

TEACHABLE MOMENTS

*Life lessons can be found in all shapes
and sizes around your property*

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRUCE INGRAM



Last summer while walking up our driveway, I came across a copperhead part way through the process of swallowing a chipmunk.

So, I did what any sane grandparent would do—I ran to find my 4-year-old grandson. Sam lives next door with his parents, and since it takes a long time for a copperhead to swallow prey, I knew there would be time for him to witness the event up close.

My objective was to begin the process of teaching Sam about snakes, both venomous and not. During the consumption process, I explained to Sam how he should find a parent or grandparent when he sees a snake, that snakes are to be respected but not feared and that they have a place in the environment. I knew that at Sam's age, he wouldn't understand all of this now, but the life lesson had begun.

Throughout the 26-minute or so progression of the copperhead slowly swallowing the rodent, I also explained how animals eat other animals every day, that the copperhead was not being mean to the chipmunk, that all kinds of bigger animals eat smaller ones. Sam and I talked next about how big fish eat little fish—he had already been fishing—and that was as natural as the “big copperhead” consuming the “tiny chipmunk.” Sam raptly

Even a clump of grass in the driveway has the potential for a teaching moment for kids. The author's grandson, Sam, studies grass through his magnifying glass.

COPPERHEAD AND CHIPMUNK IMAGES BY GLOBALP/ISTOCK





Bird nests around the house provide accessible venues for teaching moments, such as the cardinal nest above or the Carolina wren nest at top. Right: Elaine Ingram steadies Sam as the young naturalist checks on a nest.

watched the death of the chipmunk and peppered me with questions about what we were witnessing. The lesson couldn't have gone better.

LIFE-AND-DEATH

Similar life-and-death scenarios play out in our backyards day after day. Indeed, we adults should use them to teach kids about nature and wildlife. Allen Boynton, the wildlife diversity program coordinator for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, says these lessons are important.

"Personally, I think of living in or nearby natural communities as a quality of life factor," Boynton said. "Our children benefit from living in such a place, learning to appreciate and love nature."

And these places that Boynton refers to exist throughout North Carolina, whether they are backyards in the state's suburbs, cities or rural woodlots. For example, this past summer, Sam (now 5) and I began taking short nature walks around our backyard—forays that I hope will lead to longer treks, both in distance and time, as the years go by. I started by showing Sam where phoebes had built a nest under the eaves of our house. My wife, Elaine, positioned a step-ladder near the nest so Sam could have a better view. We explained that the phoebes had selected this place because they felt it was safe, that the young had hatched and left, never to return, but that was OK because that's just the way nature is.

I then gave Sam a "nature notebook," where I would write down the interesting



things we saw, and he (with his preschool scribble) would copy what I wrote in the lines below. As we began our expedition, we heard several different songbirds in the backyard, but my grandson was most enthralled with the sounds of an Eastern wood peewee and a yellow-billed cuckoo. Of course, I shortened their names to just "peewee" and "cuckoo," and Sam quickly learned how to mimic the sounds of both—"peeweeeee" and "cuke-cuke-cuke"—which he thought were outrageously funny to pronounce.

Next, we ambled up the driveway, where Sam found the leaves of a sassafras tree interesting ("Why are they all different?") and some grass growing in the driveway even more intriguing ("Why is that growing here?"). For both flora, Sam peered through his magnifying glass to get a closer view. I don't know why this boy likes that magnifying glass so much, but he has insisted on bringing it everywhere he goes since he discovered that such a miraculous tool exists.

As glorious and stimulating as all these events were, the highpoint of our rambling was Sam spotting a lightning bug on a red maple leaf. The questions came in a rapid-fire sequence: "Why is the lightning bug out during the day?" "Why is it sitting on a maple leaf?" "Is something going to eat it?" My answers, respectively, were "He's just resting and waiting for night to come." "The leaf was just handy." "Maybe."

On the way back to Sam's house, we came across an animal skull, which Sam wanted to bring home to show his father, and some wineberries, which were eaten on the spot.

Bringing something home to show his parents and 3-year-old brother, Eli, was very pleasurable for Sam, and eating something sweet and nourishing on an excursion is always a good thing for a child to experience. The entire lesson lasted only about 12 minutes before Sam decided that his Legos demanded his attention. I didn't try to talk him out of his decision. Sam requested that we venture afield soon—an entreaty that I was pleased to promise would happen before long.

BACKYARD LESSONS

There are no ends to the wonders we will discover if we approach our backyards with a sense of curiosity. For example, this past spring next to our front stoop, Elaine and I espied a banded snake that looked a little like a copperhead but something told me it wasn't. Using our snake tongs, I picked up the reptile and noted its round eyes (snakes with slits for pupils are venomous), finally identifying it as a milk snake. I then released the creature so that it could continue servicing us by consuming rodents.

