



# WINTER WONDERLAND NATURE PLAY:

Activities for Cold Weather

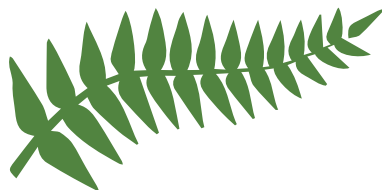
Part of the Nature Play Workshop Series by

GARFIELD PARK  
CONSERVATORY  
ALLIANCE 

In Chicago, where the Garfield Park Conservatory is located, the weather can be miserably cold and gray in the winter months. We hope this guide aides you and your young ones in enjoying even the coldest of days. The first five activities in the book are designed to get you outside in a winter wonderland, while the last five activities are good for indoor nature play when going outside may not be feasible.

We at the Conservatory hope you use this book to guide your nature play and give you new ideas for activities during the coldest months of the year.

- The Nature Education team at Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance



This work is supported by a grant from PNC for education with young children. We are grateful for their support of our programs at the Conservatory.



## Table of contents:

4. Cook County Forest Preserves
5. Dressing for outdoor adventures
6. Take a nature walk and look for signs of life
7. Cold weather bubbles
8. Winter color safari
9. Do-it-yourself snow paint
10. Evergreen neighborhood exploration
11. Pinecone birdfeeders
12. Maple syrup taffy
13. Nature mandalas
14. Snow dough
15. Winter wonderland storytime

# Cook County Forest Preserves

Heading to your local forest preserves is a great way to find larger, wilder nature spaces. For full maps and more information we recommend checking the Cook County Forest Preserve website ([fpdcc.org](http://fpdcc.org)).

Some of the preserves we love near the city of Chicago include:

- **Thatcher Woods** Chicago Ave, west of Thatcher Ave, River Forest, IL 60305

Close to the west side of Chicago between Maywood and River Forest, the woods in this area border the Des Plaines River and host a variety of wildlife. The trails in the preserve are favored in winter especially by cross country skiers and snowshoers.

- **Trailside Museum of Natural History** 738 Thatcher Ave River Forest, IL 60305

Near Thatcher Woods you'll find the Trailside Museum of Natural History, which hosts a nature center and has year-round activities for adults and children. Make sure to check the schedule in advance so you don't miss out on special events like predatory bird feedings, nature story times, or planned hikes through the preserve.

- **Forest Glen Woods** N Forest Glen Ave, north of N Elston Ave, Chicago, IL 60630

Located along the larger North Branch Trail system, this park has a picnic pavilion and features areas for exploration in addition to connecting to the larger trail.

- **Dan Ryan Woods** S Western Ave & W 87th St, Chicago, IL 60620

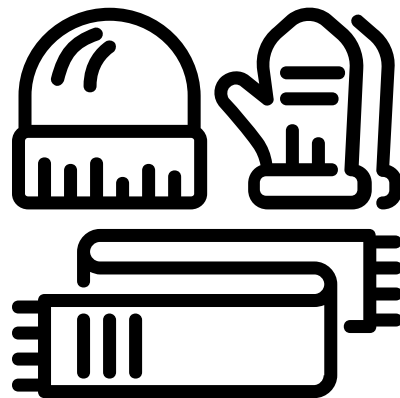
Located on the south side of Chicago this spot is a perennial favorite for winter adventuring due to its sledding hills and paved hiking paths that connect to the Major Taylor Trail.

## Dressing for outdoor adventures

One of the most challenging things about winter exploring is getting bundled up appropriately.

If the weather is below 15° Fahrenheit, avoid going out with young children due to risk of frostbite or harm from the cold. Above 15°, make sure everyone has gear to cover their extremities and help them stay warm and dry. This includes:

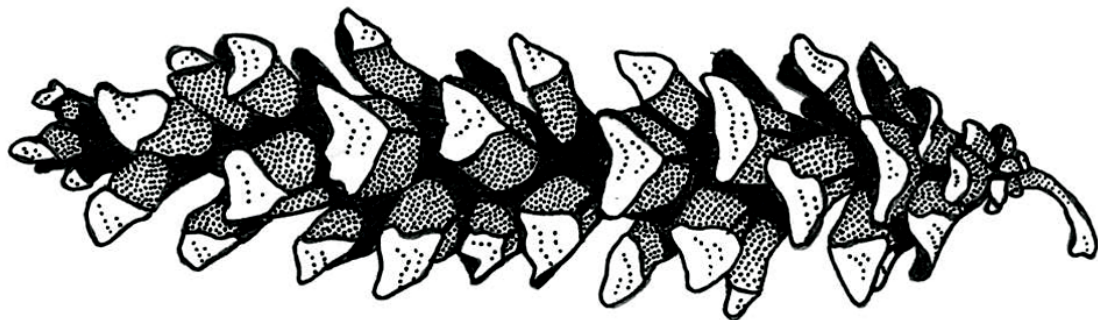
- Hats to cover ears and head and prevent heat loss
- Mittens or gloves to protect hands
- Warm socks to protect toes and feet
- Insulated, waterproof winter boots
- Long underwear (if it's very cold)
- An insulated, windproof jacket, waterproof if it's snowing
- Snow pants or other waterproof pants



