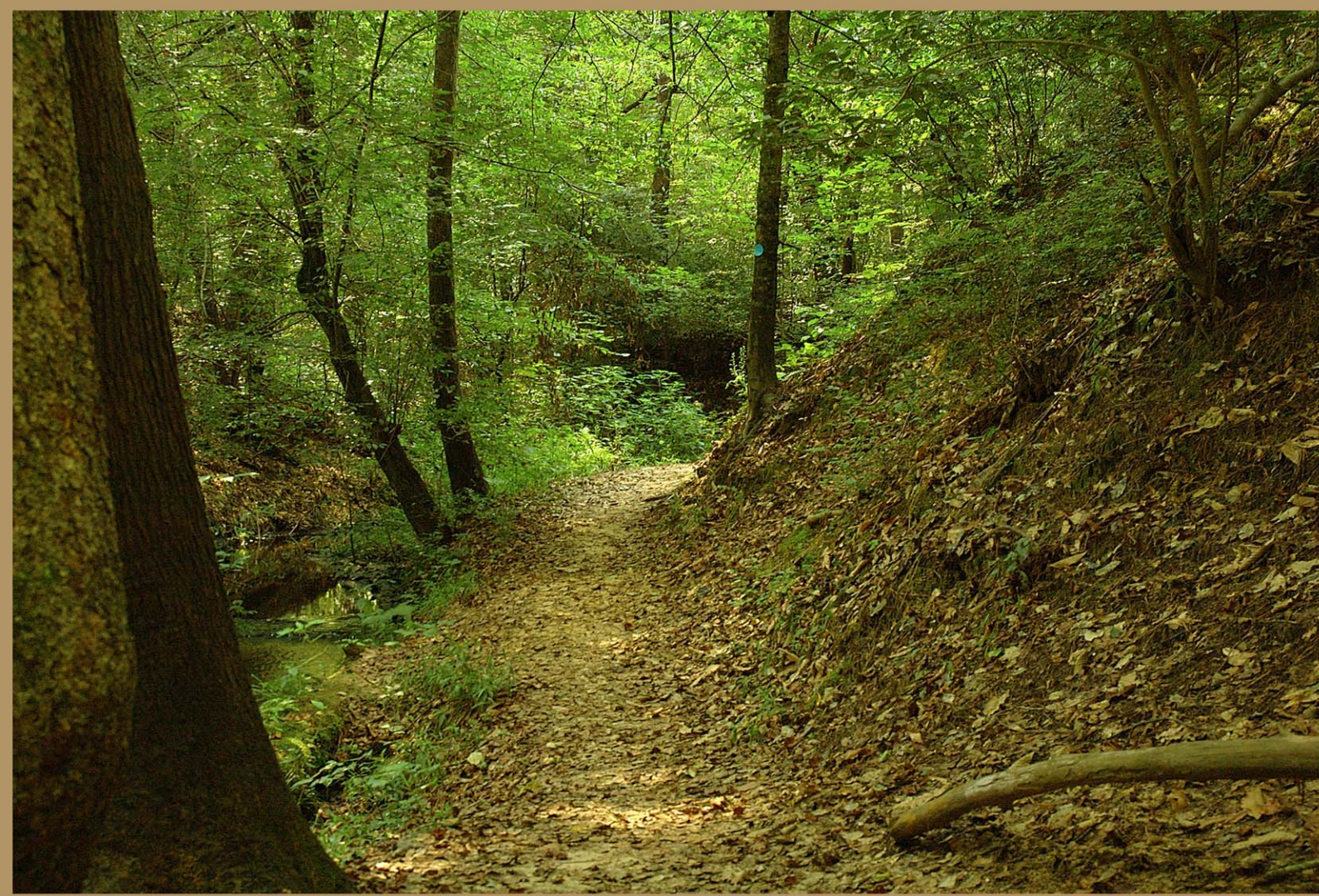


While You Hike . . .

Trail Activities



Here are some nature activities you can do along your hike that will help engage your senses and increase your awareness of the wild life around you. Many of these will work well for groups and children. Others you might want to try out when you are hiking alone.

If you do nothing else, take a deep breath, shrug off your daily concerns, open up your heart to the wilderness, and have an adventure.

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Wilderness Senses

When you consciously use these senses all the time, your awareness of your surroundings will increase and you will start to notice many more animals in the woods.

Fox Walk Have you ever heard a fox crashing through the forest? Probably not! You can walk as quietly as a fox like this: step forward with one foot, touch the outside of your foot to the ground and roll it inwards until it is flat. You can feel if there are any sticks, leaves or stones underneath it that might cause noise. Reposition your foot if needed and then slowly put weight on it.