Of course, sometimes snakes must be removed from an area, but rarely is it necessary to kill one. For instance, several weeks after the milk snake incident, we observed a very large black rat snake on our sundeck. The snake tongs were once again utilitarian as I employed them to remove the creature from the deck and deposit it near our backyard woodpile. Snakes such as the black rat and hognose do yeoman's work for us by controlling rodent populations.

Besides snakes, numerous other animals can benefit us by their presence in our backyards. Two of my favorites are great-horned and screech owls, which primarily prey on rodents, small mammals and insects. Many people don't realize how common it is for

owls, especially the screech variety, to take up residence in urban and suburban neighborhoods. This past January in an urban backyard, for example, I observed a screech owl swoop down on a rodent.

Many species of animals have much to teach youngsters—and adults—about their amazing ability to blend in with their environment. One of my favorite amphibians is the gray tree frog, which is common throughout North Carolina. This frog, which has a prominent X across its back, is virtually indistinguishable from the tree bark and limbs it likes to hunker down on.

The American toad is just as gifted with its ability to camouflage itself and just as efficient, if not more so, than the gray tree

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Teaching children at a young age to respect, identify and admire snakes will go a long way toward warding off phobias as they grow up. They should know that snakes, like the Eastern milk snake (top left) and the rat snake, are beneficial to have around.



Among the species the author found with his grandson on a tour of his property are (clockwise, from top) an American toad, a Carolina wren, a painted turtle and a great horned owl.



frog in controlling backyard insects. Last fall, I was visiting my garden to harvest tomatoes one last time when I almost stepped on an American toad that was ensconced under a tomato plant. Though it was nearly the end of the growing season, the toad evidently was still experiencing prime hunting for insects and performing a service for me.

Many birds are also quite good at camouflage, the Carolina wren being a good example. Last summer, a neighbor asked me to come take pictures of a Carolina wren nesting in a flowerpot in her backyard. I checked several pots and couldn't find the nest and had to call my neighbor so that she could tell me which specific pot the nest was in. My next field trip with Sam will partly consist of a visit there. I'm going to challenge him to see if he can be better than his granddaddy at spotting the nest.

KEEP WILDLIFE WILD

I sincerely believe that teaching our young folks about respecting and understanding wildlife will make them want to be good stewards of the land. Commission Extension Wildlife Biologist Jessie Birkhead agrees.

"Talking to kids about the value of animals like snakes, spiders and bats can help turn 'scary' encounters into teachable moments that stick with kids into adulthood," she said. "The best way to ensure that wildlife continues to thrive in our state is to make sure the next generation values our wildlife resources and knows how to live with them side by side."

Toward that end, Birkhead suggests that we try to establish native plants instead of erecting bird feeders or throwing out scraps for birds and other animals.

"Many people enjoy seeing wildlife around their homes and want to help those animals survive," she said. "Feeding wildlife is one way many folks try to help, whether through bird feeders or leaving human food scraps out for animals to find. All too often feeding wildlife leads to unhealthy animals that become too comfortable around humans or whose populations expand to abnormally high numbers.

"Both cases are a recipe for trouble, with animals that become bold and aggressive around people or who struggle to survive

without human-provided foods. While these efforts have the best intentions, in the long run wildlife is better served by creating habitat around our homes that can provide for the animals without teaching them to expect food from people. Backyard wildlife habitats that include native plant food sources is a beneficial way to provide for and encourage wildlife in your area while keeping those wild animals wild."

Another thing that we can do to help children understand the natural world better is not to interfere when life and death dramas play out in our backyards. For example, last summer a neighbor called and said that a "sick pigeon" was in her backyard and what could she do for it? I arrived at my neighbor's house, confirmed that the pigeon was injured and said she had two options. Attempt to capture the pigeon, which would be stressful for both human and bird, then take it to a vet where she could pay to euthanize it. Or she could just let the natural world decide the matter. She chose the latter option, and all that was left the next morning were several feathers.



Similarly, several years ago, Elaine and I stood by and did nothing as a black rat snake ate every phoebe egg in a nest. Birkhead agrees that it is best for us humans not to interfere and to pass on that lesson to youngsters.

"The thing about nature is it isn't always pretty, and that's OK," she said. "While our

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instincts are often to intervene, I believe our role should be to simply allow nature to take its course and appreciate the chance to see natural processes taking place. Why is the health of the rat snake in this situation any less valuable than that of the phoebe eggs?

"Would we have been less offended by the situation if it were a raccoon taking the eggs to feed her young? It is fascinating to think about how our biases and preferences lead us to pick winners and losers in natural interactions between animals. At the end of the day, the ecosystems around us are complex, interconnected webs, and our interference with these natural relationships only serves to throw those systems out of balance."

So, if you have children, grandchildren or neighborhood kids about, consider giving them some nature lessons in your own backyard. In fact, some of your neighborhood adults might benefit as well. ♦

Bruce Ingram is a longtime contributor to Wildlife in North Carolina. He is the author of eight books, including "The New River Guide," "Living the Locavore Lifestyle" and "Fly and Spin Fishing for River Smallmouths." Bruce can be contacted at bruceingramoutdoors@gmail.com.