

## *Nature Play as a Subversive Activity*

Nature play is a “warm fuzzy” to most people — regardless of race, creed, politics, or position. After all, what’s not to like about children playing in nature?

Yet sometimes it seems like the deck is stacked against nature play, with rules, restrictions, and rumors all squashing children’s opportunities for unstructured, nature-based play. For instance, in Green Hearts’ home town of Omaha, the usual “covenants and restrictions” for most newer neighborhoods forbid building tree houses or pitching tents in your yard — front or back! Heaven forbid that the neighbors should see our children doing the exact same things that most of us fondly remember doing as kids!

So in the great spirit of American revolution and democracy, Green Hearts offers these playful tips for making urban and suburban living a bit more “play-full!”

### **Throw Trash in Your Backyard**

Kids love to play with a wide assortment of “loose parts” — things to build and create with, over and over again. Give your kids a heaping pile of sticks, logs, corn stalks, pine cones, large rocks, sheets of plywood or heavy cardboard, old tarps, etc. While you’re at it, lay a modest piece of scrap plywood in a quiet corner of your yard where it will create a dark microhabitat for bugs and other tiny beasties — just waiting for kids to peak in on!

### **Drown Your Inhibitions**

- Wait for one of those delightful, warm summer rains without lightning or high winds.
- Go for a walk in it, and take your kids along.
- Leave the umbrellas, hats, and raincoats behind.

Try not to worry: sidewalk drownings are quite rare. And once you’re thoroughly soaked, it’s all a blast! Plus an added bonus: your most crotchety neighbors will think you’re nuts. What fun!

### **Sneak Around at Night**

When a gentle overnight snowfall comes along, stay up until the middle of the night. Then wake your kids and bundle ‘em up. Head out into the night, quiet as mice, and make snow angels in all your neighbors’ yards. They’ll smile in the morning! A post-angelic dose of good hot chocolate will be well-received by your munchkins. (Great thanks to dear friend Alice Miller for living this idea!)

### **Sneak Around at Night, Take Two**

Do your own “Leopold Day.” Author and conservationist Aldo Leopold had a daily habit of getting up at 3:30 a.m., brewing a pot of coffee, and settling into a comfy chair (often outside) to start writing — and, of course, to begin the day in spiritual peace. Try it out for a break in your routine! If it’s warm and you have a nice front porch to sit on, all the better. You might even meet your paper boy (for those of us who still indulge in newspapers). Try it with your kids, too — but give them books to read instead of write, and then make the finest pancake breakfast you can!

### **Anger Your Neighbors**

Plant a little prairie or a vegetable garden in your front yard. To dodge “weed” ordinances, keep a strip of mowed grass around it, so it’s clearly a “planting bed.” While you’re at it, let a corner of your backyard grow wild and uncut; see what comes up! To further insult the local aesthetic, give your kids a large, often-muddy digging pit in the back, or even have a very large pile of dirt hauled in — there’s no better play feature! And after it’s been raining for days, invite the local urchins to join your own kids in a free-wheeling backyard mud wallow. Never fear: all kids come in wash-and dry!

*continued on back cover*



## Harmony

I know this road like the old friend it is; Kelley Stand it is called. It is a narrow dirt ribbon that twists and climbs into the Green Mountains of southern Vermont. Today it is in good shape; I'm cruising. But in springs past I've driven it when the road strained to merge with the adjacent stream, and I needed the help of passersby to pull my hapless station wagon back onto dry ground. The locals don't even try to keep this road open during the winter.

As a child, some magical alchemy of place, play, and parents bonded me to nature, forever. My presence here, on Kelley Stand Road, is a direct outcome. I'm heading for a trailhead that will launch me into a short backpack camping trip inside a gentle and beautiful wilderness. I've made this same excursion many times before — nearly all of them solo, like today. Lye Brook Wilderness has become the most sacred place in my life, a sanctuary that offers peace to my spirit, clarity to my thoughts, and beauty to my vision.

Reflecting the destination, even the drive itself has taken on meaning and power for me. Windows are down so I can capture the smells and sounds. The latter include flute-like hermit thrushes, plus white-throated sparrows singing of "Oh Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada." But the dominant sounds come from the stream, aptly named Roaring Branch. Water gushes over, through, and around rolling cobblestones, giant boulders, and patches of shattered gravel — more rocks than there are stars, I am certain. No one would ever build a road like this today, right on the banks of a forest stream. But my god, it is beautiful.

