



Winter Wonderland: Nature Preschool By Christina Johnson

As the days grow shorter and colder here in Maryland it can be very tempting to climb into hibernation and not be present again until Spring. However, as an Interpretive Host at Locust Grove Nature Center I know that the winter months must not be wasted. This is a magical time of the year full of opportunities to teach our preschoolers about the wonders of Winter. The forest is still alive with animals prepping their winter homes and foraging the last of food supplies to store for winter. Our winter birds have made the migration here to their warmer climate and for those who don't migrate, amazing animal adaptations are taking place to get them through these cold months.

We want our nature explorers to experience all of these wonders and do so safely. Caregivers often ask what the best clothing is for our programs. I always reference the Norwegian saying "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes." When we are dressed properly for the cold weather it can be enjoyed safely. We recommend dressing in layers and wool socks are best. Wool makes a great winter fiber because it wicks away any moisture and traps air pockets in the fibers to insulate you from the cold. Waterproof gloves and boots keep snow and ice off hands and

feet and warm hats protect their ears from the cold. I also recommend snow pants even when it is not snowing. They add an extra layer and will keep them dry if they are down on the ground. And of course, a warm winter coat. We always tell our caregivers to bring an extra set of clothes in case the children need to change into a dry set.

Now that we are bundled up and ready for the cold we can get outside and enjoy this season. Before every program we are using weather monitoring equipment to check the combined temperature and wind speed to determine if the wind chill is safe. We can offer the Nature Center in the event of extreme cold but otherwise we will be outside for the duration of our program. In the cold it is best to have activities planned that keep us moving. We always have a hike planned and will keep stationary activities like story time or a craft to under 20 minutes. Hiking in the winter is a good time for scavenger hunts. We will be out looking for signs of animals through their tracks and scat, signs of nest making and finding trees and shrubs that will keep their berries over winter. We will make bird feeders by rolling pinecones in sunflower butter, then bird seed and hang them from branches. The children love to watch the birds enjoy their gifts. If you are lucky enough to get a snow day during one of your programs, then is a great day to build a snow-person and decorate them with natural materials. Our favorite day last winter was our snow day. We had spray bottles filled with dyed water and after the children built their snow-people they were able to color them with the dyed water. This was a great fine motor activity that could be done with gloves on. I have also included a list below of more glove-friendly activities.

So, while I hope that we can all use these winter months to slow down, reflect, and drink more hot chocolate than we should I also hope we can use them to interpret the Winter into the magical time it is, and show our preschoolers that there is fun to be had all year long.

- Blowing bubbles
- Shoveling snow
- Using sand toys in the snow or mud
- Making snow candles
- Filling bird feeders
- Making snowballs to throw at a target
- Making frozen suncatchers
- Pinecone owl craft
- Making & threading nature looms with pine branches