

Program Shuffling

By Michael Perez, Education Program Manager

When you visit our website to search for programs, it may look the same as always, but it is, in fact, different. COVID-19, as in many areas of our lives, has changed how we offer programs at the Nature Center. This can be seen in how many participants can attend a program, how we adhere to health policies, how the public registers, and most importantly, when programs are offered.

A majority of our programs used to occur during the weekend. Programs such as Canoe Fest, guided paddling tours, nature hikes, and other nature-related programs dotted our schedule. Weekends were well attended, and it made sense to offer as many programs as possible on Saturdays and Sundays. Plans changed when COVID-19 reared its ugly head. We wanted to be present but did not want to encourage large groups. This forced us to consider alternate ways to offer programs.

At first, we began offering virtual programs. Wednesday Walks became virtual. Our virtual walks are scheduled on Wednesdays from 10 – 11 a.m. The original purpose behind this program was to share with the community how the Refuge was changing during its closure. Since reopening, the virtual walks continue but serve different purposes, namely, to encourage our virtual community to come hike in person, help answer questions about the Nature Center, share what is new, and provide an opportunity for those who cannot visit in person to enjoy different areas of the park.

Another staple program was our Preschool Discovery Club. This program was offered every 3rd and 4th Friday of the month and was geared toward three- to five-year-olds and their parents/guardians. Each week, a theme was introduced with a story, lesson, hike, and craft. The program was a great way for young children to learn about nature and foster a family-friendly environment where everyone could engage in nature-related activities together. The hope was for parents/guardians to further their nature experience through increased visitation, sign up for programs (including summer camps), and share with their friends.

Because of new constraints on how many could attend, this went virtual, too. The Nature Center now collaborates with the Fort Worth Public Library to provide meaningful and fun lessons. The program is called Discovery Club and targets a similar age range. Ms. Angela Barratt, Senior Librarian at the Central Library, works with Nature Center staff on lessons. She reads a story, acts out a story, and/or sings a song before our staff provides a lesson on the topic. By the end of 2020, we had collaborated on 35 lessons. The videos are aired on Fridays at 10 a.m. For 2021, the videos will occur twice per month rather than each Friday.

We understand that our audience is not just virtual. Providing in-person programs is essential where possible. Since this past spring, we have moved all our programs to weekdays. This switch has allowed us to maintain the smaller groups recommended by current CDC guidelines. Generally, Mondays are reserved for an Early Birds walk. A naturalist will take you across the Refuge to find birds in season. At this point, birds of note are the American



Natural Scientist Laura Veloz helps identify macroinvertebrates for an aquatics program at the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge. FWNC&R Staff Photo.

White Pelican, Bald Eagle, Spotted Towhee, and Brown Thrasher, to name a few. As we approach spring, we will see migrants coming through, and birds such as Indigo Buntings, Painted Buntings, and Purple Martins will remain. These hikes are free for members (\$5 for nonmembers) and are held from 8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

If you want a more general hike, each weekday from 9 – 10:30 a.m., a free nature hike for members (\$5 for nonmembers) is available. Staff will take you to various areas of the Refuge, discussing the plants and animals that are visible within the season. It is not unusual to hear an armadillo plowing through leaves or see colorful plants along the walk.

For those who have walked the trails or prefer a non-terrestrial tour, aquatic tours are available. We conduct kayak tours, canoe tours, and even a monthly nighttime aquatic tour coinciding with the full moon. These experiences on the water allow you to get a different view of the Refuge. In the fall, the best views of fall color can be seen from the water. Paddling also allows great sightings of aquatic wildlife such as beavers, alligators, and waterfowl.

We are not going to allow COVID-19 to disrupt our mission of engaging you with the outdoors. Come in person or join us virtually and take advantage of being out in nature. Nature is a great way to handle the stresses of the world, and the Nature Center is a spot where you can forget about the world around you and enjoy the natural world.