

WILDWOOD NATURE SCHOOL HANDBOOK



*Connect With
Nature*



UPPER THAMES RIVER
CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

www.thamesriver.on.ca

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1. WHAT IS WILDWOOD NATURE SCHOOL

a. Guiding Principles

Learn and grow in nature through play and exploration. Every trip to Wildwood Nature School, Upper Thames River Conservation Authority, will be its own adventure! The Wildwood Nature School program provides opportunities for participants to spend time in-and-with nature using the principles of Forest and Nature School. These principles focus on providing repeated outdoor experiences that are participant led, inquiry based, emergent, play and place based. Wildwood Nature School provides seasonally appropriate opportunities with sessions that are planned to include activities and explorations of the natural world while allowing for flexibility to support participant inspired learning and direction.



Each visit will start with a grounding in the surroundings and a reminder of nature awareness routines and best practices for spending time outside. Activities may include songs, stories, play, exploration, journaling, sit spots, shelter building, hiking, using tools and more! A gathering circle to share reflections and plan for the next outing will conclude each visit. All planned activities and provided materials are based on participant inspired observations during each visit.

b. Land Acknowledgement

Wildwood Nature School is privileged to learn from and teach about the traditional lands of the Neutral, Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. We recognize and honour the past, present and future water and land stewardship of these First Nations. We strive to provide opportunities to nurture connections with the land, water and each other so that all people will share in the responsibility to protect our natural resources.

c. A Typical Half Day

Arrival

Drop Off (procedures completed with parent/guardian, participants free play in area)

Opening

Gathering Circle (mental preparation for the day through introduction to/review of nature awareness routines and best practices for spending time in nature)

Body Break

Physical preparation for spending time in nature by having snacks/drinks, using washrooms, checking apparel

Morning

Programming (using emergent, inquiry-based, and/or pre-determined activities)

Closing

Story of the Day (reflect on the day by sharing stories/experiences freely or with a guiding question for immediate consideration or future inquiry)

Departure

Body Break (physical replenishment/release, responsibility for collecting all belongings)

A Typical Full Day

Drop Off

Arrival (procedures complete with parent/guardian, participants free play in area)

Opening

Gathering Circle (mental preparation for the day through introduction to/review of nature awareness routines and best practices for spending time in nature)

Body Break

Physical preparation for spending time in nature by having snacks/drinks, using washrooms, checking apparel

Morning

Programming (using emergent, inquiry-based and/or pre-determined activities)

Lunch

snacks/drinks, using washrooms, checking apparel followed by quiet time (napping, reading, drawing, etc.)

Afternoon

Programming (may include additional activities such as knot tying, whittling, fire building and safety, cookouts, hand tools, or loose parts/imagination playgrounds, and longer hikes to different locations around the conservation area)

Body Break

Physical replenishment/release, responsibility for collecting all belongings

Closing

Story of the Day (reflect on the day by sharing stories/experiences freely or with a guiding question for immediate consideration or future inquiry)

Pick Up

Departure (procedures complete with parent/guardian, participants free play in area)



d. Location

Wildwood Nature School takes place at Wildwood Conservation Area, 3995 Line 9, St Marys, Ontario. This multi-use park covers 1400 hectares and has more than 20 km of trails with forest, stream, and meadow ecosystems as well as a day use area. Wildwood Conservation Area is part of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority.

Conservation Authorities are local, watershed-based agencies that are unique to Ontario. Conservation Authorities work in partnership with all levels of government, land owners and many other organizations.

e. Upper Thames River Conservation Authority Mission Statement, Services and Programs

Conservation Authorities are local, watershed-based agencies that are unique to Ontario. Conservation Authorities work in partnership with all levels of government, land owners and many other organizations.

The UTRCA's mission statement is "Inspiring a healthy environment." Each Conservation Authority takes its priorities from the needs of their watershed environment and residents. The UTRCA has shifted from its initial focus on flood control and prevention through structural engineering solutions and land acquisition, to a more holistic, ecosystem approach.

Today, our programs and services focus on five key areas:

- protecting people and property and supporting safe development;
- delivering landowner stewardship;
- providing natural spaces and recreational opportunities;
- making science based decisions;
- empowering communities and youth.



2. TERMS AND CONDITIONS

a. Programs

All programs are not offered in all seasons or sessions. Please refer to the registration webpage for currently available options.

All ages are as of January 1st.

Falcons & Fledglings (Fall, Winter, Spring)

Falcons are powerful and agile, taking great care to teach their young how to hunt and fly. Together, Falcons and their Fledglings will spread their wings and take chances, navigating decision making about interests and abilities through observation, exploration and play!

