**Showcasing the DNR: Bringing nature and history home for Michigan kids**

**By CASEY WARNER  
Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

When Michigan schools closed in March, ultimately for the remainder of this school year, and educational recreation venues shut down to help slow the spread of coronavirus, many parents and caregivers began asking themselves the same question:

“What do we do with the kids now?”

Seeing the need for more at-home learning resources, Michigan Department of Natural Resources educators set out to help answer that question.

“The DNR recognized early that families and teachers were going to need engaging and relevant educational activities while obeying the governor’s ‘Stay Home, Stay Safe’ orders,” said Kevin Frailey, DNR education services manager.

Frailey and others in the DNR who work on education programs – interpreters at state park and fish hatchery visitor centers, staffers at the Michigan History Center in Lansing and the Outdoor Adventure Center in Detroit – while unable to provide their normal in-person learning opportunities, began creating videos to help teach people about a range of nature and history topics from a distance.

These videos are available on a recently launched webpage at [Michigan.gov/NatureAtHome](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79135_98480---,00.html), along with a collection of other resources, including virtual field trips and online tours, scavenger hunts, games and other easy ways for families to explore and engage with nature and history. The webpage also has suggested reading materials and links to free nature apps, social media pages and websites where families can find more learning tools.

“We know you’re overwhelmed trying to teach your kids from home,” said Natalie Elkins, DNR preK-12 education specialist. “Start by watching the videos from DNR staff for a stress-free addition to your new ‘learning from home’ environment – they’re educational, fun and Michigan-based.”

Frailey said DNR staffers consulted resource agencies in other states and environmental education colleagues to collect materials for the webpage.

“We’ve heard that many organizations and agencies are linking to ours in lieu of creating their own site,” he said. “We are proud to be providing leadership in these difficult times.”

The website includes a series of videos DNR education staffers created to celebrate 50 years of Earth Day, which took place April 22 this year. Many fairs and events associated with the annual environmental observance, normally drawing hundreds or thousands of people, were canceled due to the COVID-19.

“The 50th anniversary of Earth Day was something we wanted to celebrate even though DNR education staff are quarantined. Their creativity was just what we needed to celebrate five decades of Earth Day with five days of educational and engaging videos all shot in their homes, yards and property,” Frailey said. “With so much negative news coming out each day, we felt these put a smile on everyone’s face.”

Other DNR nature lesson videos featured on the webpage cover everything from birds, frogs and snakes to tying various types of fishing knots.

One video series on the site explores how to identify Michigan trees. Hartwick Pines State Park interpreter Craig Kasmer, who created the videos, calls it “Tree Detectives,” a moniker he originally came up with for his tree ID programs at the park.

“My hope was to inspire the curiosity in kids. At the time, my nephews were just toddlers and watched Blue’s Clues: ‘Look for clues!’ So I took that idea and used it in my interpretation,” Kasmer said.

Kasmer and interpreters at other state parks and fish hatcheries contacted teachers who had planned spring field trips that had to be canceled because of coronavirus concerns to let them know about the videos and other education resources available on the DNR website.

They heard back from many educators about the videos’ usefulness.

“We plan to run with these and use them in our Google Classrooms as assignments to watch and respond to,” wrote Janet Serba, a teacher at Johannesburg Elementary in Otsego County.

Kelly Signorello, a Gaylord Middle School teacher Kasmer works with, posted a lesson asking her students to “go on a virtual field trip to Hartwick Pines and be tree detectives” by watching one of the videos and answering question about tree identification and pine species native to Michigan.

When the Michigan History Center in Lansing closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, education staff there began converting museum gallery programs and activities into [short videos](https://vimeo.com/seekingmichigan).

Filmed prior to the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” executive order, the first two 10-minute videos are about the Kellogg brothers and Michigan’s war production during World War II. The content for the videos was originally developed for the Michigan History Museum’s Learn 517 home school program.