## Take a nature walk and look for signs of life

It's easy to think that in winter everything is dead or dying, but this scavenger hunt focuses on finding signs of life even in the gloomiest months. Take your young ones out for a walk and try to find:

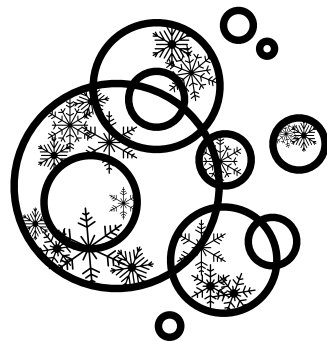
- A plant with needles or waxy green leaves
- Seeds, berries, or pinecones
- Buds on trees or bushes
- Tracks on the ground (better with snow or mud)
- An animal that doesn't hibernate (deer, tree squirrels, chickadees, etc.)
- Grass under snow



## Cold weather bubbles

Even in the bitter cold, there's still fun to be had outside! Using an eyedropper and bubble solution, you and your child can explore frozen bubbles. (We aren't kidding when we say bitter cold--temperatures of  $-13^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit or lower work best. Use extreme caution in these temps and be ready to come in quickly.) You will need:

- 200 ml warm water
- 35 ml corn syrup (helps thicken the mixture)
- 35 ml dish soap (helps form bubbles)
- 2 tablespoons sugar (helps with crystallization)
- 1 plastic straw or eyedropper



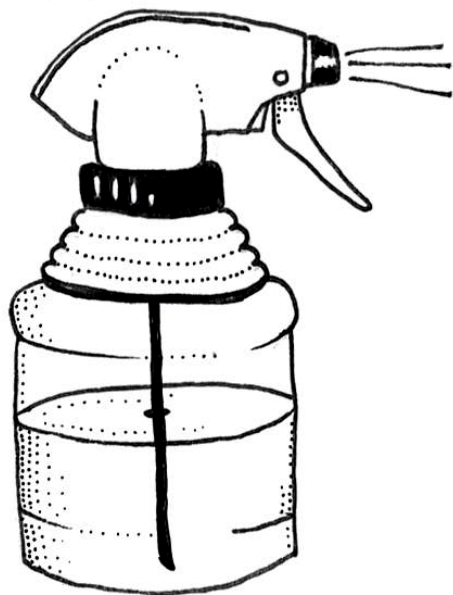
Mix ingredients in a bowl until all the ingredients are combined. Then head outside (bundle up first) and find a branch or piece of ground that is very frozen to practice blowing bubbles onto. Using your eyedropper take a small amount of liquid and then gently squeeze it out along with the air inside the dropper. The bubble will take a little while to start freezing so be patient. If it's cold enough you'll see ice crystals form in the water layer of the bubble, but frozen bubble experts say it can take a few tries to get a bubble to freeze.

## Winter color safari

Winter may feel cold and gray, but if you start looking closely you can find lots of colors. Below are some color swatches you and your young ones can try to match when you go outside. For more variety, you can even make your own color safari set using paint chips from the hardware store and a binder ring. Once you start looking you'll be surprised by what a riot of color even winter can be!