The stream's song mixes with Loreena McKennitt, singing of ancient places and questing journeys. I think about turning the CD off, but the birds and frogs in the music fit well with the tumbling water. Besides, I'm deliberate about my music choices before backpacking: the final tunes I hear will stay with me on the trail. Over thirty years ago, bad luck and a Denver oldies station conspired to make Connie Francis' "Lipstick on Your Collar" the last song in my mind before beginning a three-week Outward Bound course — with no electronics allowed. That thoroughly mediocre song became the everlasting soundtrack for my O.B. experience; it was outright cruel. I remember that lesson, and decide to leave Loreena on. I do my best to absorb the melodies.

I drive onward, savoring the voyage which is so fully a part of the magic. Reluctantly pulling my gaze away from the scenery to actually watch the road, I notice a bright red, rather brawny pick-up truck backed into a pull-out at the very edge of Roaring Branch. At first I can just barely see a man near the rear of the truck. As I go by I glance over, expecting to see him whipping a fly fishing rod — a common sight around here. Instead, he's standing still and alone beside the water, facing upstream, playing a violin.

I almost stop. It is a wonderful scene, infused with spirit, surprise, and delight. I have shared my preceding week in a workshop with 35 accomplished and budding nature writers — creatives all, tree-huggers all. Those days were drenched in warmth, passion, and art. Now, beside this rough and little-traveled dirt road, I witness something so similar in essence, yet solitary.

Two hundred yards further I'm still debating whether to turn around, go back, and ask to take his picture. I downshift and tap the brakes — but then decide, *no*. He is in his own spiritual place; I respect and understand that. And in my mind I hear him playing majestically, notes soaring and blending with the creek's percussion. I don't want to risk being disappointed. I want to hold the image and memory unsullied and perfect: a person expressing his love for nature — his personal harmony *with* nature — in a way he cherishes.

As I drive on towards the entry point for my own sanctuary, my own place of harmony, I realize that I want my children to grow up to be like the man with the violin. I want *all* of our children to be like him.

### **Green Hearts**

#### **Institute for Nature in Childhood**

*A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization incorporated in Nebraska.*

#### **Mission Statement**

**Green Hearts' mission is to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature.**

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## Leading the Way for Nature Preschools

Nature preschools are an excellent way to bring nature play back into young children's lives. They operate similarly to most child care centers: parents sign kids up for two to five days a week, for a full year. The key distinction is that nature preschools have wild habitats right outside the door, where their students explore daily, in all safe weather conditions.

Nature preschools effectively embrace Green Hearts' three key principles of good nature play:

1. The right kind of **place**: "wild" nature where kids are free to play and explore.
2. The right kind of **play**: unstructured, child-guided play in rich, stimulating environments.
3. The right kind of **re-play**: that is, frequent play in natural settings.

Now Green Hearts is proud to be helping to spread the nature preschool model through two important new planning initiatives.

### ♥ Pennsylvania State Parks

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has contracted with Green Hearts to provide information and guidance on the potential development of nature preschools within Pennsylvania State Parks.

The DCNR sees nature-based preschool programs within PA State Parks as a promising methodology for encouraging a lifelong, meaningful connection between young children and nature. By exposing their students to the outdoors — day after day, week after week — these programs can build a foundational stewardship ethic in both the preschool students and their families, creating strong advocates for the State's natural resources.

Green Hearts will create a planning manual that will provide the DCNR with step-by-step instructions for the development of nature preschools, beginning with simple feasibility study methods that will help determine the financial viability of a nature preschool within any given State Park. The manual will then guide State Park staff and any collaborating agencies

on how to proceed with the establishment of a proposed preschool.

In addition, Green Hearts will provide the DCNR with an implementation plan for the creation of their first pilot nature preschool in the State Parks: a licensed, tuition-based, financially sustainable program within Presque Isle State Park. This effort, if ultimately approved, will make use of a currently available building at Presque Isle that is readily accessible to the residents of Erie.

Green Hearts and the PA DCNR are happy to be able to work together on this future-oriented approach to strengthen the stewardship of Pennsylvania's natural resources. Completion is expected by Spring of 2011.



Photo by Bob Bailie. Thanks Bob!

### ♥ Margaret A. Cargill Foundation

This new Minnesota foundation has a strong interest in the nature preschool model as a legitimate conservation strategy that can simultaneously address other childhood issues, such as the obesity epidemic plus healthy social and emotional development.

Green Hearts is working in partnership with the Margaret A. Cargill Foundation (MACF), the National Audubon Society (NAS), and John Flicker (former President of NAS) to conduct a feasibility study on the viability of establishing a network of nature-based preschools in the Upper Midwest region — with an eye towards possible national expansion in the future. We will also utilize many other experts in this project.

Drawing on results of the feasibility study, Green Hearts and our partners will then produce a detailed business plan to show how a nature preschool network could best be financed, established, operated, and evaluated. The final plan will then guide MACF and other foundations in their consideration of possible future implementation funding.

