

No More Hungry Hearts

Robin Bowman of WildWise has a plan to get teenagers into nature



pic.1 above
pic.2 above right

Which bird's call can warn of an oncoming storm? Which mushroom can you use to light a fire? Do you know? Do your children know? Does that matter if no one knows? These questions are just the tip of the iceberg of what humans have always known about the natural world, since we first inhabited this landmass on the edge of Europe 800,000 years ago.

Half of my generation, growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, regularly played and roamed in wild places compared to just one in 10 today¹. Last year the National Trust's report 'Natural Childhood' broadcast some frightening statistics. As a result 2012 finally became the year we could no longer avoid Nature Deficit Disorder, a term coined by Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods* to describe the effect changes in modern lifestyles are having on our children and the starvation that their interaction with the natural environment is having on their well-being and health.

On average Britain's children watch more than 17 hours of television a week², and spend more than 20 hours a week online³. There is little doubt that there are some serious problems, with one in 12 adolescents self-harming⁴; 35,000 on anti-depressants⁵; and around three in 10 children in England aged between two and 15 are either obese or overweight. All these problems have been, at least in part, attributed by researchers to a decrease



in the time children spend outdoors compared to previous generations.

Depressing stuff. However it's also clear through the evidence of research that the benefits to children that are exposed to nature is overwhelming. They score higher in almost every category, whether it's concentration and reasoning, or reading and writing, whilst consistently showing general overall behavioural improvement, as well as responsibility, better attitude and leadership. But more importantly their self esteem, motivation and confidence is higher. A fantastic and fast-growing movement I'm part of called the Nature Culture Network (formally the Art of Mentoring) is along with other organisations such as Scouts and the Forest Schools rebuilding this relationship between children and nature. This restorative power of nature is brought home to me in very real terms in my work with a charity called Write to Freedom.

We work with young male prisoners coming towards the end of their sentences who are let out of jail on a temporary licence and spend four days in the wilds of Dartmoor, tracking roe deer to their day beds, fishing for their dinner in upland rivers, creating fire by friction, and eating wild plants they've never seen before. Giving them an authentic deep nature experience, many of them tell me they have never set foot in woods of any kind. In fact some, like PJ, have never left their inner city council estates their whole lives. He has been trapped both

by poverty, lack of opportunity and then due to the very real threat of being attacked by rival gangs from another postcode.

The transformation and hope I see in prisoners like PJ in the four days of being in the wilderness and woods of Dartmoor is extraordinary. To witness someone who has been in and out of jail since 13 and admitted he'd never stopped to consider the effect of countless counts of armed robbery on his victims, say after his time in the woods with us: "I've learnt to think about how some people feel, and having some kind of remorse for the things or people I have hurt." It is a testament to the healing, reflective and rejuvenative effect of nature.

Dislocation

However the long-term effects of this dislocation with nature not just for us but for the natural world must not be underestimated, not least because in the words of Richard Louv: "If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment we must also save an endangered species: the child in nature." The woods, marshes and wild places are holding their breath. Since 1999 here at WildWise we have been facing the challenge of how to coax these modern teenagers into the great outdoors, coming up with new innovative ways? We are up against a vast marketing machine fluent in keeping kids indoors with video games, Facebook, countless television channels and an infinite choice of

distractions. Our latest idea is to meet teenagers where they are at and run several five-day camps based on and inspired by the trilogy of books and films the *Hunger Games*, which is, in case you don't know, very popular amongst teenagers.

The *Hunger Games* is a 2008 science fiction novel by American writer Suzanne Collins, written in the voice of 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, who lives in the post-apocalyptic nation of Panem, where the countries of North America once existed. The Capitol, a highly advanced metropolis, exercises political control over the rest of the nation. The *Hunger Games* are an annual event in which one boy and one girl called Tributes aged 12-18 from each of the 12 districts surrounding the Capitol are selected by lottery to compete in a televised battle to the death in an Arena which is a vast wilderness area. However although combat skills are important it is the bushcraft and wilderness skills Katniss learnt hunting with her father which stand her in such good stead. Watching and enjoying the well made film a small light bulb went off in my head. Though it didn't crystallise until I realised just how popular this film and trilogy of books was.

