



FRONT YARD NATURE STUDY

BY JENNIFER DEES
PHOTOS BY KRISTIN ROGERS

So much exciting nature study happens right in the front yard. Although my family and I have taken trips to national parks and other faraway places to see impressive animals such as black bears and pronghorn and bison, I'm learning to not take for granted what can be observed right in front of me, right where my children play, without needing to go anywhere. I love that there are still places dominated by large animals and long prairie grasses. But the beauty of flowers and birds in the yard are important too.

I live in a neighborhood of small houses near lots of open green space. In my neighborhood, that means lots of squirrels and opossums, the occasional raccoon, and an abundance of skunks. A few years ago, we started noticing a crop of baby skunks every spring, foraging in our yard and squeaking to each other in irritation as they crossed one another's path. Skunks were my favorite animal as a child, and even in my early twenties, I had considered getting a pet skunk. So I was thrilled.





Other neighbors were not so thrilled. But observing skunks can teach one a lot about the way wildlife interact with human activity and cultivated spaces. In observing skunks, you can see their awkward gait and fearlessness, their propensity for digging, especially in the garden, and their appetite for cat food.

We have had a family of skunks living under our house, and when I see skunks in my yard, I'm reminded of the description of skunk families by John James Audubon, telling how families of skunks live together. Even when the young are large and grown, the whole skunk family retired in their den over winter, sleeping soundly.

Another interesting neighborhood creature is the opossum. We think of marsupials as exotic and foreign, like the kangaroo and the koala, but we often neglect the study of this common and strange North American marsupial. I have seen opossums hiding in my backyard, foraging for fallen fruit and insects, and occasionally I have seen their toothy grin when disturbed, that grin that John Burroughs describes as both comical and idiotic, as he has frequently encountered them on his nature walks in the Catskill Mountains, and describes opossums in his book, *Squirrels and Other Fur Bearers*.

There are many examples of animals that will wander into the yard without any effort on your part. But some creatures have to be wooed into our yard by us. Bird encounters are some of the easiest to make happen, no matter where you live. Using feeders, different types of food, and birdbaths, you can learn to attract a great variety of bird species.





WESTERN YEW
Taxus brevifolia Nuttall

Other Names: Pacific Yew, Mountain Manzanita
Range: In Idaho only on islands of the subalpine zone south of the Great Basin of Idaho, California and Oregon. In the Blue Mountains, Idaho, and in the Sierra Nevada, California, it is found in the Coast Range from the Oregon to the Washington border. It is also found in the Sierra Nevada, California, and in the Coast Range, Oregon, up to 10,000 feet.



Diagnosis: Bark very thick of purple-pink color, furrowed into the undergrowth, clear, smooth, and shining. The young tree has a dark yellow-green, and later a brownish-green, color. The leaves are dark and glossy, with a distinct dark yellow-green margin. The cones are dark brown, and the female cones are very large, with a long, slender, and pointed beak, and surrounded by a dense covering of scales.

My kids and I have enjoyed attracting birds with different types of feeders, and it is fun to see bird species come into our yard that we previously had never seen in our neighborhood, such as hooded orioles and goldfinches. Birds will come to your porch or window and are easily viewed from inside your home.

We have also attracted a variety of butterfly species to our yard through planting native flowers that butterflies and moths use as a food source and that caterpillars eat. We are in love with the sight of butterflies in our yard, and have even begun to notice their unique habits.

Western Swallowtails fighting in mid-air, sphinx moths hovering over flowers like bats, and Gulf fritillaries hiding in the shade on hot summer days are observations we have found worthy of nature journaling. We have enjoyed watching newly emerging monarchs from their chrysalis, pumping fluid into their wings before they can fly.

There is so much in a yard that is worthy of nature study, and I don't want to miss any of it. Paying eager attention to the nature that finds its way into our yard has led us to learn about the plant and animal world and has taught us to be scientists, eyes open and ready to learn more. Charlotte Mason said, "Every common miracle which the child sees with his own eyes makes of him for the moment another Newton."

Any animal you encounter in your neighborhood can be an opportunity for nature study. We teach our children to be curious and not indifferent when we model enthusiasm for the nature around us. We remind them that magic is before us. It's our job to notice.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Dees and her husband live in Long Beach, CA. She home-schools her four children using the Charlotte Mason philosophy of education. She also makes oil paintings in her spare time.

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ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I love to laugh, learn, make fun of myself (there is much opportunity for this one), let my children climb on me, and join them in their homemade forts. I am not a “put together” girl. I often discover a rip in my dress a little too late or get caught making up words when the correct ones fail me. My heart does a “pitter-patter” for nature, adoption, reading, coffee, homeschooling, thrift shops, messy hair and tattoos. I’m grateful for grace and the love of my husband and two daughters... and hugs. I’m grateful for hugs.

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