

Nature Niche

Nature By The Yard – Fostering a Natural Sense of Wonder

Spring, 2007

Volume 4 Issue 1 Calendar of Events

Please call the hosting organization for reservation information.

Mar. 13, Apr. 12 and May 11 **Toddler Walks** 10-11am. For kids 18-36 months with parent. Buttinger Nature Center. Pennington NJ (609) 737-7592. Fee

Thurs. Mar. 15, Apr. 19 and May 17 10-11am **Nature Story Hour** Kids age 3-6. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve New Hope, Pa.. Free for members. 215 862-2924

Thurs. Mar. 20 11-12 **Nature Inside Out Windy Days**. Kids age 3-6 years Cotsen Children's Library Princeton NJ (609) 258-2697 Free, no reservations needed.

Sat. Mar. 31 10am -4pm **Princyclopedia** Family event Cotsen Children's Library. Princeton, NJ. No reservations. Free. 609 258-2697

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My First Sound of Spring

When I was training to be a naturalist in 1986 in Maryland, I discovered migratory birds could read a calendar. Every year on March 9, without fail, the Eastern Phoebe would return to the woods of Wheaton, MD and start to set up a territory. This was earlier than most migratory birds. When we started hearing his distinctive call, we knew it had to be March 9.

As you know, early March has a

bad rap so the Eastern Phoebe was a light at the end of the tunnel.

When I began working in Arlington, Virginia a few years later, I was pleasantly surprised to hear the Phoebe on March 8 one year. Presumably, since Arlington was 20 miles south of Wheaton, MD, the Phoebe came to Virginia first.

Phoebes are part of a group of birds known as flycatchers.

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Ants and Plants

I recently watched a movie with my kids called Ant Bully. I have to say, I really enjoyed it for a number of reasons. It offered me an hour and a half of blissful quiet, it was well animated and it had a great message. Not the least of which was "Don't mess with ants."

Many of you know I don't like ants. As a naturalist, I'm not proud of this. It pains me to even admit it but everyone has at least one thing that creeps them out and for me its ants. One or two is ok, but when I roll over a log and find thousands of them frantically scrambling

around in total chaos, I can almost hear them screaming "Save the eggs! Save the eggs!!", I just get the heebee jeebees.

I can appreciate their organization though. Deep underground, the colony has sleeping chambers, bathrooms, nurseries, hallways and a trash dump. And now, we all have something else to appreciate about them. Ants are the dispersers of wildflower seeds. This relationship even has a name. Myrmecochory. By definition, this is the collection

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Sat. Apr. 14 2-3pm **Spring Animals** Families. Yardley Library 215 493-9898 Free

Sun. Apr. 15 4-5:30 **Wonder Walk** Families. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve. Free for members. Reservations 215 862-2924

Sat. Apr. 21 11-12 **Earth Day Celebration** Plumstead Library. All ages. Free 609 758-0229.

Thurs. Apr. 26 11-12 **Nature Inside Out: April Showers** Kids 3-6 years. Cotsen Children's Library, Princeton, NJ 609 258-2697. Free no reservations

Thurs. May 24 11-12 **Nature Inside Out: Flowers** Kids 3-6 years. Cotsen Children's Library, Princeton, NJ 609 258-2697. Free no reservations

Sat. May 26 8-9:30pm **Moonlight Walk**. Families. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve. Fee. 215 862-2924

NBTY can come to your child's class and provide a curriculum- supporting program on a variety of exciting topics. Check out our website for ideas.

We're on the Web

See us at:

www.naturebytheyard.com

Phoebe's (continued)

They perch on low branches bobbing their tail and when they see an insect, take flight, catch it in mid air then return to the perch to consume their meal. To see a Phoebe dive and maneuver to nab a bug is quite a site to be sure.

With its nondescript grayish-brown hood and back, white belly and gray-brown tail, Eastern Phoebes are easy to miss, but listen for the characteristic call "Phee-be, phee-blee" and watch for the

tail bobbing. These are the best field identification marks. Phoebe's will nest on platforms such as beams, outdoor lights, and building shelves. They often have two or even three broods in a season before returning to the tropics in the fall.

But if March 9 comes and goes and you still don't hear the Phoebe, maybe give him some slack since Eastern Pa. is about 200 miles north of Arlington, Virginia.

Ants (continued)

and dispersal of seeds by ants. Leave it to scientists to create a name for every activity imaginable.

Many of the spring wildflowers like Dutchman's Breeches, Violets and Bloodroot that are just beginning to break through the soil will rely on ants to disperse their seeds. The plant produces a fat rich structure called an eliasome that is attached to the seed. The ant grabs it with its jaws and drags it, along with the seed back to

the colony. So here is this ant, dragging a seed that has this delicious energy source attached to it. She shares the meal with her sisters and being a good clean ant, drags the seed to the garbage dump. The dump is chock full of nutrient rich soil for the seed to germinate in.

So the next time I turn over a log and find a frantic colony of ants screaming to save the eggs, I'll thank them for the flowers and try to hide my shudder.

About Our Organization...

Nature By The Yard was started in January, 2001. We offer fun, hands-on, nature education programs to schools, scouts, camps, libraries, birthday parties, garden clubs, nature centers, wildflower preserves or any organized group. We also provided

workshops for teachers on using the schoolyard as a classroom tool as well as offer advice and expertise on designing school yard habitats. For details on our services visit www.naturebytheyard.com or call Pam at (609) 610-6292