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This article was published in the March 8, 2012, edition of *The Bar Harbor Times*. Nature and kids are intrinsically linked. What better way to nourish this connection than by sending kids to nature camp. In this week's column, Rich shares some scholarship opportunities for local kids to go to camp.

The Nature of Things....

By Rich MacDonald

Nature is to kids what our forests are to birds; both relationships are intrinsically intertwined. For me, this inseparable relationship between youth and nature was exemplified by a young Theodore Roosevelt. An asthmatic, myopic lover of the natural world, he was astute in documenting flora and fauna. At fourteen years of age, "Teedie," along with cousin Henry Minot, wrote the first four-page bird "book" of the Adirondacks (eventually published in 1877), including such birds then known as Hudsonian Chickadee, Red-bellied Nuthatch, Blue Yellow-backed Warbler, Orange-throated Warbler, Golden-crowned "Thush," White-breasted Swallow, and Cedar-bird.

While not all of us are quite so ambitious, I have certainly heard enough anecdotes to make me think my childhood experience was close to the norm of my day. Summers, holidays, after school, weekends, family vacations...every possible minute was spent outside.

Growing up on the shores of the Niagara River, the natural world was our playground. The Niagara River Gorge offered opportunities for hiking, fishing, skipping rocks. It was along the shores of "The River" where I got my start as a birder, banding ducks. The slopes adjacent to my childhood home—a 100-year-old, amphitheater-shaped excavation, forested on the perimeter—afforded innumerable hours of sledding, skiing, watching wildlife, building secret forts from discarded pallets. A part of every day entailed reading in some quiet place outdoors. At the end of the day, covered in the fine red clay shale that was the bedrock of my Western New York landscape, my siblings and I were required to strip to our skivvies and hose off before entering the house.

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Like the young Teedie Roosevelt, I was a sickly, asthmatic kid. Yet, my urge to go outdoors was irrepressible. Over time, I came to the realization that being active outdoors had a positive effect on my asthma. What does all of this have to do with the natural world of today? At a minimum, it can serve as something of a parable. Young people who grow up with an ethos of valuing the natural world are more likely to maintain those connections as adults. For some, that life-long passion can lead to careers, as it did with me, focusing on furthering our understanding of the natural world, working toward conserving tracts of landscape sufficient to allow for its healthy functioning. For others, that life-long passion may color their perception of the natural world, seeing it as a place of intrinsic value.

All this is well and good in theory, but we need to get to that point where today's youths are tomorrow's decision-makers who see the value in healthy landscapes. Fortunately, here on Mount Desert Island, opportunities abound for engaging our youth in the natural world.

Downeast Audubon offers two particularly intriguing opportunities for all Hancock County youth. The first is a full scholarship to National Audubon Society's Hog Island Camp, the second are a series of full scholarships to Camp Tanglewood.

Hog Island Audubon Camp, located off midcoast Maine, has long been the premier summer youth ornithology camp. The roster of luminaries who have either attended camp, worked there in the past, or work there today, include Roger Tory Peterson, Pete Dunne, Lang Elliott, Stephen Kress, and Scott Weidensaul. These people have written books, produced sound recordings, taught the joys of birding, and are recognized for their studies of the birds of North America.

This year's Downeast Audubon scholarship will send a Hancock County high school student, age 14-17, to the 'Coastal Maine Bird Studies for Teens' program in June (the full scholarship is worth \$1,195). Teens will observe Audubon's seabird conservation field research and visit the Atlantic Puffin nesting colony on Eastern Egg Rock.

As an aside, Downeast Audubon also has a scholarship available for local educators to participate in a weeklong program this July.

Applications for these scholarships are available on the Downeast Audubon Web site (www.DowneastAudubon.org/p/education.html) and are due March 19.

Downeast Audubon also offers a full scholarship, valued at \$500, for one week at Tanglewood 4-H Camp and Learning Center. Located in Lincolnville, on the western side of Penobscot Bay, this camp is an environmentally focused, educationally enriching center where activities focus on such things as nature study, forest life, birding, and watershed exploration. Up to ten Hancock County youths, age 10-13, will be selected to attend the camp. To apply for these scholarships, students must write a short essay answering the question, "Why would you want to go to a nature camp?" Essays are due April 16.

All of these scholarship opportunities are made possible by pledges to the Downeast Audubon Birdathon (I lead a team here on MDI, the Acadian Flycatchers). For more information on any of these scholarship opportunities, contact Erich Reed, Downeast Audubon's Education Coordinator, at erichreed@yahoo.com. Essays can be emailed or sent to Downeast Audubon at P.O. Box 1212, Ellsworth, Maine, 04605.

Locally, we are fortunate in having Camp Beech Cliff. Located on the Quiet Side, the camp is more than a place to send kids for a week in the summer; they are moving toward a model of year-round programming that is inclusive of all ages. Nature is taught throughout the camp and all programs are designed to get kids outdoors. If the weather is not cooperative, thematic program buildings can be opened as a way to embrace the natural world. Attendees of Camp Beech Cliff are encouraged to "discover new talents, learn skills at their own pace, make enduring friendships." For more information on the camp, visit their Web site at campbeechcliff.org.

College of the Atlantic also offers a diverse mix of summer programming designed for youth and families. There is Summer Field Studies for children, Summer Field Institute for high school students, and Family Nature Camp that brings the generations together. You can find more information on these programs on-line at www.coa.edu/summerprograms.htm.

Of course, The Natural History Center also offers a diversity of programming designed to engage people of all ages. Opportunities include free Saturday morning bird walks through the winter, family tide-pool tours, nature hikes, and more.

Oh, and in case you have not figured out those archaic bird names mentioned in the introductory paragraph, today they are known as Boreal Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Parula, Blackburnian Warbler, Ovenbird, Tree Swallow, and Cedar Waxwing, respectively.

Rich MacDonald runs The Natural History Center in Bar Harbor. If you would like to share your observations of the natural world that is Mount Desert Island, contact him at rich@thenaturalhistorycenter.com.