



Summer 2015 Newsletter

The year is almost halfway over, and **BackYard Nature Center** is looking back on months of rewarding work from our board members and volunteers. We were delighted to return to favorite events like **Pioneer Day**, and we've seen our educational programming reach more children of all ages. We're also looking forward to new events and projects, such as our **Nature Play Area**, as we continue to move forward. We would like to share a few of the events that BYNC was part of, and give you an update about the continued success of our programs. We'll also discuss some developing projects we're excited about!

Special events this season

We got in touch with rustic life at Pioneer Day

Winnetka third-graders were excited to try their hands at some pioneer skills when they visited BYNC's stations at Crow Island Woods. The annual Winnetka Park District event saw BYNC sponsor a Maple Syrup Station, where students learned how to tap trees for sap, and a Hike Station, where kids searched for useful resources on a nature walk. Winnetka Park District employees demonstrated the tree tapping techniques early settlers used, and the students couldn't wait to use hand drills to bore their own holes in Ash tree stumps. At the Hike Station, Gary Morrissey and our newest volunteer, Tom Murphy, encouraged students to find plants and animal tracks that would have been useful to pioneer families. BYNC brought traditional skills and rustic know-how to Pioneer Day for the second year in a row, and we're looking forward to next year's event already!



BYNC Members Daniel Kielson and Gary Morrissey help supervise the tree-climbing area
Photo Credit Diane O'Donnell

A Play Date with Mother Nature

BYNC constructed a Nature Play Area in Crow Island Woods for Day 2 of The Alliance for Early Childhood's Park-A-Day Challenge. Play spaces included a tree climbing area, stand-up and hanging swings, balance beam logs and a mud hole. BYNC also provided insect nets, posters and field guides so kids could learn about the plants and critters encountered during a nature trail through the woods. Winnetka Park District provided large tree trunk slices and we brought additional natural materials like

Buckthorn branches and building blocks the children used to create their own imaginary worlds. We were thrilled to see scores of children running, jumping, laughing, learning and just having fun in nature. Thank you to The Alliance for sponsoring a great week where families are encouraged to explore the diverse parks in New Trier Township.

Educators were inspired by a Chicago Botanic Garden seminar

Teachers and nature educators heard about how to incorporate nature play into childhood programs at "Inspiring Nature Play: Digging Deeper." BYNC was a non-profit partner at the event where a number of speakers discussed new approaches to getting children outdoors. Presenter Katie Slivovsky shared information about "ecophobia" and how negative messages about ecological threats can discourage children from learning about nature. Amanda Armstrong discussed



Dustin Thacker of the [Tinkering School Chicago](#) shares his display of child-built tree forts
Photo Credit Katie DeVogelaere

technology tools that can supplement learning, such as the Star Walk app for smart phones that can be used to identify star constellations. Andy Howard shared his play area designs and explained what works well for engaging younger children in outdoor play. All of these presentations aimed to provide educators with practical tools they can use to support child development and help kids become more comfortable with the outdoors. We were proud to support the workshop, presented by The Alliance for Early Childhood and Chicago Botanic Garden, as part of our mission to connect young children with the wonders of nature.

Highlights from our continuing programs

Wilmette Jr. High School headed to the Skokie Lagoons

BYNC gave Wilmette students the opportunity to head out of their classrooms and into the outdoors as they learned about the history and biology of the Skokie Lagoons. Nature hike leaders led groups of 15 students to different stations, where the students learned about bird watching and about how to identify animal tracks and bones. While exploring the Forest Preserve, they heard about the creation of the Lagoons during the Great Depression and the geography of the area. They got some hands-on experience doing water quality testing, and they also gained valuable skills in identifying invasive plant species. We were lucky to have cooperative weather during the three day event in early May!

BYNC is especially appreciative for the work of the Volunteer Hike Leaders: Barbara Clark, Howard Ebner, Ben Keller, Betsy Leibson, Bob Rudis, and Len Strauch. They did an outstanding job and had great rapport with the students! We anticipate collaborating with other schools as we continue our outdoor programming for schools in the next year.



Students watch for birds during a nature walk at Skokie Lagoons
Photo Credit Katie DeVogelaere



**Glencoe campers search for insects with
BYNC Board Member Heidi Kiesler
Photo Credit Diane O'Donnell**

Kids are exploring their local woods with *Outdoor Adventures*

We continue to explore Crow Island Woods with young children through our Outdoor Adventures programming. This popular program with the Winnetka Park District brings children on an "outdoor adventure" with seasonal activities. Most recently, class was held during four afternoons in March, which was a great opportunity to explore during the transition from winter to spring. Linn and Gary guided the class into the woods to search the snow for animal tracks. The kids also

learned about different snowflake shapes by capturing and observing snowflakes with a "snow catcher." The group had fun working together to build their own habitat structures with found branches. In the spring, children learned how to identify trees and plants. Using compasses and binoculars, the kids also got to observe birds, reptiles, mammals and insects in their natural environment. We held similar programs for Glencoe Park District's Spring Break and Summers's Beginning campers, who got the chance to explore the woods behind the Takiff Center and in nearby parks with BYNC. Using nets, kids collected insects for observation and searched under logs for early signs of life as we anticipate the next season. The Outdoor Adventures program becomes more and more popular as we continue to present the hidden life and opportunities for learning in local nature areas.

Announcements

We're moving forward with our Nature Play Area

"Do you remember the last time you climbed a tree?" BYNC, partnering with The Alliance for Early Childhood, and in conjunction with the Winnetka Park District and the Practical Arts Department of New Trier High School, is designing and planning to build a nature-based play area in Winnetka. What is a nature-based play area? A variety of landscaped configurations where kids can climb a tree, play in the mud, pretend they're Tarzan, build a teepee -- anything using nature that encourages children to explore, create, and have tons of fun. BYNC has been meeting with Winnetka Park District staff and members of the Lakota Group (contracted by the WPD to help create a waterfront master plan for Winnetka). We'll keep you posted. In the meantime, don't wait for us—find your own park or forest to explore!



**Park-A-Day visitors to Crow Island Woods
build their own play space**
Photo Credit Diane O'Donnell

Flickr Gallery

Take a look at our newest website addition, the [BYNC photo gallery](#)! It features photos from events such as Park-A-Day Challenge, Outdoor Adventures, Second Saturday forest preserve workdays, and classrooms from all around New Trier Township. Check back often as new photos are added monthly.



_____ Special thanks to Will Carey for volunteering _____
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**BackYard Nature Center - Connecting children and adults with the
wonders of nature** www.backyardnaturecenter.org