

Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



Drawing by Kara Priest

EXPERIENCING NATURE



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

At Thorne Nature Experience we make a special effort to give youth meaningful experiences out in nature. In this way our students will often vividly remember in later years what they have experienced. I was looking back on some of the most meaningful impressions of nature that I had in my childhood. These definitely led me to be a “nature boy” and a lifetime of studying nature, and also teaching about it. Today I would like to tell some of my stories as I still remember them.

One of the earliest memories I have is of my godmother, “Ma” Hawkins, taking me by the hand and leading me down to a nearby creek where we fed her very tame, but wild, Mallard ducks. Later in my youth I was able to hatch from eggs some ducks of my very own.

I was lucky to live with my family on sixty acres of woods, meadows, streams, and even a lake, on the South Shore of Long Island, NY, out in the country 40 miles from New York City. I would often sit on the edge of the lake and watch the beautiful sunset colors. Often a Great Blue Heron would glide by close to me, silhouetted



Photo Courtesy of Thorne Nature Experience

A young Oak Thorne connecting to nature at the beach.

against the orange sky. That was always exciting!

When it rained I remember that one of my fun projects was making dams in our gravel road to divert the way the water flowed. This was “wild play” at its best, because I was really learning about the physics of gravity and water flow!

Many times, as I went to sleep in early summer when it was still light, there was a Wood Thrush that used to sing right outside my window. This is one of the most beautiful bird songs in the whole world. Even today, when I hear this bird song dubbed into a movie or on TV show, it takes me back to those early days.

My biology teacher, Frank Trevor, at Millbrook School in Millbrook, NY, would take us outside and teach us the various bird songs and calls, especially in the springtime when the male birds are singing to defend their territories and attract mates. I soon learned all the local birds by their songs!

Much later, when I was a Junior in Yale College, I was chosen to do the 1950 Breeding Bird Census of the 360-acre Audubon Center in Greenwich, CT. I went out at 5 a.m. each morning and recorded all the bird songs that I heard, covering 20 acres each day until I had done the entire center. A singing male bird meant a breeding pair!

One morning, when it was just beginning to get a little bit light, I was standing only three feet away from a big log. Suddenly a Ruffed Grouse flew in and landed on this very log and started to “drum” with its wings right in front of me. What an amazing experience this was! I stood very still and he didn’t notice me. Finally I had to scratch my itching nose and he flew away.

I learned how to fly-fish when I was a young teenager. One evening at dusk I was casting for trout with my cousin on Carmen’s River near Brookhaven, NY. Suddenly, as a flock of ducks flew by, a Peregrine Falcon (we used to call them Duck Hawks) swooped down and knocked one of the ducks right out of the air in front of me. That was my introduction to predator/prey relationships!

I feel lucky to have had these great experiences in nature and I hope you get a chance to have some special times in nature, too! When you do, be sure to keep a journal and write about them. Then someday, just like me, you may be writing for *Boulder County Kids!*

Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute) in Boulder. They have helped “connect youth to nature” for over 60 years! For information about their programs for kids, check their website at www.thornenature.org or please email info@thornenature.org or call (303) 499-3647, ext. 100.