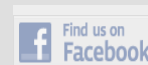
Green Hearts is excited about this extraordinary venture, and is very happy to be working with our new partners on it! This project is targeted for completion by April 30, 2011.

One key to great nature play:  
*Play with nature, not just in it!*

Catching frogs, climbing trees, and digging holes to China are perfect. Playing Frisbee in the park is fun, but that's *outdoor* play — not *nature* play.

### *Become a Friend to Green Hearts!*

- Schedule us for a talk or workshop.
- Visit our website: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org)
- Donate to support our work.
- Share this newsletter with a friend.
- Become our friend on Facebook.



## What Is Green Hearts Doing for Nature Play?

*Green Hearts works around Omaha and around the country on behalf of nature play — or, more accurately, on behalf of our children who need to be able to enjoy nature play! It's been a busy few months for us, and now Green Hearts is about to go international! Here's a summary of our recent work.*

### Educational Advocacy

A central part of our mission is teaching about the value of nature-based play and how we can restore it to modern childhood. In recent months we've enjoyed many opportunities for this work!

**Asbury Woods Nature Center, Erie, PA:** Staff training plus a public presentation.

**The Wilderness Center, Wilmot, OH:** Podcast about nature play: [www.wildernesscenter.org](http://www.wildernesscenter.org). (Click on yellow "Wild Ideas" banner on home page; use the podcast search bar to get Episode 53. 25 minutes; starts at 9:50 into the show — click on progress bar to skip forward.)

**MORE Nature (Metro Omaha Resources for Exploring Nature):** Helping with the design and interpretation of a demonstration backyard for nature play at Omaha's "Street of Dreams." Also, a Parents' Workshop on Nature Play, held at Fontenelle Forest.

**4C of Southern Indiana, Evansville:** Workshop for child care providers, plus a podcast about nature play: [www.child-care.org](http://www.child-care.org). (Choose "Podcasts" from the left-hand menu; click on Episode 20. 42 minutes)

**Community Alliance and Services for Young Children (CASY), Terre Haute, IN:** Keynote presentation at their annual conference for child care providers, plus two follow-up workshops.

**Nebraska Association of Resource Districts, Kearney, NE:** Panel presentation about new approaches and options for outdoor and environmental education.

**Connecting Children with Nature Action Forum, Nebraska City, NE:** Helping a Nebraska team plan statewide community forums about nature play.

☺ **Coming in November:** "Natural Phenomena" early childhood and nature conference, Whangarei, New Zealand — keynote presentation plus two follow-up workshops.

### Consulting

Green Hearts lends its expertise to other groups that want to provide their audiences with more nature play. Recent clients have included the following.

**SafeNet Domestic Shelter, Erie, PA:** Design help for creating an urban nature play space to serve mothers and their children who are in sheltered housing.

**Asbury Woods Nature Center, Erie, PA:** Design assistance for the creation of a large nature play space at this community conservation center.

**Montgomery County Community College Child Care Center, Bluebell, PA:** Design help for the creation of a nature play space for this model facility.

**The Brenton Arboretum, Dallas Center, IA:** Design assistance for enlarging an existing nature play space.

**Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources:** Assistance with planning for the possible development of nature-based preschools in Pennsylvania State Parks. (*See article on p. 3*)

**Margaret A. Cargill Foundation, Eden Prairie, MN:** Assistance with a feasibility study and creation of a business plan for a possible network of nature preschools in the upper Midwest. (*See article on p. 3*)

### Publications

These are Green Hearts' most recent publications.

**25 Easy Nature Play Ideas for Early Childhood Centers.** You can download this from our website: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org) (in the Resources section).

**Early Childhood Resources for Nature Play.** Also available on our website, in the Resources section.

**Bumper Stickers — "Got Mud?" or "Go Out and Play!"** You can order these from our website or from our office (see inside cover for contact info.).

*"Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you."*

— Frank Lloyd Wright

This newsletter can also be viewed, downloaded, and shared from Green Hearts' website: [www.greenheartsinc.org](http://www.greenheartsinc.org).

If you'd like to receive future issues of this newsletter via email, send a message to [kfinch@greenheartsinc.org](mailto:kfinch@greenheartsinc.org). Put "electronic subscription" in the subject line.



Photo by Carmen Field. Thanks Carmen!

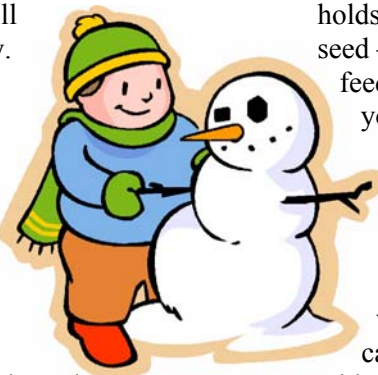
## More Nature Play Tips for Your Yard: Be Brrrrrave!

