The great outdoors

See how Peninsula summer camps are connecting kids with nature

Page 6
Endless Possibilities

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Local camps foster precious connections with nature | BY KARLA KANE

With kids cooped up in classrooms for much of the school year, summer can be a much-needed time to get them out of the desks, off the screens and released into the wild. Outdoor fun is a major part of many local summer camp programs, and some specialize in fostering lasting ties to nature, helping campers get familiar with local ecosystems and introducing useful wilderness skills.
“We need nature in our lives,” said Dan Baird of WilderSkills, which has offered camps in Saratoga and Redwood City. “As human beings, we’re hardwired for being outdoors, for having nature in our lives. When we don’t, it kind of feels like something’s missing.”

WilderSkills and other local camps, including Pathfinders Nature Mentoring, the Riekes Center’s nature programs and Be An In Nature, use a mix of activities, such as games, art, stories, training in survival and traditional skills, observation and, perhaps most importantly, free play, to help kids nurture an understanding of and appreciation for their environment.

Activities can include learning about tracking, birdwatching, studying and harvesting edible plants, making art from natural materials, building emergency structures, using tools such as whittling knives and hatchets, learning how to safely build fires, and hearing folktales and original stories that relate to the lessons learned.

‘As human beings, we’re hardwired for being outdoors, for having nature in our lives. When we don’t, it kind of feels like something’s missing.’

Dan Baird, Founder, WilderSkills

“What we really are trying to do is to form the connections that are really deep between human beings and the land,” said the Riekes Center’s Nature Director Kate Peters. The Menlo Park-based Riekes Center runs numerous nature camps in locations including Los Altos Hills and Woodside.

“We want to get kids immersed into the environment, into learning through direct participation, and what that might look like on a real level is, there’s learning about a manzanita tree or bush and doing a journal on it, but then there’s also harvesting the manzanita berries and processing them into a cider, or eating them, or grinding up their seeds into flour,” she said. “We really want to get kids — and adults — to experience what it means to have a real relationship with various pieces of an ecosystem, because that’s what our natural inheritance really is as human beings on this planet.”

In interviews with this publication, the camp leaders all also emphasized the importance of flexibility, of adjusting to the needs and interests of the children as well as offering the opportunity for open play and exploration.

“Nature itself avails that boundless curiosity for kids,” said Be An In Nature’s Marisa Bean, whose programs have taken place at sites from Morgan Hill to Woodside. “We follow the love of learning.”

Modern, fast-paced society, she said, doesn’t always allow much time to engage with the natural world, or with skills that were once common.

“In our normal, busy Silicon Valley life, we don’t sit around the fire and work with our hands creating, or weaving,” she said. “We know that these are so engaging for children.” Her programs often pair a more physically active activity or game followed by a period of focus. There’s also an emphasis on core values and socioemotional learning, with the campers and staff fostering an inclusive environment of safety and respect, she said.

Pathfinders founder Drew Harwell grew up in Palo Alto, and his programs take kids to many of the natural spaces he enjoyed exploring as a child.

“We always find a way through the children’s creativity and passions. As long as it’s connecting them deeper into nature, we want them to explore their own journey that way,” he said.

Meeting up in Palo Alto’s Rinconada Park, campers embark on field trips to a variety of habitats, starting close to home at Foothills Nature Preserve.

“Each day we start getting a little further away from Palo Alto,” he said, voyaging to places like Huddart Park, Castle Rock State Park, and eventually all the way out to the coastal tide pools.

“I like that there’s kind of a mix of everything; we get to go to new parks every time,” said Lizzie Wray, a Menlo Park sixth grader who’s been involved with Pathfinders since she was in preschool. The 11-year-old, who named jackrabbits as her favorite wildlife spotted at camp, said she hopes to become a Pathfinders counselor in training in the future.

Some children, like Wray, come to camps already having a lot of enthusiasm for or experience with interacting in the natural environment. Others ... not so much. Some campers are initially afraid to touch dirt, Baird said, or are terrified of insects, Bean said.

“The goal is to help them gain a familiarity and comfort level, no matter their previous experiences.

“The idea is to get kids outdoors and equip them to learn skills that will connect them to nature and (help them) feel comfortable outdoors all their life,” Baird said of WilderSkills (founded as a branch of California Survival School), which in addition to teaching traditional skills like carving techniques also emphasizes simply giving unstructured time for campers to explore and feel a part of nature, rather than thinking of it as “something external,” he said.

Campers are often thrilled to
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Into the wild (continued from page 7)

goal practical knowledge, such as using bay leaves as natural insect repellent (look for campers coming home with them stuffed in their sleeves and socks, Peters said). They also tend to enthusiastically share the information they’ve gleaned with family and peers.

“I get to teach my friends a lot because I’ve learned so many things,” Wray said of her years with Pathfinders.

Camps offer a range of programs depending on age group and interest. For example, BEan In Na-
ture has offered sessions including “Girls’ Ancestral Survival Fairy Camp” (ages 5 1/2 to 13), “Wilderness Survival Skills” (ages 7-17) and a tween/teen leadership program, among many others. The Riekes Center’s nature camps have included “Nature Ninja Circus Camp” and programs specializing in bush-
craft, survival skills and stealth, in addition to their broader nature camps.

While the focus for younger campers is often more about introducing them to the great outdoors, play, and building basic skills, for older and more experienced campers, there are plenty of op-
portunities for challenge and advancement, from how to create fire by friction and gather firemak-
ing resources, to knife safety certification, how to split wood or build a primitive trap, and advanced orienteering using compasses and maps. At the heart of all of these programs, though, is finding the wonder in the natural world.

Something as simple as finding an owl feather on the grounds of Filoli, for ex-
ample, and identifying the bird it belonged to can lead to a lot of excitement.

“You pull out the feather field guide and the kids are like, ‘Oh, what is it?’ and then they just lose their minds when it’s an owl,” Peters said, laughing.

Peters fondly recalls attending camp at Hidden Villa as a child herself, and the sheer joy of hands-on encounters with flora and fauna. Frolicking barefoot in a creek, watching newts wriggle nearby, can make a child’s day and form lasting memories.

“I think that an underlying principle of our pro-
grams is that you don’t build a really deep love for nature by, kind of, bombarding children’s brains with scary environmental facts,” Peters said. Instead, it’s about “intentionally finding those things that make kids’ brains go, ‘Wow! This is really cool!’ And put-
ing as much of that in there as possible.”

The seeds of environmental awareness can be planted early and who knows, today’s tree climbers and mud wallowers could well be our next generation of green leaders.

“Given our current environmental crises and all that’s going on in the world, it’s really important, I strongly believe, for children to be outdoors as much as possible,” Bean said. “That they fall in love with nature in their own way.”

Email Karla Kane at kkane@paweekly.com.

ABOUT THE COVER:
Clockwise from left: Pathfinders campers explore tide pools at Pescadero State Beach. Courtesy Pathfinders Nature Mentoring.

A nature instructor demonstrates basket weaving at Huddart Park. Courtesy Riekes Center.

A BEan In Nature teen leader in training works with a young camper. Courtesy BEan In Nature.

WilderSkills offers summer programs in Saratoga and Redwood City. Courtesy WilderSkills.

Background courtesy Getty Images.
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JUNE 17 - 28, 2024

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