

## The Nature Circle is Connecting Kids with the Outdoors at Long Hunter State Park

*Text by Nancy Dorman and Photo by Thurman Mullins*

Every Monday morning from August to May, an aquatic biologist from Mt. Juliet pulls into the parking lot at the Long Hunter State Park headquarters in Hermitage and unloads her car. Not far behind her other cars arrive, as dozens of young children spill down the sidewalk and into the meeting room at the park office. But this is not a traditional classroom, and Liana Dranes is not a formal classroom teacher. This is The Nature Circle: a weekly pre-school program for children aged three to five, who come specifically to learn about nature and all things that one might find at a state park.



The Nature Circle seeks to develop a curiosity and love of nature within young children. Each meeting includes a nature-themed topic with a story time, a hands-on activity and craft that is not only fun, but educational as well. As Ms. Dranes puts it, “I wanted to help reinforce that sense of respect and awe for nature that already exists within each of us. Toss in a mother’s love of story-time memories with her own children, a weakness for the arts and crafts isle, and last but not least, a lifelong love of science...and The Nature Circle was destined to be born!”

We have all heard the startling statistics about today’s children. The average screen-time use per day is nearly 7.5 hours. Childhood obesity has doubled and adolescent obesity has tripled over the past 20 years. In communities everywhere school field trip funding and support has been slashed. Yet we also all know the importance of connecting kids with the outdoors for the future of conservation and wildlife, and for the physical, mental, and spiritual health of our children. In order to connect with nature, to love, appreciate, and cherish its wonder and wildness, children need positive, recurring experiences outdoors beginning at a young age. The Nature Circle has value today and in the future as it helps to mold the next generation of park advocates who will remember their positive experiences of nature and science when they grow up.

According to Park Manager Thurman Mullins, “Ms. Liana knows the children and their families, and cares about each of them. She looks forward to her weekly programs as much as the children do, and it shows. The children know that each week’s class is important, but they also know each Nature Circle is going to be fun. Ms. Liana has a rare gift for making learning fun.” The Nature Circle started in August of 2009 and features approximately 44 sessions each year. Long Hunter State Park has a regular schedule of interpretive programs that in the past had been geared more toward older children and adults. This program is an opportunity to expand the range of ages that the park is able to reach. Ms. Dranes explains, “We create opportunities each week for young children to come together and learn about themselves too, as they discover about the habitats, needs, and behaviors of insects, plants and animals. Most importantly, at The Nature Circle children grow to understand how important it is for us to help take care of what we have.”

Remarkably, Dranes volunteers to lead the free 45-minute program each week. She saw the need for a preschool program realizing that the sooner children learn about a subject, the deeper impact it will have on them throughout life. This program is operated at a minimal cost to the tax-payer. Donations of materials and supplies are accepted to cover the expenses for the program. The park provides the space and regularly sends out press releases about past experiences and future opportunities. The primary sponsors are the Friends of Long Hunter State Park and ESC Lab Sciences of Mt. Juliet where Ms. Dranes works.

The children report that they love going and regularly bring in things that they have found to share with others. The format most weeks includes a themed show-and-tell (the children all bring something that has to do with the week's theme); a reading from a nonfiction book on the topic of the week; and an activity to illustrate the topic and a craft. Ms Dranes closes the session by reading a related picture book.

According to grandparent Barbara Triplett, "Children learn by example. If they observe their family members respecting nature and taking care of our natural resources, they will do likewise. They are our future and we will en-trust the future of our planet to them. Nature Circle is the ideal program to introduce preschoolers to these concepts. It is fun, hands-on, and relevant."

"Although the goal of the program is to get young children interested in nature and science, frequently parents state that they also learn something new," says Mullins. "The program has a ripple effect." As the preschooler becomes involved, so does the parent and other family members. Mullins reports that parents and children are frequently seen around the park exploring the trails on their own after the program. The Nature Circle inspires a greater appreciation for the park as families make both an emotional and intellectual connection with the resource. They go on to join the park friends group, volunteer for park clean-ups, and generally commit long-term support and appreciation for the park.

One morning a Nature Circle dad came in a shared a story about his little girl that has become Ms. Dranes' favorite. "Dad told me he was walking by his daughter's room over the weekend and saw her sitting on the floor with her baby brother. She had gathered around her some books, stuffed animals and dolls," she continued. As dad peeked in, he asked her what she was doing. She smiled sweetly and answered him: "We're playing Nature Circle, Daddy!"

Long Hunter State Park is located on J. Percy Priest Reservoir just 22 miles from downtown Nashville at 2910 Hobson Pike. Each Monday throughout the school year, Ms. Liana Dranes volunteers to lead the free 45-minute program for three to five-year-old children. For more information about this program and others at Long Hunter, contact the park at 615-885-2422 or visit the Web site: [www.tn.gov/environment/parks/LongHunter](http://www.tn.gov/environment/parks/LongHunter).

**(Nancy Dorman of Nashville works for Tennessee State Parks as the manager of the Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Education section. She also serves as a member of the organizing committee for the Every Child Outdoors Tennessee Coalition.)**