The *Hunger Games* book has spent more than 200 consecutive weeks/more than three consecutive years to date on *The New York Times* bestseller list since publication in September 2008. Amazon have announced that Collins has become the best-selling Kindle author of all time. When

References

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pic.5 top
pic.6 above right

Lionsgate released the *Hunger Games* film in March 2012, it shattered multiple box office records to become the third highest opening weekend of all time and the highest opening ever for a non-sequel film. It was then that I realised that at WildWise we already had all the expertise, skills and resources to run a camp based on this hugely successful *Hunger Games*, and that this could be just the siren we needed to call the teenagers outdoors and into the woods. The primal sound of a fire crackling and the zesty taste of wood sorrel was waiting for them. But there is something else important going on here.

Messing about in woods

Traditionally since the early days of the Scout movement, bushcraft and messing about in woods has been more in the domain of teenage boys than girls. The real challenge is how to coax teenage girls into participating in these bushcraft and woodland skills based camps and thus into a deep nature connective experience. Here's where the *Hunger Games* comes up trumps, as the real hero, or rather heroine, of the story is a strong empowered teenage girl. Not only has this action film got a female lead for once, but also one that's not been over sexualised to provide eye candy, and to please the marketing suits behind it. Stories, especially

blockbusters and bestsellers, that portray young women in this light are far too few and far between. Fortunately the *Hunger Games* has led to an increased enthusiasm amongst teenage girls to learn these skills and spend time in nature, because they now have a heroine like themselves to emulate.

"But," I hear you say, "what exactly will they be doing and how will the Tributes win without actually 'killing' each other?" It needs to be stressed that these are non-combat courses, both safe and held, whilst still giving teens an authentic edge experience. The whole camp including the Arena will be closely monitored by the staff, and no bows and arrows, sticks, spears, knives or any other weapons, or anything that could be used as a weapon are allowed in the Arena.

The 'Tributes' will arrive at our 'Capitol', and spend the first two days camping all together at the 'Training Camp' learning all the wilderness and survival skills they'll need in the 'Arena'. These include fire making, archery, sneaking and stalking, shelter/den building, camouflage, edible and medicinal plant use, setting snares and nature awareness skills such as bird language. They will also be winning sponsors, hoping to get support from a gift 'parachuted' into the 'Arena'. On the morning of the third day, pairs of 'Tributes' enter the

Woodland Activities for Teenagers

We ask Robin Bowman how to keep young adults keen on woods

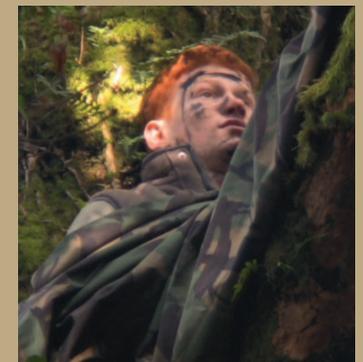


Robin Bowman has a number of ideas for teenage activities in the woods. "Making fires is foolproof for any age and sex," he says, starting with simple ones using matches, paper and kindling. He uses it as an activity with very young children, teenagers, corporate clients and offenders. "It is primal. After all we've been lighting fires for 800,000 years." You can show them how to pick dead twigs off trees to ensure they are dry, and uses the Five Minute Fire as a challenge for everyone to see if they can get a fire going quickly. Then you can get more advanced by using cotton wool and bracken and a spark stick, and ultimately as a family try to make fire by friction. Obviously, you need to be careful where you start a fire (not too close to a tree), don't use too many sites, and put out with water afterwards, and cover with leaves.

Den building is popular with younger children, either under a tarp or by creating a cave, or in a tree. In the *Hunger Games* one of the characters appears from a pit of leaves (above), and there is plenty of scope for hide and seek games in the woods. If you have particular ways of playing them, do send in your suggestions. You can build tunnels in depressions, using corrugated iron as a cover if you have any lying around.

An alternative to seeking games is the scavenger hunt, for young children. Robin suggests laying out eight items on a blanket on the ground, and then sending contestants off to find their own. "It can be played competitively or collaboratively."