## Do-it-yourself snow paint

Snow is a lot more fun when you can think about it as a canvas for your next masterpiece rather than something that has to be shoveled out of the driveway. One of our favorite and easiest winter activities is this snow paint—we hope it lets you enjoy the fun of fresh snow with your kids in a new way. You will need:

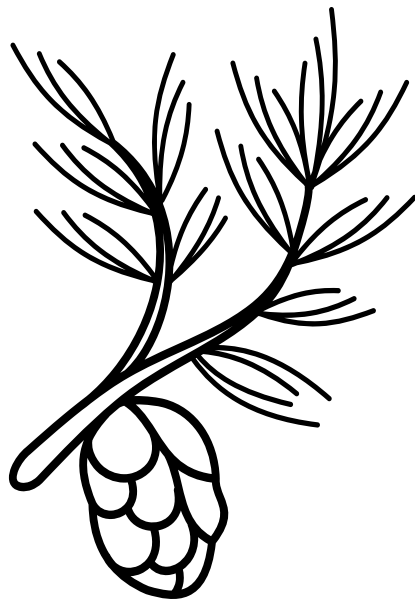
- Spray bottles
- Enough water to fill spray bottles
- Food coloring

Fill your spray bottles with water and then add food coloring until you get your desired color. With the size spray bottles we use it takes about 10 drops of food coloring to get a bright color, but your results may vary. Get bundled up and head outside to turn fresh snow into a colorful work of art!

## Evergreen neighborhood exploration

Pine trees may go unnoticed in the midst of summer, but in the winter evergreen plants stand out as some of the lone greenery of the season. Evergreens are plants that don't drop their foliage in the winter months, like pine trees and boxwood shrubs. Setting out on an adventure to find the evergreens in your neighborhood is a great way to engage with nature while it's cold outside. When you and your young ones find plants that are still green, here's some questions to ask about the plants you find:

- Look and see whether the plants have needles or leaves (Conifers will have needles, while evergreen shrubs like boxwoods have leaves)
- What kind of seeds do they have? Can you see anything that could be a seed on the ground nearby? (Check the plant for things like cones or berries)
- Does this plant look like the other evergreens you've found? Does it have a different or similar feel? Smell? Look?



## Pinecone bird feeders

Winter is a tough for birds just like it can be tough for us! One way to help out the birds in your area is to create a bird feeder. We love these simple ones made from pinecones because they provide a great snack for our feathered friends and are easy to make with the help of little hands. You'll need:

- Pinecones (make sure they are clean, dry, and free from perfume\*)
- Sunflower seed butter or peanut butter
- Cornmeal
- Birdseed (black sunflower seeds or millet are great)
- String to hang the pinecone with (natural fibers are best!)

Tie your string around your pinecone and knot it in a loop. Mix your nut butter and cornmeal together and spread this mix on your pinecone using a knife or even your hands. Pour some birdseed into a flat plate and roll the pinecone in it until it is completely covered. Hang up on a branch in your area to attract birds to your feeder.

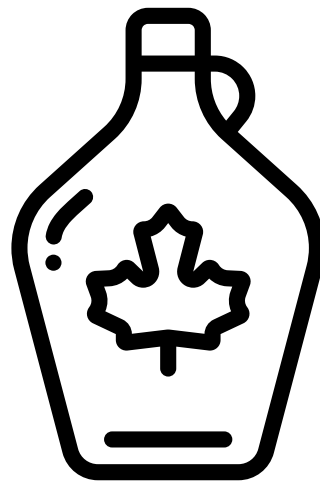
\*Pinecones sold in stores for decoration often have added scents to make them more pleasing, but these are not the kind we should use to make feeders

## Maple syrup taffy

Coming in from the cold to a house that smells like candy is a definite favorite of ours. This special treat is a great way to warm up after a nature walk out in the cold. You may also be familiar with this recipe from Laura Ingalls Wilder's book *Little House in the Big Woods*. You will need:

- Clean, fresh snow
- Pie pan or cookie sheet
- Candy thermometer or glass of water
- Maple syrup

Pack your snow into your pie pan or cookie sheet. This will be used to cool the candy down once it's done cooking. In a pot on the stove, heat maple syrup up to 235°F (112°C). Make sure to stir constantly while bringing the syrup up to temperature. You can check this using a candy thermometer or doing a "soft ball" test (we recommend googling for more information if you use this method). When the syrup reaches the right temperature, remove it from the stove and drizzle it immediately over the snow packed in the pan. Let the syrup cool for a minute or two (have a grown up check first!) and then enjoy this special winter treat.



## Nature mandalas

Mandalas in many cultures start with a circular shape to represent the universe. We use these at GPC as a way to slow down and explore creatively.

When you go outside on nature walks, take some time to collect small pieces of the natural world to bring back home with you. Good things to collect include: sticks, leaves, seeds, pinecones, and stones.

Back inside, clear off a space to arrange your pieces as art. Try starting with a circle shape and get creative from there! For younger children, it can be helpful to get sheets of paper or cardboard and draw designs for them to arrange their supplies on. We've even done giant versions of this activity using sidewalk chalk for collaborative group play.

