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Nature Camps Provide

Chances to Explore, Connect to the Earth

Several Baltimore-area camps offer outdoor experiences

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BY MARC SHAPIRO



(PHOTOS PROVIDED)

For 11-year-old Noah Lindquist, nature camp is his yearly reset button after a year of being cooped up inside a classroom.

“It’s like his revitalization. He gets back to finding who he is after a year of being in the classroom,” his mother, Karen Levin, said. “I feel like he’s a relaxed, truer version of himself basically. He’s tired, happy, filthy every day he comes home and just kind of excited about what’s going on the next day.”

Noah attends Nature Camps, Inc., a 230-acre property of nature conservancy woodlands in Monkton. Each day, campers choose which activities they want to participate in and explore the

woods, fields and streams with mixed-aged groups. There are camper and family overnights and concerts each session.

“It’s really old school in a really lovely way,” Levin said.

Nancy Kaplin, whose son Jonas attends Nature Camp, said the camp staffers have great respect for the kids and give them independence.



“You can’t even believe the health and the utopian feeling of being there. It feels very peaceful, very open,” she said. “Everybody respects everybody, and there’s this incredible equality and just happiness. My son waits all year for the experience of going to nature camp.”

It’s just one of several nature camps in the Baltimore area that offer outdoor experiences for those who want to spend their summers reconnecting with nature.

In Owings Mills, the Irvine Nature Center allows campers to explore 116 acres of forest, wetlands and meadows.

“Irvine’s mission is to educate and inspire current and future generations to explore, respect and protect nature,” said camp director Steve Mickletz. “Out there, kids are finding bugs and salamanders under logs, playing ecologically themed games, running with butterfly nets in the meadow and sometimes getting muddy head to toe! We feature our live education animals as often as we can so kids can really get an up close encounter with critters they don’t always get to meet outside.”

Deena Samantha Lucas worked as a counselor at Irvine in 2013 and 2014. A senior at Syracuse University, Lucas first interned at Irvine when she was in high school at Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School.

“I fell in love with it. I fell in love with the people in the field in general, but especially at Irvine,” she said. “The people have a positive and easy-going attitude. It’s laid-back and educational.”

Lucas loved the work so much that she decided to major in environmental education and interpretation. At Irvine, she particularly enjoyed the outdoor classroom and making natural and recycled crafts. A highlight was the week that started with kids being squeamish about holding worms. Their attitudes had changed within a few days.

“By the end of the week they’re outside playing in the mud and wanting me to make mud for them to play in and they’re covered in it head to toe,” she said. “They went from uptight, scared of nature to ‘I want to be in it and a part of it.’”

The Howard County Conservancy offers two summer nature day camps, both in and around Patapsco State Park. The camps offer weekly sessions with different themes including aquatic adventures, animal antics, backpack adventures, fossils and feathers, buggin’ out, among others.

“The Conservancy’s camps are designed to nurture respect for the natural world, increase awareness of environmental issues and instill a sense of stewardship,” a camp brochure says. “Our nature camps encourage children to learn about Howard County’s ecology and natural history through fun and exciting hikes, experiments, stories and hands-on exploration of our nature center and parklands.”

The Ladew Topiary Gardens, also in Monkton, offer nature camp sessions for kids ages 4 to 15 that are staffed by naturalists, an art instructor and a former school teacher. For younger campers, Ladew offers outdoor discovery walks, story time, crafts, games, butterfly house visits and puppet shows. For older campers (ages 9 and up), Ladew offers “Art in Nature Camp” where campers will blend art and environmental education through different design disciplines such as landscape architecture, sculpture and painting.