A child's view of the world is much smaller and more intimate than that of adults, and this is a key factor in providing frequent nature play for your kids! They don't need spectacular vistas or miles of trails to explore and enjoy nature. Instead, they can be engaged for hours with tiny wonders they find right in your own yard, even in winter — like twigs, pine cones, animal tracks, or small "landscapes" like rock gardens and shrub hideaways.

As winter approaches, it's good to remember a simple mantra: *There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing!* Don't miss a chance for truly memorable nature play experiences just because it's cold outside!

**Get Flaky:** Scientists claim that no two snowflakes are exactly alike. Good luck proving that! But you can start your own study. Tape a piece of black velvet cloth around a piece of cardboard (page size is fine), and then put it in the freezer. When snow comes along, venture out with your kids and your cold black cloth, and use it to catch flakes. Bring a magnifier along, too. The flakes will show up well against the black background, and the pre-chilling will keep them from melting too quickly. Snowflakes really are incredibly beautiful — as you will see!

**White/Out!:** Millions of people have no snow to play in — so don't miss the chance for your kids to do so! Snow forts, snowball fights, good old snowmen (OK, snow-people!), and just plain rolling around in the white stuff — all make good fun and good memories! And for refreshment you can make a pretty passable snow cone out of fresh flakes and a little fruit juice. Good clothes are a must, of course — and if they get soaked through, it's time for a change or a break.



**Feed the Birds:** Winter is the perfect time to feed birds. Their natural food supply is limited in the colder months, so many bird species will readily take handouts! You'll do best with hanging tube feeders filled with black oil sunflower seed or niger ("thistle") seed — but get the right feeder for each, as these two seeds require different-sized feeding holes.

You might add a cage-type suet feeder that holds handy square cakes of suet mixed with seed — a favorite of woodpeckers. Hang your feeders close enough to a prime window so you can easily watch them; keep a bird guide and binoculars handy; and record all the species you see. Local bird-seed stores are a good source for expert advice!

**Log In!** A large log or two in your yard will make a great play center! Your kids can balance on it, hide behind it, use it as a table, or for a bench. Don't have a log? Wait for one of those nasty winter ice storms that (sadly) bring down lots of trees. Then call up a tree service firm and ask if you can buy a log or two from the many they'll be cutting. They have to do something with them, anyway!

### Supporting Green Hearts

If you believe in Green Hearts' mission to restore and strengthen the bonds between children and nature, you appreciate the work we're doing, and you would like to stay informed about it, please support us with an annual contribution! Every gift truly helps, no matter what size — and every one will be gratefully acknowledged.

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*Thank you!*

## ***Nature Play as a Subversive Activity***

*continued from front page*

### **Give Away Your Yard**

But keep it in the family! Designate a chunk of your backyard as your kids' play zone — the place where they can dig, build, plant, un-plant, hide, and cause general mayhem, to their hearts' delight. Then use your computer skills to create an official-looking lease, giving them all rights to that corner of your landscape. They'll love being land barons! Be sure to have a properly formal signing ceremony!

### **Bring the Dead Back to Life**

Plant flowers in your "hell strip:" the too-narrow patch between the sidewalk and the street where every house on the block has dead grass. If it's too hot and dry for the flowers you'd really like there, try planting flowering succulents instead. Your yard will stand out like a colorful beacon!

While you're at it, tear out a large chunk of your ridiculously huge driveway and turn it into native shrubs for the birds. Or leave the paving, but build giant planter boxes on top of it: a perfect, sunny spot for your tomatoes, peppers, and corn!



### **Contest the Covenants**

Go ahead, pitch that tent in your backyard; do it often. Sleep out with your kids. If someone complains, take them on at a neighborhood association meeting; come armed with facts and passion about nature play. Read up about it at [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org), and bring a copy of Last Child in the Woods. Give Green Hearts' "Got Mud?" stickers to all the Board members!

Those silly covenants and restrictions won't change until people like you start speaking up for sanity.

And while they're trying to figure out what to do about the high crime of backyard campouts, build a tree house in your backyard. With or without a tree. And be sure to invite your neighbors up inside for Twinkies and milk. Chances are, they remember fun childhood times playing in nature, too!

The nature play movement is growing at an amazing pace, and it's happening because folks all over the country are stepping up to bring outdoor play back to their kids. These aren't people with PhDs in play, or Masters in mud. They are just individuals, like you, who care about how their children are growing up. Join in, and add your voice to the movement!



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*Bringing Children and Nature Back Together*