



Photo courtesy Gina Vercesi

Fabulous Nature Centers

A SPRINGTIME TREAT FOR FAMILIES

By Gina Vercesi



Our rubber boots squelched along the banks of the Cross River as warm, spring mud oozed out from beneath our footsteps. It had taken a while for the weather to turn warm this season and the purplish-green fronds of the skunk cabbages that dotted the wetland had just begun to unfurl. We were at the tail end of a morning hike – a hike that would culminate in a visit to the Trailside Nature Museum at the Ward Pound Ridge Reservation. It was our plan to join that afternoon's family program, Amphibians for Kids, after a quick picnic lunch at the sun-warmed picnic tables nearby.

Trailside's program is just one of countless others offered by the preserves, sanctuaries, parks and reservations in and around Westchester County. On any given weekend, families can seine in the Hudson, build a nesting house for eastern bluebirds, or search for salamanders in a vernal pond alongside resident naturalists. In this age in which technology reigns supreme, our county nature centers offer the opportunity to authentically reconnect with the natural world around us.

On the Farm

Muscot Farm: Step back in time at this authentic 19th century farm, the goal of which is to preserve the county's agricultural heritage. The farmyard is home to many animals including pigs, sheep, cows, chickens and turkeys. Touring

the farm buildings it's easy to imagine county life of a bygone era – our favorite is the icehouse. The farm offers demonstrations of farm life in the olden days, seasonal events like maple sugaring and sheep shearing, animal talks and crafting workshops. There are plenty of trails for hiking, too.

Stamford Museum and Nature Center: When our kids were younger we spent countless hours visiting the animals, especially the goats, at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center. A short drive off the Merritt Parkway in Stamford, Conn., visitors can spend the day exploring Heckscher Farm, be sure to stop by the otter pond, visit the Overlook Nature Center, hike a trail or play in a fully-equipped Nature's Playground. Themed astronomy nights at the Center's observatory are an opportunity for a unique family outing.

For the Birds

Edith Read Sanctuary: Read Sanctuary is a 179-acre county park recognized by the National Audubon Society as an important bird area. There is a small bird watching section complete with binoculars and field guides in the Sanctuary's small, but enjoyable, nature center. Behind the center is a three-mile network of trails while across the street there's a half-mile stretch of shoreline perfect for wading, treasure hunting and a picnic.

Audubon Greenwich: The Kimberlin Nature Education Center is the place to begin a visit to this 285-acre sanctuary where seven miles of trails traverse diverse ecosystems replete with local wildlife. Naturalist-lead programs like family bird watching, native plant study and wildlife walks are offered several times each month. On rainy days bird watch from the indoor viewing area. There's also a very nice gift shop and a hands-on nature exhibit room.

On the River

Bezczak Environmental Education Center: Opened in 2004, Bezczak's riverfront interpretive center focuses on educating people about the ecology, history and culture of the Hudson River. The River Explorer's family nature programs are operated seasonally through the Center for the Urban River at Bezczak (CURB) in affiliation with Sarah Lawrence College. Additionally, the center's monthly family seining sessions are especially exciting.

The Science Barge: A floating hydroponic farm, the Science Barge offers family drop-in hours every Saturday and Sunday, April through November. Visitors tour the barge and explore different aquatic growing systems, learning about the effects of various plants on our health and development. Special events take place seasonally and kids can participate in anything from building and taking home their own hydroponic mini-gardens to crabbing in the Hudson.

Become a Naturalist

Teatown Lake Reservation: Teatown is a jewel in the realm of nature education. In addition to their extensive field trip offerings and summer programs, weekends at Teatown finds families engaged in all manner of outdoor adventures including animal care, birding, insect study, ponding, hiking and star-gazing.

Westmoreland Sanctuary: Housed in a former Bedford Village church that was moved to the sanctuary piece-by-piece in 1973, Westmoreland's nature center is a county treasure. With everything from live animals and a large bird watching area to excellent nature exhibits, it is easy to lose track of time in here. Each weekend, the sanctuary's enthusiastic naturalists lead hikes, guide pond studies and teach about indigenous flora and fauna.

Meet the Animals

Greenburgh Nature Center: Featuring a variety of animal exhibits and habitats perfect for young naturalists to explore – a miniature farm, rescued birds of prey, a woodland pond and prairie dogs are just a few – this is one of the area's best known



A visit to a nature center or farm can help kids understand where our food comes from.

and loved nature centers. The Center's small network of trails make for a great beginner's hike and getting acquainted with the critters residing in the live animal museum alongside the wonderful staff is always a highlight.

Wolf Conservation Center: Home to 25 wolves including the center's three wolf ambassadors, the WCC seeks to protect wolves by teaching the public about them and their relationship to

the environment. A wide variety of daytime and evening family programs are offered including monthly full moon hikes. Particularly intriguing are the weekly "Sleeping with Wolves" events in which participants spend the night camping on the center grounds.

Lend a Hand

Many of these places are always on the lookout for a helping hand and several even have volunteer workdays as part of their monthly or seasonal calendars. Donating some of your time and energy weeding the butterfly garden, cutting invasive vines, or helping to clear hiking trails is a great way for you and your kids to give back to our community.

This year, The Friends of Westchester County Parks held its annual Pitch in for Parks event on Sunday, April 26 during which volunteers lent a hand around many of our local preserves. For more information about other Friends of Westchester County Parks events visit the County's website, westchestergov.com.

Gina Vercesi is a freelance writer, teacher, mom, nature enthusiast and founder of kidsunplugged.org.



GO NATURE!

Visit a local nature center this spring. Here's a resource list of the centers mentioned in this article, as well as some other wonderful places to enjoy nature.

Audubon Greenwich

613 Riversville Road
Greenwich, Conn.
203-869-5272
greenwich.audubon.org

Beczak Environmental Education Center

35 Alexander St.
Yonkers, N.Y.
377-1900
beczak.org

Edith Read Sanctuary

Playland Parkway
Rye, N.Y.
967-8720
friendsofreadwildlifesanctuary.org

Greenburgh Nature Center

99 Dromore Road
Scarsdale, N.Y.
723-3470
greenburghnaturecenter.org

Muscot Farm

51 Rte. 100
Katonah, N.Y.
864-7282
muscootfarm.org

Rye Nature Center

873 Boston Post Road
Rye, N.Y.
967-5150
ryenaturecenter.org

Sawmill River Audubon

(manages 8 sanctuaries)
275 Millwood Road
Chappaqua, N.Y.
666-6503
sawmillriveraudubon.org

The Science Barge

99 Dock St.
Yonkers, N.Y.
375-2151
groundworkhv.org

Stamford Museum and Nature Center

39 Scofieldtown Road
Stamford, Conn.
203-322-1646
stamfordmuseum.org

Stone Barns Center for Food & Agriculture

630 Bedford Road
Pocantico Hills, N.Y.
366-6200
stonebarnscenter.org

Teatown Lake Reservation

1600 Spring Valley Road
Ossining, N.Y.
762-2912
teatown.org

Trailside Museum

at Ward Pound Ridge Reservation
6 Reservation Road
Cross River, N.Y.
864-7322
friendsoftrailside.org

Weinberg Nature Center

455 Mamaroneck Road
Scarsdale, N.Y.
722-1289
weinbergnaturecenter.org

Westchester County Parks

The County manages many beautiful parks, including some mentioned in this article.
parks.westchestergov.com/parks-destinations

Westmoreland Sanctuary

260 Chestnut Ridge Road
Mount Kisco, N.Y.
666-8448
westmorelandsanctuary.org

Wolf Conservation Center

South Salem, N.Y.
763-2373
nywolf.org