Owl Eyes Owls can't move their eyeballs inside their eye sockets, so they compensate by using their peripheral vision. Try it: pick a spot straight ahead to train your eyes on. Notice that without moving your eyeballs, you can see some ground below that spot, and some space above it, as well as on both sides. Now, while focusing on your spot straight ahead, stretch your arms out to the sides and wiggle your fingers. Try above and below as well.

Raccoon Touch Raccoons don't have good vision or great hearing, but they have amazingly sensitive fingers. Feel the clothes on your body. Feel your feet touching the ground. Do you feel heavy? Light? Feel the sun and the wind on your skin. Which way is the wind blowing?

Deer Ears To put on deer ears, cup your hands behind your ears and turn your head to focus on different sounds. Now cup your hands and put them in front of your ears, so you can hear behind you without turning around. Does it make a difference? What is the closest sound? The farthest sound? Can you hear the wind?

Dog Nose Think of dogs you have seen walking down the street, with their noses to the ground, or sniffing around every bush, smelling everything as they go. Try it - take quick sniffs of the air around you like a dog. What do you smell? Can you smell differently with a long breath than with a quick sniff?

The Six Arts of Tracking

Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Look for animal tracks as you walk and see if you can answer these six questions about them. You can also apply the questions to insects, fish, geology, weather or just about anything else you see.

- Who made the tracks?
- What was the animal doing?
- When was the track made?
- Where was the animal going?
- Why did it come through just here?
- How did the animal feel? How does it move it's body, perceive the world?

Sit Spots

Find a quiet, sheltered place and sit in it, and observe everything that is around you. After you have been there a while, the birds will start ignoring you and go back to their normal activities. Sitting still, you will become part the landscape and can observe the animals in their daily activities.

If you have a group of people, inspire them with a sit spot story and then let everyone find their own sit spot. Give them a time limit. When the time is up, call everyone back to share their stories with the group. A sit spot is a very special place of learning when you come to it know well. You can find a sit spot near your home or in your yard and visit it daily for all sorts of nature adventures. Mornings and evenings are great times to visit, as that's when many animals are active. In the evenings, you can watch for roosting spots of birds.



Image courtesy Ben Casey, WRAL.

Camera Stalk

Some indigenous tribes practice stalking deer until the hunter can reach out and touch the animal they've been following. Before cameras had zoom features, wildlife photographers would lie for hours to capture beautiful images of wildlife close up. Both activities took enormous skill and patience.



How close to an animal can you get to take it's picture? Can you get close enough to see it's eye clearly.... **without using the zoom feature?** Give it a try!

Tree Tag

During your hike, someone designated as the Chaser suddenly calls out "You're safe if you're touching..... (insert tree name or identification clue)" Examples: "You're safe if you're touching an oak tree!" or "You're safe if you're touching a tree with fruit you can eat!" Anyone who is not touching the right kind of tree can be tagged by the Chaser.

Stick Drag

Pick one person from your group to go ahead of the others, dragging a stick behind them to mark their way down the trail. They can go as far as they like, then pick a spot next to the trail to hide well. After two or three minutes, the others follow, tracking the stick marks. The goal is to follow the marks all the way to the hiding spot.

This activity can be extra challenging when your hike includes trail turns and intersections, rocky terrain, or busy trails where the stick marks might be obscured by other hiker footprints.

Songline

Many indigenous cultures have storytelling traditions that make the world around them come alive. One of these is to interpret their travels by telling the story of the things they passed. Once these stories are shared, listeners can recognize these things and navigate through the wilderness using the stories.

Songlines interpret things based on what they look like or what they remind you of.

Here's an example:

"First head toward Leaning Aunt Maple with her cane, then put the sun behind you. Look for Shaggy John where the land leaps up, then pass down through the Channel of Snakes. Once you reach the Bridge over Nothingness, you are only thirty steps from home."

This might translate as *"Go towards the leaning maple tree with the low branch hanging straight down, then follow the trail away from the sun. At the rocky outcrop on top of the hill, pass the old cedar tree with peeling bark. Be careful of tree roots crisscrossing the trail. Cross the old footbridge over the empty gully just before you reach the end of the trail."*

Now try this yourself or with a group. As you hike, look at the trees and rocks around you, and give them identifiers that are fun and easy to remember. It may help to act out the songline as you describe it. You can even make them into a rhyme.

After your hike, check in: can you remember all the things you passed? It might be fun to create a map of your journey.

Secret Animal Calls

A great way to keep your hiking group organized is to use animal sounds. As a group, decide what your secret sounds are. For example, agree to use the call of a crow or a coyote to get a group back together if some people get too far ahead. Or use the call of a chickadee when another hiker is coming and everyone wants to freeze like a deer, silent and motionless in it's surroundings.