Half day sessions for participants aged 18 months to 6 years old. All participants must be accompanied by an adult (maximum 3 children per adult). Maximum 14 participants per session.

Ospreys (Fall, Spring)

Ospreys are high flying and deep diving! Young Ospreys make their first migration without their adults, instinctively knowing their way. Ospreys will split their time between adventuring and exploring a variety of activities both planned and incidental at the nature school site and a little farther afield. Along the way, participants will be encouraged to make choices for themselves about their desires and outcomes while interacting with others and the outdoors!

Half day sessions for participants aged 5-9 years old. Maximum 16 participants per session.

Eagles (Fall, Spring)

Eagles are powerful and tenacious, spreading their wings and taking flight across the landscape. Eagles will spend most of their day traversing meadows, forests and streams while building capacity to spend time in nature. This might include working as a team, being creative, discovering animal traits they can apply to themselves, or finding peaceful moments.

Full days, for participants aged 8-11 years old. Maximum 16 participants per session.

Snowy Owls (Winter)

Snowy Owls are only in our area in Winter! They have keen eyesight, great hearing and a lot of patience as well as special adaptations for surviving in winter. Snowy Owls will spend time discovering the distinct wonders of winter, learning from the animals about how to best succeed in the conditions and enjoying a variety of activities only available this time of year!

Half day sessions for participants aged 5-11 years old. Maximum 16 participants per session.

b. Registration and Payment

- Registration links can be found here. [Wildwood Nature School Registration](#)
- A waiting list will be kept and additional concurrent sessions may be added based on demand.
- Sessions may be cancelled due to insufficient registration.

c. Refunds and Cancellations

- Please note that the fee is for the entire session, not on a day-by-day basis. Refunds will not be given for any missed/cancelled outings and any missed outing cannot be made up.
- A full refund will be given in the event that a program is cancelled due to insufficient registration.
- Any participant that is removed from a session due to behaviour will not be refunded.
- If a participant is unable to attend due to an extenuating circumstance a refund or adjustments will be considered by request.
- If a participant chooses to withdraw, a refund or adjustment may be issued if the spot(s) can be filled from the waiting list.



3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

a. Participants will:

- Respect all living things including self, others, plants, and animals;
- Respect the learning environment including routines, materials, and site;
- Listen and respond to safety instructions and boundaries.
- Document learning opportunities after each visit and make every effort to accommodate them in the next visit;
- Give participants the freedom to explore, build, use tools and test limits within a safe environment.

b. Parents/Guardians will:

- Ensure participants, including themselves, are equipped with the proper clothing, outerwear, and other supplies according to the season and duration of scheduled visit;
- Provide any and all information necessary to meet the needs of participants, including themselves;
- Support participants in play and exploration of the natural world by both playing with and closely observing them, understanding that getting wet and dirty is part of healthy play, as is taking part in risky play;
- Follow all Wildwood Nature School Guidelines set out in this document.

c. Staff/Volunteers will:

- Ensure the physical safety of all participants, by assessing and managing risk on an ongoing basis;
- Provide opportunities for all participants to feel comfortable in and connected to the natural world;
- Encourage a caring and respectful community so that participants feel safe taking risks and posing questions to deepen their learning;
- Model care and respect for the natural world and each other;
- Play with and closely observe participants in order to build on observations and experiences;
- Be flexible throughout the day and move fluidly between being the leader and the learner;
- Talk openly with participants about learning and thank them for their knowledge sharing;
- Be open to the ever evolving plan for the day in order to cultivate a culture of wonder;
- Build relationships with participants that are based on respect, trust, honesty and active listening;

d. Inclusion and Accessibility

Wildwood Nature School seeks to maintain an inclusive and respectful environment for all participants in the program regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language, physical ability or financial need. Requests for modifications or accommodations will be considered. Please inform staff prior to the commencement of a session about any needs or considerations a participant may have to allow time for consultation and co-development of plans with the family to best accommodate a successful experience.

e. Behaviour

Wildwood Nature School staff members are able to deal with mild to moderate behaviour issues as they occur. Strategies might include the use of redirection, removal of privileges, and/or time away from the group. If issues arise with a participant's behaviour beyond implemented strategies, staff will communicate with Parents/Guardians in person, over the phone, and/or by email as appropriate to the situation. If a participant's behaviour proves to be an ongoing issue, staff will work with all involved to develop a plan to help resolve the issue. In the rare case where this process is not successful, the participant may be asked to leave the program, temporarily or permanently, if their behaviour proves to be unsafe for themselves, other participants, staff or the environment.



