

BEYOND THE GREEN BLUR

Green adventures in your own backyard

by backyard nature guru,
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Photo: Niels Hariot / shutterstock.com

“To observe the same spaces over and over again with the same eyes is not to see them.”

Our own backyard or even a nearby park can become nothing more than a green blur: a natural backdrop to our everyday lives that we tend to dismiss and ignore because it's always there. We fantasize about far away places and the discoveries we could make, but we neglect the wealth of possibilities in our own community.

But switch your perspective and something magical can happen! Here's how:

CREATE A MINI TRAIL

Visit a nearby green space or backyard. Take along some twine, popsicle sticks and scissors. Hunker down and take a closer look at the world on which you are standing. Do you notice the texture of that mushroom or the fanned gills underneath its nodding head?

What about the gallery of bark beetle etchings scrolled across a log? Is that a form of natural writing with a tale to tell? The natural world is replete with stories both large and small. We tend to focus on the above world and we forget to look down – especially at the breathtaking detail that can be found in the very small.

Take your popsicle sticks and push them into the ground beside any nearby point of interest. Perhaps it is a chewed leaf, an egg mass, a spider's web or a seed. Maybe you found a basement window? If there is a log or a stone you can lift up and explore the underworld—full of sow bugs, centipedes, earthworms, millipedes, and perhaps even a salamander!

When you have found a dozen or so points of interest, tie your string joining each popsicle stick to the next until you have a continuous string trail, 12 yards or so long, linking them all together. You've created a micro-trail!

When you are finished, sit down and watch your trail quietly for 10 minutes or so. Did anything of note happen? Then take a trip along the trail, keeping your head close to the ground. If you have one, use a hand-lens. Bring someone special to your micro-trail and give them a guided tour of your discoveries! Did they discover something you missed?

FINGER FRAME VIEW

Sometimes we gain a new appreciation for what surrounds us when we take the time to isolate features in the natural world. Here is a technique used by photographers to create an instant and portable frame. Take each hand and extend your finger and thumb to make an “L.” Flip one hand so your palm is facing toward you and with the other hand you are viewing the back of your hand. Join your fingers and thumbs together. In a nearby green space, look through your homemade finger frame. Do you see any images that are particularly striking? If so, use a real camera and see if you can replicate this view. For a variation, you can also use an empty cardboard frame with several clothespins. Hang the empty frame in front of a beautiful view. Share your discovery!

With a friend, have each of you take a photograph of a close up natural spot—a unique configuration of twigs, curling bark, stone or a flower. Now switch cameras: can you find the exact spot from which the photo was taken? When we visit the same natural spots over and over again, we begin to build a relationship—a sense of connectedness and belonging. Like any relationship, this takes work, commitment and time. And like any relationship this is how we cultivate love and respect.

Here are a few more things you can do in nearby green space on a regular basis to help you feel part of the natural world:

- Sit with your ears cupped and listen to the natural sounds—the wind sweeping through the boughs of a tree. Notice the difference between an evergreen (needles) and deciduous tree (leaves)? Some people can identify the species of tree by the unique sound the wind makes as it moves through its branches. Is that you?
- Pirate eye. Close one eye and leave it closed for at least 3 minutes while leaving the other open. Now switch, and alternate between opening and closing each eye. You should notice an entirely different shade of colours with the eye that had been closed and the eye that remained open. Which shade of colours is real?
- If it is a warm day and the ground is soft, remove one shoe and one sock. Walk on the soft grass moving from shadow to light—concentrate on the feeling of the earth through your bare foot compared to your shod foot. Move about and feel the texture of the grass and leaves (do watch where you step). Some people claim that there are health benefits to “earthing”—soaking up the energy of earth through your hands and your feet.

Take the time to soak up the natural world on a regular basis. Go back to the same natural spots over and over again, until they become an intimate part of your own neighbourhood. Delight in the discoveries over and over, and may the adventures never end. •

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