



GREEN MOUNTAIN Audubon CENTER



Audubon Forest Playschool Parent Handbook

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Description & Location

Audubon Forest Playschool is a half-day drop-off program for children ages 3 to 5 based at the Green Mountain Audubon Center in Huntington, Vermont. The program meets at the Education Barn, from which the group travels on their daily adventures. Close to the Barn and Center we have a meeting place, Forest Camp, serves as a home base for tracking the seasonal rhythms of nature and developing a strong connection to the plants and animals that share this home with us. This space is a place we can make a fire and enjoy snack and lunch, but also explore and play in nature.

Forest Camp will also serve as the launching pad for further explorations across the landscape; the 252 acres of the Green Mountain Audubon Center give us access to beaver ponds, meadows, sugarbush, hemlock swamp, brook and river all within easy reach during our 4-hour program. Each week is different because a new student shares and plans their vision for the day.

Program Philosophy

The Forest Playschool program seeks to develop the innate bond between children and the natural world by providing a landscape to play, explore, and use all of our senses. Our teachers act as role models and guides: they share in the children's curiosity, ask questions, inspire with stories, and embody empathy towards all living things.

We operate with the following goals and guiding principles:

- **Maximize outdoors time:** We aim to spend all of our time outdoors. We expect children to come prepared with warm and waterproof clothing, and we will develop skills of self-care to stay warm and comfortable. Our goal is to make kids comfortable

in all types of weather, while developing and understanding their own personal boundaries.

- **Learn through play:** Forest Playschool will offer ample opportunities for free and imaginative play, starting upon arrival where children will be greeted with an activity that is important for their current stage of development. Games and spontaneous play will be woven throughout each day. Student will be able to express what play they will like and are encouraged to play amongst their fellow students to allow adults ample time to supervise and observe.
- **Plan for spontaneity:** Our day is child-led. During morning meeting each student is given the opportunity to decide what we do and where we go. Our teachers will be ready with a theme, story, and activity of the day in their back pocket, but we won't hesitate to adjust plans as natural learning opportunities emerge and steer us in other directions. We take our cue from nature and from the interests of each child in our inquiry-based teaching approach.
- **Take healthy risks:** Children will develop confidence and an ability to calculate risk for themselves by exploring healthy options at Forest Playschool. This could mean climbing a rock/tree or balancing on a log. Our staff is trained to supervise and support children in these activities, ensuring safety and steering children away from potentially harmful hazards. Please see the complete Safety Protocols for Education Programs document for specific details on safety procedures and measures at Forest Playschool.

Daily Schedule

- 9:00- 9:30 – Drop-off and get ready for the day at the Education Barn. Parents welcome to stay for first 15 minutes. Playschoolers should use this time to pack their bags, use the bathroom, and fill water bottles. We will encourage students to do this themselves to develop self-preparedness, but of course we will be on hand to help and do backpack checks.
- 9:30—Begin morning meeting to plan out our day with all of the students. We start with a fun question and names to warm up and learn more about our friends. We pick who is the morning meeting leader and listen to their plan for the day. As a group we take time to discuss the weather and temperature outside to prepare ourselves for the day ahead as well as the season we are currently experiencing.
- After morning meeting we will enjoy our snack, preferably outside at forest camp, on the trail, at the picnic tables etc. During snack we enjoy a story and some quiet time. We will then always take a mandatory bathroom break where we encourage everyone to try.
- Then we are off on our adventure. That might mean staying at Forest Camp to rebuild the fort or hiking down to Peeper Pond to have lunch and look for frogs!
- 12:00 -- We have lunch either at Forest Camp, on our trails, at Beaver Pond, etc.
- We will end each day with our Thank You circle where we express any gratitude that we might be feeling and our favorite part of the day.

- 1:00 Pick-up at the Barn.

The theme and direction of our “adventure” will depend on what nature has to offer us that day, based on weather and wildlife activity as well as student interest. This part of the day will often build on seasonal themes such as how animals prepare for winter, building our Forest Camp, cooking over a fire, learning to make a snow ball, sledding, or practicing our nature observation skills. We also work on basic numeracy and alphabet familiarity through nature-based activities and games. In addition, we focus on gross motor skills, detail oriented skills, as well as social and emotional awareness.

When possible we love integrating cooking our own food over the fire. We’ve made muffins in an orange peel, baked apples in foil, and other delicious creations that are easy for preschoolers to help create, cook, and eat! When it is cold we love having the option to enjoy a nice warm drink around a fire too. We will always take allergies into consideration.

