



A father and son catch fish on the Belle Fourche River in Crook County.

KICK THE KIDS OUTSIDE THIS

SUMMER

Wyoming a natural for endless summer outdoor opportunities

By Jacelyn Downey

Kids and families across the nation celebrated National Get Outdoors Day June 9.

This event encourages Americans, especially our youth, to seek healthy, active outdoor lifestyles and embrace parks, forests, refuges, and other public land and waters.

You may ask, "Do we need a special day to encourage folks to get outside?"

We apparently do.

Yesterday's youth probably had the chances to build a tree

house, plant a garden, go hunting and fishing with a family member, and to go camping in the summer. Unfortunately, not all of today's youth get those opportunities. Many spend more time watching the outdoors on TV than actually experiencing it. One study found the average American child spends more than six hours a day indoors staring at some type of screen.

The great news is Wyoming is a special place where there is still plenty of rural land, ranches, and forests for youth to see and in which to

recreate. However, with busy schedules, parents have difficulty finding the time to do everything they'd like during the busy summer months. Luckily, many agencies you might already be familiar with offer opportunities for kids to get outdoors and learn about Wyoming's resources, plants, animals, and recreational opportunities.

These groups often partner to provide camps, field trips, and special events. Take a look at some of the websites of these organizations to view events for youth and families.



Audubon

<http://rockies.audubon.org>

Bureau of Land Management

http://www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/resources/Environmental_Education.html

Natural Resources Conservation Service

<http://www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov/>

Science Kids

<http://www.science-kids.org>

State Parks

<http://wyoparks.state.wy.us/Kids/Index.aspx>

Teton Science School

http://www.tetonscience.org/index.cfm?id=summer_youth_education_programs

University of Wyoming

Extension (programs such as 4-H)

<http://www.uwyo.edu/4%2Dh/>

Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts

<http://www.conservewy.com/EDUCATION.htm>. Contact your county office for local details.

Wyoming Ag in the Classroom

<http://www.wyomingagclassroom.org/events.asp>

Wyoming Game and Fish Department

<http://wgfd.wyo.gov/web2011/education-1000452.aspx>

Wyoming Land Trust

<http://wyominglandtrust.org/join-us-events.shtml>

Wyoming Stock Growers Association

www.wysga.org/events.htm



This girl's chores include feeding the goats, fetching eggs from the coop, and helping with any outdoor tasks needed on the ranch.

This list is by no means comprehensive. Chances are your community offers other summer activities for youth through recreation centers, youth groups, YMCAs, and more. Many organizations listed above and others like Project Learning Tree (<http://www.wyomingplt.org>) offer summer workshops for teachers and those who work with youth.

If organized events are not your thing or don't fit into your schedule, there are still great ways to enjoy the Cowboy State. Try one or more of these this summer:

- **Go:** Outside. Check out Wyoming's State Public Lands. Go to <http://publiclands.org/explore/?plicstate=WY> to learn about access and how to hunt, fish, hike, and more on public lands. Also check out the Bighorn, Bridger-Teton, Medicine Bow, and Shoshone national forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland. Go to <http://www.fs.fed.us/> for more information.
- **Create:** An explorer's backpack. Kids will get a lot of use out of a backpack filled with tools to explore outside, even if just in a barnyard or backyard. Contents could include small fishnets for pond exploration; a notebook and pencils for drawing and journaling; binoculars; guides for identifying birds, plants, mammals, or tracks; and, lastly, a compass. If filling a backpack seems too expensive or time-consuming, Audubon loans backpacks to families filled with all the items listed and more. Contact jd-owney@audubon.org to borrow a backpack.
- **Plant:** A garden. A garden helps kids learn where food comes from – a simple activity many kids don't get a chance to experience firsthand. Children love seeing how a seed grows into something to eat. Contact a local University of Wyoming Extension Master Gardener for details about community gardens or visit the

Cheyenne Botanical Gardens (<http://www.botanic.org>) or visit barnyardsandbackyards.com for information to create a flower or vegetable garden.

- **Engage:** Your kids with chores. Chores mean more than helping wash dishes or make beds. Chores for a Wyoming kid may mean bottlefeeding a goat, feeding calves, opening gates, fixing fences, chopping thistles, weeding gardens, moving and working cows, picking up square bales, and the list goes on and on and on. Putting kids to work outside does more than just get the work done – it builds character, gets them out of house, and gives them a sense of purpose.
- **Camp:** Near or far. Hectic work schedules often leave parents



A camper gets familiar with one of Wyoming's pond ecosystem residents – a Leopard frog.

with little time for long trips in the summer. Pitch a tent in your backyard. Children enjoy the novelty of getting to sleep outdoors no matter if in Yellowstone or out back in the yard. Even if only for one night, getting to enjoy campfires or even microwave s'mores

while viewing the night sky is worth more than someone might think. Wyoming also has great state parks, places to camp, boat, fish, hike, and more. Check them out at <http://wyoparks.state.wy.us/Kids/Index.aspx>.

During summer break, many parents are left struggling with what to do with the kids. Why not get them outdoors? It's more than just fun; numerous studies show summer learning opportunities improve academic outcomes, and early and sustained learning opportunities lead to higher graduation rates and preparation rates for college.

Our kids will benefit greatly from exploring outside and profit from Wyoming's natural heritage, which is more than any screen has to offer.

Jacelyn Downey is a community naturalist with Audubon Rockies and can be reached at jdowney@audubon.org or (307) 756-3941, unless she happens to be outside hiking, camping, or boating with her husband and two daughters.



Dusty Downey, Audubon's community naturalist, takes a group of campers on a hike behind the Bradford-Britton Memorial and Museum near Big Horn. To visit, check out: www.bbmandm.org