

Delve Into Darkness

— Explore the Night!

by Kathy Lajeunesse

Many of us are comfortable during the day, venturing out to explore the natural world, but as soon as night falls, out come the flashlights and lanterns to light the way. A night hike is an excellent way to remind us that our eyes are very capable of adapting to darkness.

It's also a wonderful way to explore the fascinating lives of nocturnal creatures. Here are some guidelines and some cool activities to help you put together an experience for your Cubs or Scouts at your next camp, or weekly evening meeting.

First Things First!

Find a trail that you know! It might be a local woodlot, conservation area, parkland, or a camp that you visit year after year. It's very important that the leader has walked the trail in daylight. A wide and flat path with few exposed rocks and roots is perfect.

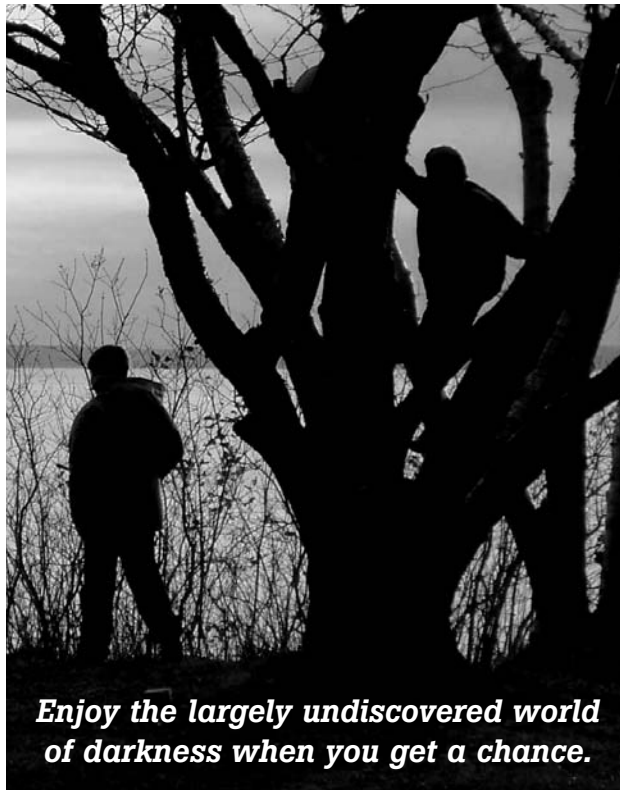
Dress appropriately for the weather. As with any outdoor activity, being prepared for the weather is part of your recipe for success.

Most people want to hold flashlights at night, and they will bring them unless they are instructed not to. Bring some pre-cut red tissue paper and a bag of elastics. As your Cubs arrive, help them secure a double layer of red paper over the end of their flashlights. Once the walk is underway, flashlights will be off, but if there is any reason for the leader to turn one on, no one will lose their night vision. Our eyes take a full hour to adjust to darkness but work reasonably well after 15 minutes. Also, many nocturnal animals cannot see red light, so the flashlights will not scare them away.

Before leaving, assign everyone a number, leaders and parents included. Count out loud to confirm everyone is there. Repeat this safety procedure at the end of each activity before you move on to the next stop.

Ten Night-time Activities

Each of the following activities is designed to help your youth discover something about their own night vi-



Enjoy the largely undiscovered world of darkness when you get a chance.

sion, and/or make some connection to the lives of local wildlife. Familiarize yourself with the structure of the human eye, and how it is the same and/or different from the eyes of an owl or raccoon for instance. Use your preamble and/or follow-up to each activity to help make connections, but also keep explanations brief, as many experiences speak for themselves!

Find your Mate

In a clearing with a natural perimeter, hand out paired noise makers (bells, maracas, shakers, crinkly plastic, etc.). Once your Cub receives a noisemaker, he/she then slowly and carefully spreads out in the clearing. At the leader's signal, everyone starts making his or her noise. They stay still for the first minute to sense the variety of sounds. Then, they slowly move in the direction of where they heard the same sound until everyone is paired up.

Coloured Sticks

Hand out popsicle sticks that have been coloured in a variety of different colours at one end. Your Scouts try to identify their colour in the dark. They can also try to find another Scout who has the same colour as their own. At the end of the hike, they can determine if they were able to discern colour accurately.

Deer Ears

Identify a place where night sounds abound. Meadows and wetlands are awesome locations — especially in the spring, summer and early fall! Arrange your youth so they face the natural area with no one behind or in front of them. Everyone stands silently. Get hats and hair out of the way and then pull your fingers together and cup your hands broadly behind your ears. Now pull them

Photo: Garth Holder

away. Do this several times. It's amazing how bigger ears amplify sound. What a wonderful adaptation many creatures have for being able to hear their predators or prey!

Sketching by Night

At night, we have the ability to see shapes, and to discern shades of black, gray and white. Find a location on the trail where the canopy is open enough to see the shapes of the trees. A vista from a hill or boardwalk also works well. Hand out white chalk and pieces of black construction paper. Each person finds a spot to sit down and sketch what he or she can see! Some Cubs will need more guidance and encouragement than others. Make a gallery of art when you get back to camp.

Silhouettes Camouflage Game

Choose a wide and safe section of trail for this activity. One leader goes ahead on the trail with two or three youth. She helps them find a place to hide, one or two metres from the side of the trail. The goal is to disguise their body as a tree trunk, large rock or stump. That leader then stops at a designated place further down the trail, and signals to the rest of the group to begin. The second leader sends the youth down the trail one or two at a time. They try to spot the camouflaged figures. If they think they see someone hiding, they simply leave the trail and touch them, then come back to the trail and keep going so as not to give the hiding spots away. It's amazing how many tricks can be played with the eyes!

Moon Mints!

They are hard to track down, but if you can find wintergreen Life-savers™, carry a small bag of broken pieces. Cubs face a partner and take turns crunching the mints between their teeth with open lips. The crunching sends off sparks — like mini fireworks in the night!

Heat Sensors

This is a great cool weather activity. Partner up and stand arm's length apart. If wearing mittens or gloves, take them off. Rub your hands vigorously together for one minute. Close your eyes and slowly move the palms of your hands towards those of your partner starting at your own shoulders. Your partner does the same. Can you sense their body heat before your hands come in contact?

Call an Owl!

There may be a leader or parent in your midst who knows how to call in an owl. You can also carry a recording of a Great Horned Owl call. Play it and then listen for a response. Great Horned Owls are widespread in urban and natural settings. Barred Owls can be called in as well, but are more apt to be found in natural areas. Even if you do not get a response, the awareness that these beautiful night fliers are around will shine through your Cubs' anticipation and excitement!

Stargazing

Once again, you might have a leader or parent who has some expertise in astronomy and stargazing. They can highlight some attractions

In the Dark of the Night

Night Science for Kids by Terry Krautwurst (Lark Books, New York, 2003)



Owl Moon by Jane Yolen. Illustrated by John Schoenherr. (Philomel Books, New York, 1987) This is a great storybook.



in the night sky. Otherwise, don't be afraid to lie down on the ground in a clearing or on a boardwalk and gaze up at a starlit sky. Try lying down like the spokes of a wagon wheel.

Some Final Comments

In the absence of our daytime vision, our other senses of smell, taste, hearing and touch are keener at night. Smell some evergreen leaves rubbed between your fingers or touch a rock that is covered with moss. Include at least one activity for each sense. Otherwise, be creative with your own ideas and enjoy this largely undiscovered world the next time you get a chance! X

— *Kathy Lajeunesse is a Cub leader with the 123rd Ottawa Pack, Ontario.*

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