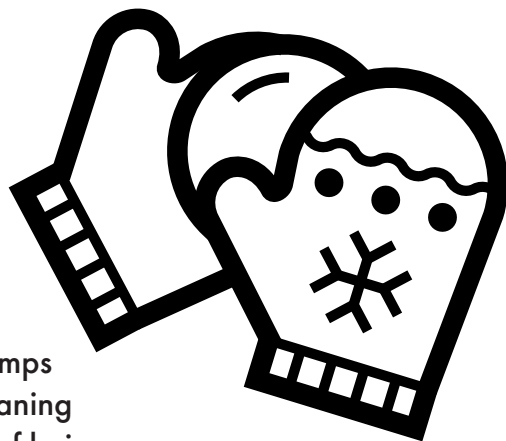


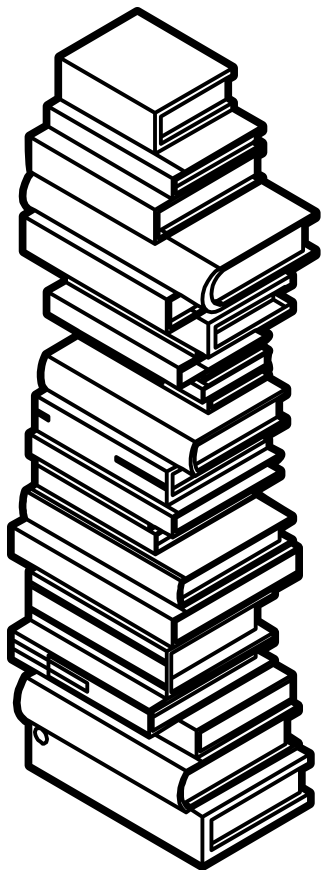
## Snow dough

Sometimes winter weather is a double whammy—too cold to go outside and there's no snow on the ground! But never fear, our magical snow down recipe can be made inside easily for when you need a dose of snow and mother nature isn't cooperating. You'll need:

- Baking soda (6 parts)
- Hair conditioner, white-colored (1 part)
- Small toys or animal figurines
- Sticks, rocks, pinecones
- Container to put snow dough in

Mix the baking soda and conditioner together until you can form clumps and it forms a clay. Our ratio of ingredients is roughly six to one, meaning if you had six cups of baking soda, you would need to add one cup of hair conditioner. Once it's mixed, add in your toys, nature bits, and whatever else tickles your fancy. Our favorite part of this activity might be just how easy clean up is: just add water!





## Winter wonderland storytime

One of our favorite winter activities when we can't be outside is reading books while we are warm and cozy inside. We even get ideas on what to do on our next adventures out in the cold! Here are a few of our favorite books for story times with themes of cold weather, getting outside, and enjoying winter:

- *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats

A classic with good reason! This book is a wonderful slice-of-life about a snowy day off school.

- *Over and Under the Snow* by Kate Messner

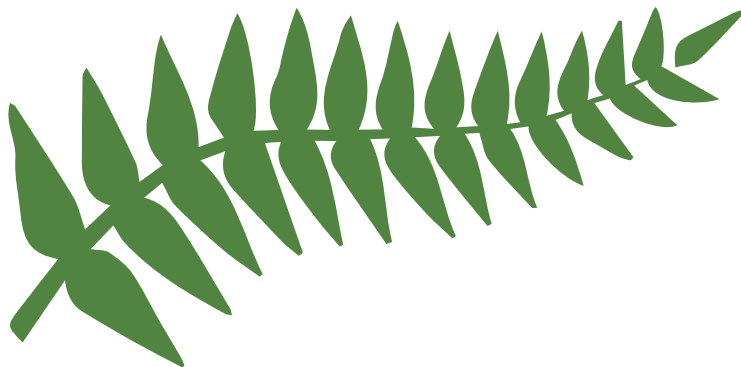
A story about going on a skiing trip and understanding the winter ecosystem of the forest as a "secret kingdom" under the snow.

- *On a Magical Do-Nothing Day* by Beatrice Alemagna

A book about exploring the forest even on a bad weather day and finding excitement and fun, against all expectations.

- *And Then It's Spring* by Juile Fogliano

Winter can feel very long, and this book is about waiting for spring with baited breath.



Thank you for reading this book! Engage with us online  
for more from Garfield Park Conservatory:  
Instagram & Twitter: @gpconservatory  
Facebook: [facebook.com/garfieldparkconservatory](https://facebook.com/garfieldparkconservatory)