Policies & Procedures

Bathrooms: We have bathroom facilities inside our main office building, within sight of both the Education Barn and Forest Camp. The water from the tap is potable. Please make use of these facilities upon arrival: use the bathroom, wash hands, and fill water bottle as needed. Children must be potty-trained in order to participate in forest playschool. When we are hiking on trail we encourage and help with students taking nature bathroom breaks.

Inclement Weather Plan: In the case of severe weather, we will shift activities to our indoor space, the Education Barn. This space will always be set up in advance to accommodate the Forest Playschool group. In rare cases, a severe weather forecast might require cancellation or delay of a program date. With our program being slightly delayed in comparison to school start we may choose to go as scheduled. Our Lead Educator will be in touch in the case of a delay or cancellation. We will follow the school cancellation schedule for Snow Days of Brewster Pierce Elementary School which is in the Mt Mansfield Modified Union/Chittenden-East Supervisory Union.

Gear List

All participants must bring:

- Outdoor clothing*
- Change of clothes (in bag or bin)
- Protein-rich snack (we will notify families at the start of the session if it should be nut free)
- Water bottle(s) (leak-proof)
- Backpack to carry snack/lunch and extra clothing layers

- A cup to hold warm liquids such as tea around our fire

*The following clothing will be required:

- Winter coat (insulated and water resistant)
- Snow pants
- Boots (mud boots for wet season, insulated for snow season)
- Rain pants
- Rain jacket with a hood
- Hat
- Gloves or mittens
- Neck warmer or scarf
- Socks (wool or fleece)
- Long underwear top and bottom
- Wool sweater or fleece top

A full change of clothes can also be left inside the Education Barn, in a bag or bin. **All items should be labeled with your child's name.** Extra layers can be put in their backpack for the day.

Meet the Teachers

Emily Kaplita, Teacher Naturalist: Emily is from Connecticut, and spent 2016 and 2017 serving as an AmeriCorps member on Audubon Vermont's education team. She is now working with Audubon full time as our Senior Educator. Emily graduated in May 2016 with a Bachelor's of Science degree in Biology from Dickinson College and earned her Masters in Early Childhood Education from Champlain College in 2022. Emily had the pleasure of being a seasonal educator here at the Green Mountain Audubon Center, working with the summer day camps and loving it. She loves learning about all the special spots of Audubon – there's so many that it takes years to learn them all! In her free time you will find Emily hiking, spending time with family and friends, birding, and downhill and xc skiing. If Emily could be one animal for the rest of her life she would be a sea otter.

Environmental Education and Outreach AmeriCorps Member: Kyra is originally from North Carolina, where she spent her childhood fishing, swimming, and exploring in and around Lake Norman. She has always had a deep love for the natural world, especially the animals that inhabit it. Kyra attended the Pennsylvania State University, where she first discovered her love for environmental education through a program known as Outdoor School. She was able to couple her love of the environment and her affinity for teaching with a B.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Science and a minor in Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management. Kyra first visited Vermont in early 2022 and immediately felt connected to the expansive views and incredible stars. She spent the summer on Lake Fairlee as a camp counselor, and was amazed by the vibrancy and beauty of the Green Mountain State. She is looking forward to spending her second summer in Vermont hiking, exploring, and brushing up on her knowledge of native

species. Kyra is so excited to be serving the Green Mountain Audubon Center and building connections within the Huntington community and beyond.

Seasonal Interns/Volunteers: An intern or volunteer might also work with an Audubon Vermont staff member to teach Forest Playschool. Volunteers who work with students are vetted and must pass a background check before they can count towards our adult:child ratio. Most volunteers or interns are using this opportunity to gain hands-on learning about environmental education or want to continue working in education in some capacity.

Debbie Archer, Education Program Manager: After spending 3 years teaching outdoor education on the west coast in Alaska and Southern California, Debbie made a happy return to the east coast, joining the education team at the Green Mountain Audubon Center in 2015. With a M.S. in Environmental Science and experience as an educator, naturalist, and camp program manager, she has a passion for getting kids outside into nature and won't flinch at the opportunity to howl like a coyote or sign a song about a hippopotamus. She knows the importance of having the opportunity to have hands-on learning experiences where everything from the development of social skills to math thinking can occur. If Debbie was an animal, she would be a Musk Ox because they are the unicorns of the north.

Contact Information

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Online

Web: <http://vt.audubon.org/programs/forest-play-school>

Blog: http://vt.audubon.org/Forest_PreK_Blog