



Where The Wild Things Are

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By: **Gina DeMillo Wagner**

Photography By: **Jack Affleck, Sean Boggs**

How do you encourage adventure, independence, and self-discovery in a world where it's no longer safe for your kids to "disappear"? You find bigger playgrounds.

We're traversing an alpine meadow near Kite Lake south of [Breckenridge](#) with my four-year-old daughter, when my husband Kris suddenly stops, nudges her ahead, and tells her to lead the way. I throw my arm out like a roadblock. "Are you sure about this?" I ask. The trail we're on is new to all of us. There are potholes and boulder fields and unfamiliar game paths all around. I'm apprehensive at the prospect of following my preschooler instead of a GPS.



Keystone.

He shrugs and says, "What's the worst that can happen?"

Back home, we don't even let our kids ride their bikes outside of our driveway, because "the worst

that can happen” is pretty scary. We live in a big metropolitan area that sees its fair share of crime and reckless drivers. My phone buzzes with Amber Alerts on a regular basis.



Northstar.

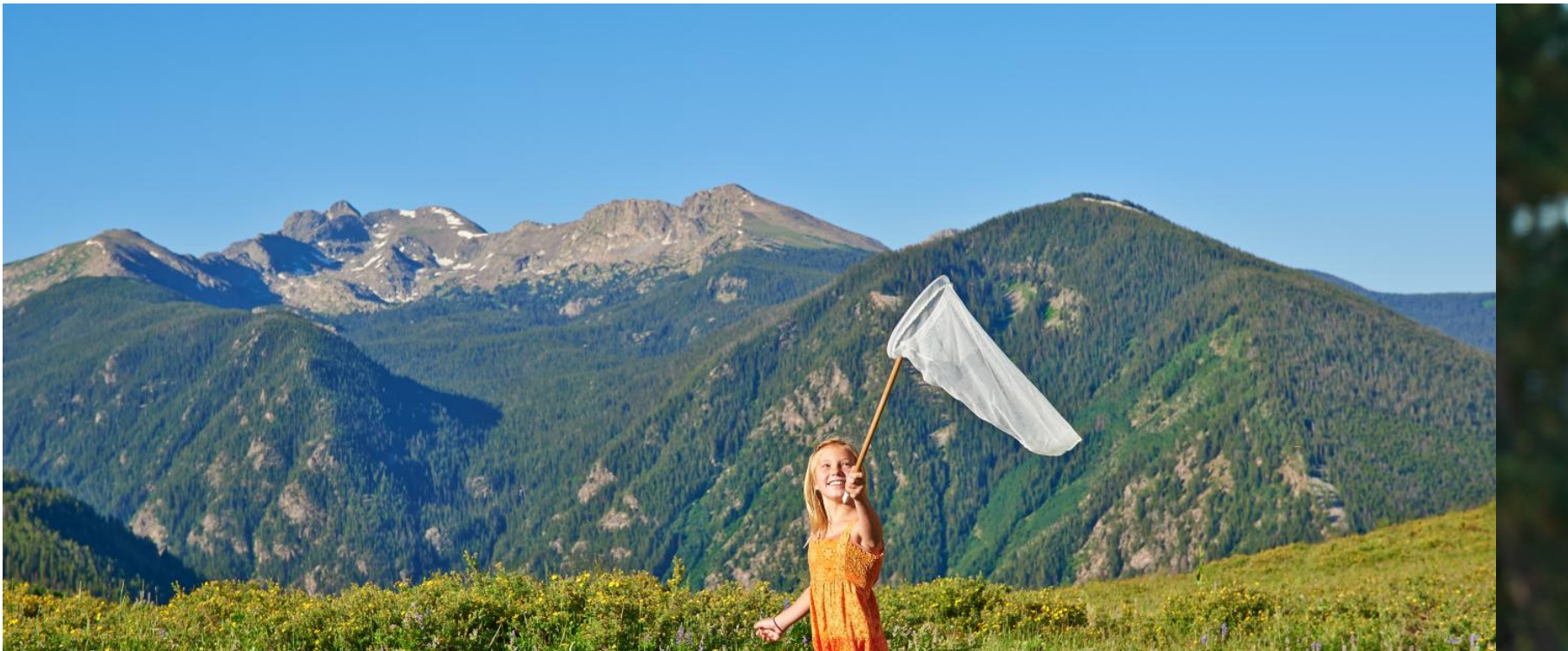
But we’re far from that city now, in a wide expanse of Rocky Mountain wilderness, sheltered by stunning 14,000-foot peaks. No roads. No stranger danger. Kris wants Bronwynn to decide our fate for the next couple of miles—and the worst-case scenario, I realize, is that we’ll hike in circles, stop and admire every single wildflower, and maybe encounter some terrain that forces us to turn back.

