a glossary, index, and list of trade books pertaining to lessons. There is also a great article entitled, "The Value of Saying, 'I don't Know'". For urban areas, a special cross-referenced list of field trips for hard-topped parking lots is included. The author had elementary teachers in mind when she wrote this book but every homeschooling parent will find it helpful for finding adventures in their backyard, no matter where they live--urban, suburban, or rural.

### **How to use a Nature Journal with Nature Study**

When my daughter was little we both looked forward to our time outdoors, include keeping a nature journal. Then, she began to resist making entries in her Nature Journal. After discussing it with her I realized she needed more guidelines for making entries rather than drawing whatever appealed her. I found *Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a whole new way of seeing the world around you* gave helpful ideas. This book is a more advanced guide intended for older children and adults but the same principals apply no matter the age. I applied the suggestions that follow and found that Bridget enjoyed the simple structure. Happily, it made our times outdoors together smooth sailing once again.

#### *Warm-ups*

Doing the following entries as a warm-up activity gets the child involved in a simple, direct way.

Record basic information, such as date, place, time, a description of the weather, including first impressions, wind direction, cloud patterns and temperature. Hint: draw the cloud patterns in a tiny box on the top of the page.

#### *See in levels*

Point out that the world is made up of those things at: Ground level, Eye-level, Overhead, Whole landscape.

Ask your child to describe what he sees at each of these levels. Make it a game not a test. Out of this discussion usually comes something he is interested in.

### *Getting focused*

Have your child sit still for a few minutes just looking at the spot he has selected

Remind your child that keeping the journal means to observe and record. This is not an art exercise or test.

Ask him to draw what he sees without stopping to erase. Later, add colors with pencils or watercolor washes. See our article, ["Dry Brush Technique"](#).

### **Are science and Nature Study the same thing?**

Through the study of nature the child learns appreciation and understanding of natural processes and, most especially, keen observational skills. To stand quietly and observe an animal or plant and then to draw (as best one can) its likeness or describe its parts to an adult, develops clear thought, communication and assessment. And yet, as valuable as keen skills of observation are, nature is no mere tool for education. There is something more than skill to be gained out-of-doors. There is inspiration, refreshment, and joyous delight. These are no small things for a child to experience. Such times sow strength for the future into their young hearts.

### **Is Nature Study the same as time outdoors?**

Time in the out-of-doors and nature study are related but not the same. Charlotte Mason taught that a child thrives by spending many hours in the out-of-doors exploring, playing, imaging. During this time there is much learning taking place. However, Nature Study is a time for focused looking, usually directed by the parent.

LBC recommends scheduling a Nature Study once or twice a week for no longer than 30 minutes. This includes the time of observation and an entry into your child's nature journal. Of course, if there is interest, your child can be encouraged to do more than this.

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### **Why did Charlotte Mason think Nature Study important?**

I believe it was because it went to the heart of a child's requirement for an ample, rich education.

*"'Education is the Science of Relations'; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, handicrafts, science and art, and upon many living books."* From Mason's [Twenty Principles](#)

### **Riches that last a lifetime**

The wonders of nature wait at your doorstep. Even if you live in a busy, crowded city, there are birds, insects, and plants to be found. Finding them is fully half the fun. When you make exploring and appreciating the

natural world a priority, it will transform your homeschool. Natural wonders are everywhere. They are as simple as watching the way clouds change and form to as complex as a fruit tree or a range of mountains. God made it so. We enjoy nature because we recognize the Creator in His creation. Even our bodies are made up of the same minerals as plants, animals and soil. Learning to appreciate and be keenly aware of nature is a habit that yields riches that last a lifetime.

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Sheila Carroll founded Living Books Curriculum in 2003. She and her husband, Dr. James Carroll, saw the need for a homeschooling solution for families based on the timeless methods of Charlotte Mason. All the proceeds of the company support their schools in Africa, which provide a Charlotte Mason-based education for children in need. Sign up here receive Sheila's free, email course, [Getting Started with Charlotte Mason Homeschooling](#).