

## Six ways to rewild yourself

*Break the tyranny of the indoors and let your inner wild child free.*

A soft golden light shone down on me and the low mountains of Teruel, Spain. I'd risen early to practice qigong and peace and contentment filled me as I gazed across the ranges. I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. I turned and beheld a fox emerge from the trees. It noticed me, froze, observed, then – deciding I was no threat – relaxed and sat facing me. Its golden eyes seemed to hold the secrets of the cosmos. Deep, enigmatic, and wise. The two of us continued facing, and then fox turned and disappeared. Some might say it was just chance we crossed paths. I believe the stillness and presence qigong gave me allowed it to happen.

These are the type of nature experiences Stevan Bonitz wishes for people who attend his wilderness awareness courses in Heidelberg. Bonitz, 36, founded the Wilderness School Heidelberg in 2016. His popular Step into the Wild course teaches people to feel at ease in nature, which sounds simple but is being lost to our indoor generation. Studies and surveys conducted in the US and the UK indicate modern people spend about 90% of their time indoors. Children today are playing half as much outside as their parents did as children. A study found kids in the US spend about 7.5 hours a day looking at screens. No wonder the indoor generation isn't comfortable outdoors. For Bonitz, reversing this trend is what his work is all about. "The first step is to sit around a bonfire together at night, and sleep out in nature," he says. "For many, it's their first time. Their sensory awareness immediately starts to improve. Out in the forest there is a lot of input coming from nature. What does the body and brain do with it? Start to become more present."

In 2013, Bonitz began training with Wolfgang Peham who heads up Wildniswissen, Germany's oldest wilderness awareness school. Until then, Bonitz had been working as a youth worker, but was frustrated because he wasn't getting the results he hoped for. He noticed a nature deficit was common among the kids and started to research older, ancestral methods – grounded in our relationship with nature – that might better stabilize young people. His research led him to discover well-known wilderness awareness schools in the US, which led him to Wolfgang Peham who had trained there. "The way we see the world is this: when you are not connected with nature there is something missing in your life," Bonitz says. "It makes your life, your mind, and body unhealthy."

The good news is reconnecting with nature is easy – with a little dedication. After all, we are part of nature. To facilitate the rewilding process, Bonitz guides students through 13 core routines. Each one requires time and repetition. Here, Bonitz shares six anyone can try.

### Find your sit spot

#### **Frequency: Daily**

This routine is the first and most important of them all. If you do only one of them, make it this. Choose a spot in nature where there's no, or few people, and go there every day, come rain, or shine, and sit there for 10, 15 or 30 minutes. It's better to sit for briefer periods more often than to try to sit for longer periods, less often. If the amount of time stresses you, it will discourage you. It's also better your sit spot is close by. It could be in your garden. Or the park on the corner. Don't make it some far off place. Otherwise it might discourage you from going there. When you go to sit, leave your phone at home. Observe silence.

Once you're there, forget everything and tune into the world around you. "Have a wide-angle gaze rather than focusing on any one thing," Bonitz says. "Observe everything happening around you. What can you see, smell, and hear? Do this regularly and something magical happens."

## Ask creative questions

### **Frequency: Fortnightly**

Find a tree outside somewhere that calls to you. Stand or sit for a couple of minutes facing its trunk, taking in its presence. Then, start to ask questions. Bonitz guides this exercise in his courses and requests students to ask 100 questions. “It’s about starting to think outside of the box,” he explains. “It starts to challenge our habitual thinking and helps people to become curious again.” Questions could include:

1. Dear tree, how deep are your roots?
2. Why is your bark so rough?
3. What could I see if I climbed you?

## Wander free

### **Frequency: Fortnightly**

This is the second most important core routine, and it’s about leaving the beaten path. Doing it properly requires two to three hours. Go to a forest and rather than follow trails, wander off path. It doesn’t have to be far to begin with. Bonitz recommends asking your gut what direction to walk in. “When you leave the path, you leave your routine and habitual patterns behind,” Bonitz says. “Wander around with an open mind, free from any to-dos, or expectations. You’ll discover a lot.” For safety, choose somewhere familiar and tell someone where you’re going.

## Become a map maker

### **Frequency: Fortnightly**

How well do you really know your surroundings? This routine is all about cultivating a good lay of the land. Starting small, take a sketch pad and pen and draw a map of the area around your sit spot. If there’s a stream, draw how it moves across the land. Is there a hill or rise? Draw it. Add shrubs, trees, the location of any fruit, herbs, or berries. Over time, gradually expand your map until it covers a 15 km<sup>2</sup> area. “When you do that for a very long time you truly know your own land,” Bonitz says.

## Know your flowers

### **Frequency: Fortnightly**

Head out for a stroll and find a flower to study. Take notes in your new flower journal about its environment; is it growing in soft earth, or a sandier soil? Is there water nearby? Note down as much information as you can. Pick the flower, sit down, and try to draw it in your book. Draw the flower from memory. Do to do this, look at the flower for 15 seconds, put it out of sight, and then draw whatever you can remember. Repeat this five times. “The improvement is incredible,” Bonitz says. “The last drawing has a lot of detail.” Go home and use a botany book or the internet to identify and learn about the flower.

## Sleep beneath the stars

### **Frequency: Monthly**

If you have one, you can try this in your own backyard, or, if not, at a forest campground. For the first time, take whatever comforts you need to feel safe and secure for a good night’s sleep. But leave your phone, books, or e-reader, at home. Settle in and open your senses to the night. Keep going to the same spot and get to the know the place. And for an extra challenge: each time you sleep out, take one item less with you. For example, take a tarp rather than a tent. Next time, leave the tarp at home. If weather permits on the next outing, leave your sleeping bag behind. How much do you really need?

## Release the wild child

Bonitz says if you do these six core routines regularly you will release your inner wild child. What does that mean exactly? It means you will rediscover your inherent child-like curiosity and wonder for the living world around you. It's always there, it just gets smothered by the tyranny of the indoors and all the habitual patterns and hyper control that entails. Practice these according to your own circumstances. Don't make them another thing to stress about. When you go out, be relaxed, peaceful and present. Who knows what magical creature you might cross paths with?