f. Lost Items

Wildwood Nature School is not responsible for any lost or stolen items while on site. Parents/Guardians are asked to label all belongings and encourage participants to leave all toys and other treasured items at home. Any items left will be kept until the end of the session and then donated, if not claimed.

g. Drop Off and Pick Up Guidelines

Parents/Guardians will give Wildwood Nature School written authorization for people who may have access to their children (e.g., a relative who picks up child, emergency contact in cases where Parents/Guardians cannot be reached). If written authorization is not possible, Parents/Guardians must phone or email to give authorization. Parents/Guardians must notify Wildwood Nature School staff before changing the usual pick-up routine. Wildwood Nature School staff will always act in the best interest of the participant if there is any confusion, uncertainty or concern.

h. Preparing for Nature School

Participants are outside for large blocks of time, in all types of weather. Comfort is very important when active outdoors, and good apparel makes all the difference between a child who is engaged in the outdoor environment, and a child who is uncomfortable and unhappy. Depending on the weather and season, participants will need a variety of gear. Please refer to "Gearing Up for Outdoor Learning."

GEARING UP FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING



4. HEALTH AND SAFETY

a. Privacy

Access to participant information is restricted to authorized staff and is not shared with third parties, unless legally required. Staff will have with them at all times a copy of each participant's personal information, including allergies, health concerns, and contact information, to be used in the event of an emergency.

Please contact Wildwood Nature School immediately if there are any concerns about the privacy of your child. Parents/Guardians will have the option to grant permission for photographs and/or video recordings (including voice recordings) to be taken during activities and programming by the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority for promotional purposes online (website, social media) and/or in print.

b. Staffing Ratio

The ratio between Wildwood Nature School staff and the number of participants varies depending on the participants' age. The maximum ratio of unaccompanied preschool/primary school-aged participants to staff is 8:1; the maximum ratio of unaccompanied junior/intermediate school-aged participants to staff is 10:1. These ratios allow staff and participants to have optimal experiences, connections, and learning opportunities.

In the event of staff illness or emergency, Wildwood Nature School will run exclusively from the Visitor Services Centre until the appropriate ratio of staff to participants is resumed. In extreme cases, Wildwood Nature School will be cancelled if the ratios cannot be met and/or maintained.

c. Illness

- In any of the following cases, participants (including adults) are to stay home for at least 24 hours after their last symptom has subsided:
 - Temperature over 101° F or 38.3° C;
 - Vomiting;
 - Diarrhea (watery, profuse stools).Should any of the above-mentioned situations arise while at Wildwood Nature School, arrangements will need to be made for immediate pick-up of the affected participant.
- Any participant affected by communicable diseases, including but not limited to measles, chicken pox, mumps, flu, strep throat, viral pneumonia, and conjunctivitis (pink-eye), is asked to not attend Wildwood Nature School until their health care provider has communicated that it is safe for them to return. Any outbreak of communicable disease will be communicated to Parents/Guardians via email.
- Head lice are not considered a communicable disease but rather a nuisance condition which can spread rapidly. If a participant is affected by head lice we ask that:
 - Wildwood Nature School staff be contacted immediately so that other families can be informed (the affected individuals will remain anonymous);
 - Parents/Guardians follow treatment suggestions provided by Huron Perth Public Health.

d. Medication

- Participants are not to administer their own medications, unless previously approved by Wildwood Nature School.
- Parents/Guardians are to bring all medication to Wildwood Nature School staff to be stored and administered. Parents/Guardians will need to complete a Medication Form upon drop off of medication.
- All participants that have known allergies and regularly carry an EpiPen® are asked to please bring one current EpiPen® for their outdoor experience.

e. Food and Drink

- All participants are required to bring snacks and water. In an effort to minimize waste, all food and drinks should be packed in reusable containers or be litter free, where possible.
- Opportunities to wash with soap and water or use sanitizer will be provided before and after snacks/lunch.
- Water bottles should be full upon arrival.
- Wildwood Nature School cannot guarantee an allergen-free environment due to the fact that it is located in a publicly accessible Conservation Area. Participants are encouraged to consider those with potential sensitivities and life threatening allergies and will be notified about any concerns within their group. On special occasions, snacks may be provided or shared by other families for the group. In these cases, all allergies and intolerances will be taken into special consideration.
- Please inform staff prior to the commencement of a session about any food related concerns or considerations a participant may have to allow time for consultation and co-development of plans with the family to best accommodate a successful experience.

f. Washrooms

- Unaccompanied participants must be able to use the facilities independently.
- Washroom facilities are limited and will only be used occasionally. This may include indoor or outdoor facilities.
- Wildwood Nature School staff will provide a washroom kit for use outdoors including toilet paper, wipes, hand sanitizer, and a trowel (for burying any waste material to ensure minimal environmental impact). Participants will learn about the washroom kit and “leave no trace” practices.