My daughter looks to me for approval, her eyes as blue as an alpine lake, her brown curls spilling out of her knit cap. Despite my initial reluctance, I nod. Her face lights up. It's not often we give her this much power, and she clearly relishes it.

I remember that feeling. Kris and I grew up free-range kids, turned loose in the mornings and not seen or heard from again until dinnertime. Today, we are part of a culture that keeps our children on extremely tight leashes. Like most parents, we struggle with the notion that our kids are in

constant danger from kidnapping, bullies, drunk drivers, germs, and chemicals lurking in our food.

They might be safer if we let that notion dictate our parenting, but I worry they'll miss out on the sense of empowerment and adventure that made us fall in love with playing outdoors. And worse, I worry their development will suffer for it. Studies published by the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, and others show that unstructured play promotes cognitive growth, strengthens emotional intelligence, and benefits social interactions. They describe how play involves problem solving, which is one of the highest executive functions.





Scrolling right: Beaver Creek, Keystone, Northstar, Vail.

What's more, kids who play outdoors (and not just on a soccer field) are better adjusted, smarter, and less stressed throughout their lives. And isn't that what we all want for our children?

Bottom line: Turning our kids loose, even if it makes us uncomfortable, is good parenting. It's not as if we were letting our daughter roam the wilderness by herself; what we *were* doing was handing over a certain amount of trust. And it doesn't take me long to realize that a four-year-old can be a good leader. Bronwynn takes us on a side trail that leads to a small braided stream. Kris and I hang back, keeping her and her two-year-old brother Miles in sight while they take turns hopping and skipping across the water. Their shoes get soaked and muddy, but they are in heaven. They are explorers, superheroes, dinosaurs, and unicorns frolicking in a magical landscape.



Vail.

Kris and I relax, watch, and snap a few photos from a distance. It's a first step for them, and for us: They're far enough away to be independent, but not so far that they'll get lost or hurt without us knowing.

When they've had their fill, Bronwynn confidently points us back toward the trailhead. She says she remembers where to go because she recognizes the flowers and rocks along the trail—details we adults overlooked.



Northstar.

That was two years ago, and we continue to seek that sweet spot between a sheltered, confined existence and zero boundaries. Now, we let them venture even farther from our grip. At every chance, we look for the wild places where the kids can roam free. We spend several weeks each summer in [Breckenridge](#), hiking and fishing and riding bikes on the paths. Our kids disappear into the woods and

build forts for hours. They risk bug bites and scraped knees or maybe a little sunburn, but I rest

easy knowing that they're getting their fill of adventure without a single adult choreographing their free time.

Better still, we've noticed that the experiences they gain in the mountains carry over to our home life. When the weather is nice, they choose the backyard over watching TV. We've discovered parks and trails near our house that we wouldn't have discovered without the kids pushing us to explore.

Will we always worry about our kids? Of course. We're parents. Do we have to let it get in the way of their falling in love with the mountains and wild places? Absolutely not.

Tags: **Breckenridge, Multi-resort**

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