“It was fun to take information and activities that aren’t normally seen outside of the museum and adapt it for home audiences,” said Christine McCreedy, the Michigan History Center educator who created the activities and appears in the videos. “We already have plans for creating more segments – with better lighting and a microphone – once we get back to work.”

Since then, the Center has added a series of “Museum People Cook” videos exploring the connection between cooking and history.

For those who want to learn more about our state’s past, there’s also [Michiganology.org](https://michiganology.org/). Launched in the fall of 2019, the website includes the Archives of Michigan’s digital collections, educational materials for K-12 teachers and interesting stories about Michigan history.

In mid-March, the staff at the DNR Outdoor Adventure Center in Detroit started the “Nature in Our Neighborhood” video series.

“Since staying at home, I have really been trying to use the resources at my disposal to create online content that is fun and educational,” Katie Gillies, Outdoor Adventure Center program assistant, said. “It is important to pull in resources that viewers of the videos can access while they’re at home too.”

One of Gillies’ favorite things about spring – “the smallest blooming flowers that are super easy to overlook” – inspired the neighborhood wildflower identification exercise she created, offering an activity that families either can do outdoors or adapt for the indoors by researching the flowers they discovered or making their own illustrations of the flowers to color.

Another indoor family activity Gillies suggests, and discussed in a video, is making a reusable tote bag out of an old T-shirt.

“This is a great opportunity to discuss the importance of waste reduction and the longevity of material items,” she said.

Catie Olszewski, Outdoor Adventure Center program assistant, looked at a different way to reuse household items in another video in the series.

“I had an interesting time piecing together resources I could find around my house to upcycle into a nature journal,” Olszewski said. “It has been fun trying to brainstorm different video topics we hope viewers will enjoy and find educational.”

The Outdoor Adventure Center videos – which also cover topics like turtles, bees, moths and more – aim to inspire outdoor exploration close to home.

“One of the main themes of our Nature in Our Neighborhood series is that given our current circumstances, we obviously are encouraging folks to explore what is literally right in the neighborhood or backyard – and that you don’t need to live on a woodlot or a farm to observe nature,” Natalie Cypher, OAC program assistant, said. “You can watch the buds change daily on your trees, look for pollinators or learn to recognize couple of neighborhood bird songs – and you can do this anywhere. Maybe you’ll even find a new interest or hobby.”

Tracy Page, DNR aquatic education coordinator and creator of a series of videos dubbed “Tracy’s Teachings,” also chose topics that most families can do at home with very few materials.

“Sampling macroinvertebrates (little critters that live in water) can be done in a ditch of water, a tiny pond or a vernal pool in their neighborhood. Kids don’t necessarily need to even know what they are, but finding tiny critters on their own helps open up a whole new world of learning and exploration,” she said.

For younger children – like Page’s daughters, ages 3 and 5 – she suggests short activities like an obstacle course, a nature scavenger hunt or what she calls, in one of her videos, a sensory hike.

“Their favorite is doing a ‘six touches’ sensory hike. We use half an egg carton, and their job while we are outside is to find six tiny items in nature that each represent a different ‘touch’ or texture. So a smooth leaf, a hard rock, a pokey pinecone, et cetera. It is a different hike each time, and it helps them to use their observation skills,” Page said.

With about a month of at-home learning left during this school year – and the upcoming months when many summer programs may be canceled to help slow the spread of coronavirus – videos like these, and the other resources on the DNR’s Nature at Home page, offer a variety of answers to the question, “What do we do with the kids now?”

To learn more about the DNR’s education programs, visit [Michigan.gov/DNREducation](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79135---,00.html).

Check out previous Showcasing the DNR stories in our archive at [Michigan.gov/DNRStories](https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79137_79770_79873_80003---,00.html). To subscribe to upcoming Showcasing articles, sign up for free email delivery at [Michigan.gov/DNR](http://www.Michigan.gov/DNR).