5. RISK MANAGEMENT

a. Site Risk

Wildwood Nature School staff conduct regular risk assessments in order to maintain participant safety and to keep the risk of injury to a minimum. Assessments include:

- Site Risk Assessments - tree health, trail condition, structure stability
- Activity Risk Assessments - tool use, boundaries, risky play activities
- Daily Weather and Site Log - weather and site conditions prior to program
- Dynamic Risk Assessments - assessment of a proposed activity during a program

The risk and benefit are evaluated in each assessment. Wildwood Nature School staff make decisions regarding each activity, program and site based on the outcome of the risk assessments. The safety and overall experience for the participants is of the utmost priority during this process.

b. Risky Play

Wildwood Nature School aims to offer a wide variety of opportunities for participants to play while testing limits and exploring risk. Risky play activities can include but are not limited to: tool use, fire building, tree climbing, shelter construction, swings/ hammocks, stick play, and exploration. Staff work with participants to manage risk through demonstration, small group instruction, and in some cases 1:1 supervision. Safety is of extreme importance and participants are taught strategies to protect themselves and those around them while taking part in an activity. Healthy risk management is modelled so that participants learn to assess, manage and overcome risks that they encounter while outdoors.

Risks at Wildwood Nature School may include the following:

- Minor injuries from physical activities such as log or tree climbing;
- Injuries from improper tool use;
- Reactions from environmental allergens (e.g., stinging nettle);
- Reactions to insect bites or stings (e.g., mosquitoes, bees, wasps, ticks);
- The potential for wild animals on site (e.g., raccoons, groundhogs, foxes);
- Inclement or extreme weather conditions.

c. Tool Use

Participants may be provided with opportunities to use tools. Tools are stored in a secured space and are inspected before and after each use. Tool use will only take place once staff have reviewed the activity risk assessment and the ability of the group to handle the risk. Training of proper tool use and appropriate safety precautions will be provided to all participants. If deemed necessary, smaller group instruction or 1:1 supervision will take place.

d. Inclement Weather

It is important that participants are dressed appropriately for outdoor activities and remain comfortable regardless of the weather conditions. Wildwood Nature School staff regularly check weather forecasts and monitor the weather when making decisions about activities for the day.

In the cases of extreme cold (below -20°C) or extreme heat (over 35°C), staff will limit participant's length of exposure based on age/preparedness, and will continually assess participant's comfort and safety throughout the program.

In the event of high winds (sustained or gusting above 40 km/hr), programming will continue away from forested areas and other overhead hazards.

If dangerous weather develops during programming, Wildwood Nature School staff will immediately seek shelter for the group and remain there until weather subsides.

e. Cancellation Due to Conditions

Wildwood Nature School reserves the right to cancel or modify programming in the event of poor travel conditions, poor site conditions and/or poor/severe weather conditions, occurring or forecasted.

If the decision to cancel is made while Wildwood Nature School is in session, participants will be kept in a sheltered area and Parents/Guardians will be contacted via phone to arrange for early pick up. Staff will remain with participants until all have been picked up.

If a decision to cancel is made prior to a Wildwood Nature School visit, Parents/Guardians will be notified of cancellations via email at least one hour prior to the program start time. No refunds will be issued for cancelled days. Alternate dates will be offered only if able.

f. Emergencies

Wildwood Nature School staff carry an emergency bag at all times, containing emergency procedures, emergency contact lists, and a regularly stocked first aid kit. Parents/Guardians must provide appropriate emergency contact information prior to the first session. Staff will carry this information with them at all times to ensure that, in the case of an emergency, the appropriate contact can be reached. Each staff member also carries a cellphone and a two-way radio during all programming.

Should a participant require emergency care, Parents/Guardians/Emergency Contact will be notified immediately (once emergency services have been contacted, if required), and a staff member will stay with the participant until a Parent/Guardian arrives.

At minimum, Wildwood Nature School staff and volunteers will maintain the following certifications:

- Current Vulnerable Sector Check
- Current Standard First Aid and CPR-C/AED

6. COMMUNICATION

At Wildwood Nature School, we strive to be both leaders and learners. We engage openly with participants about learning and thank everyone for their knowledge sharing by encouraging a caring and respectful community where everyone feels safe taking risks, asking questions and sharing thoughts. Please do not hesitate to communicate your or your child's thoughts, feelings or observations with us.

Wildwood Nature School will communicate primarily via email. This may include Welcome Letters, Updates, Cancellations, Future Sessions or Events.

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