If you have ideas for games and activities for any age of children (and even overgrown ones) in the woods, please send them in by email to livingwoods@freshwoodpublishing.com.





pic.7

'Arena' and the Games begin. Grabbing a backpack from the 'Cornucopia' filled with all the essential survival stuff, such as sleeping bag, basic food, water bottle, something to help make a shelter, and armed with their new trusty weapon of a water pistol with a safe food coloured dye in it, they take off into the wildwoods to survive, to make fires, to find food and water, and to 'kill' the other tributes off with their water pistols by stalking, camouflage and sneaking; to become the Victor. Far from their computer screens it's the ultimate game of Manhunt/40-40/ Capture the Flag, a unique and magical time immersed deep in the woods.

Many young people look forward to the time after exams as an opportunity for different and often challenging experiences, not to mention fun. To be able to look forward to an experience such as the WildWise Hunger Games in a natural setting, which they may not have experienced before, could be really motivational, and an incentive for working hard. Running these camps for GCSE and A-Level leavers who have finished their exams, as well as later camps in the summer for all teenagers, as well as one for parents and adults; we hope to provide a truly unforgettable experience. And maybe, just maybe, if you ask them next year which bird can warn you of an oncoming storm or which mushroom you can use to start a fire, they'll look at you with a smile and a twinkle in the eye and say that they could tell you but it would be better if you went to the woods, like our ancestors here have done for 800,000 years, to find out for yourself.

Details Robin Bowman is Lead Instructor, WildWise Events (wildwise.co.uk, 01803 868269). Cost for Hunger Games is £295 per head all-inclusive with all food, tents and field equipment provided. Venue: A beautiful area of woods and meadows nestled in the deep Somerset countryside yet only six miles from Bristol and six miles from the M5. GCSE Leavers: 29th June - 3rd July. A-Level Leavers: 13-17th July. 13-18 Year Olds: 28th July - 1st August.

Natural First Aid

Simon Ellar of *Bushcraft & Survival* introduces quick ways to mend cuts and bruises

Have you ever nicked your finger whilst whittling out in the woods, or perhaps on some bramble, a fence or a tin can when stopping for lunch? It is good practice to carry a small First Aid kit with you at all times, but if you are ever caught short, what can you do?

Well, if it is one of those little cuts that just will not stop bleeding, try some yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), said to be named after Achilles who used it to heal his warrior's wounds. The reason for this is that it is anticoagulant, excellent for stopping bleeding. Pick a leaf, clean it and chew it, to make it useable, then apply it to the wound. Should you have a knock or are susceptible to nose bleeds in the extremes of temperature, yarrow leaves can be carefully put in to the nose to stay the blood flow.

Ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) or common/greater plantain (*Plantago major*) also helps to stop bleeding. It offers minor pain relief, and has anti-histamine, anti-inflammatory and anti microbial/ anti bacterial qualities. Plantain is a great 'addition' to your first aid kit as it is very common and when picked, cleaned, chewed and applied to a wound, reduces swelling, helps prevent infection, heals and stays the bleeding. So even if you do have some plasters with you a bit of plantain on the wound first will help!

Need a plaster?

Birch trees are common throughout the UK, the birch polypore (*Piptorus betulinae*), also known as razorstrop fungus is a bracket fungi (a fungi which grows on the sides of logs or trees). Most commonly found growing in broadleaved woodland on old, dying or dead silver (*Betula pendula*) or downy (*Betula pubescens*) birch trees between September and November. It grows annually but remains intact from one year to the next.

It is a bracket in the region of 10-20cm across and 2-6cm thick, although smaller and sometimes larger samples can be found. It has a rounded shape at first, expanding to a hoof-shape, the creamy colour darkens with age. The lower surface has pores rather than gills and is also creamy white.

Mushrooms have been used for millennia as natural medicines. One of the uses for this fungus is that it can be used as a wound dressing to cover small cuts. Its absorbant properties along with its reputed anti-bacterial agents help prevent infection and cover the wound to prevent dirt ingress. To create your plaster, cut a small piece of the fungus to the required size and place it over the wound. It can be secured in place with cord or twine, a twist of grass or a fine root etc.

There are many plant ID books and books on medicinal plants available, always be sure to correctly identify anything before use! Why not come along to The Bushcraft Show to learn more about the medicinal uses of plants, which ones you can eat and the many craft-based uses of plants and trees from making nettle cordage to weaving a basket from willow.