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# Guidelines For 4-H Nature Hikes

## A Natural Science Leader Guide

Nature hikes are available in all parts of our state and tie in with many different kinds of 4-H projects and youth activities.

Any responsible person can successfully lead one. Actually, the main characteristics of a successful hike are that the youngsters enjoy the activity, learn something, and return safely.

The following ideas are presented to help adults enjoy taking young people on a walk in the out-of-doors where they can become better acquainted with the natural world around them.

### Enjoying A Hike

Children love a hike. They respond with joy to space, fellowship, and the fun of action. Satisfying their curiosity about living and non-living things around them can add subtle pleasure that is a hidden bonus. Actually, it is difficult to take a group of youngsters on a hike into the woods without it becoming a nature hike, especially if the children have time to do a bit of looking, a bit of loafing, and a bit of relaxing to feel the impact of the natural world around them.

Most youngsters enjoy your approval or recognition. Be alert to let them carry some of your equipment, help you spot certain kinds of flowers, rocks, trees, or animals, and share responsibilities of keeping order on the trail. Recognizing a youngster's abilities to see and observe can give a real boost in the spirit and fun of hiking. On the other hand, too much bossing or talking can take all the pleasure from the outing and turn it into an ordeal. Relax and enjoy the wonders of nature with your club members.

### Learning Something

Seeing is the first step in introducing and acquainting our youngsters with many of our natural resources. A leader can soon learn what the group is interested in by watching their response to birds, frogs, salamanders, trees, mosses, cliffs, insects, etc. It is ideal when the guide is knowledgeable about wildlife, plants, soils, weather, geology, area history and Indian legends, but it is not essential. A leader can successfully teach many things



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by merely moving along at a pace that permits the youngsters to see, hear, feel and talk about the natural world around them. Seeing and watching for things is kind of a "catching behavior." The leader can give status and importance to observations by joining with the hikers in seeing things along the trail. Remember, too, lots of information is walking along with you. Be alert to use informed youngsters. Getting them to share what they know about objects of interest creates more enthusiasm and keener observations. This is the basis for more inquiry and detailed learning.

If possible, walk a ways before you begin stopping, looking and studying items of interest. This gives the youngsters a chance to use up some excess energy and welcome a stop. After that, make frequent short stops. Short ones can be informative and interesting.

### Helps for Learning

With youngsters it may be best that they have a few concrete objectives before they begin. People go on hikes for a variety of reasons including the sheer joy of being out-of-doors, a chance to learn, or both. It will help you as a leader to open their eyes and arouse their curiosity in advance--to give them something to look for. Furthermore, when you return from your sojourn, it is hoped that all of you will be ready to listen to resource people and check references to learn more about the living and non-living things you saw, smelled and studied in the out-of-doors. Much information is available from written materials and other people. The following are offered as resource suggestions:

1. The Pocket Guide for 4-H Hikes is a dandy, and everyone can have a copy. The vocabulary is such that you and the youngsters should become familiar with it before going on the hike. Perhaps this can be done at a regular 4-H meeting or when you are planning your hike. This excellent little booklet can be used in a number of ways to lead youngsters into learning about the out-of-doors.

If you have an exceptional group, the ideal way to use it for maximum learning is to have the pocket guide along on hikes and check off the items as they are seen or discussed. Since most youngsters aren't inclined to do a great deal of paper work, this may be difficult for a majority of them to do. However, it is an idea worth trying.

Perhaps you would rather check off the items halfway through, or you could wait until you have almost completed the hike before distributing the guides and marking the items you have seen.

Another good way is to do this as soon as you get back to tables at camp.

However you do it, the Pocket Guide for 4-H Hikes can give more purpose to your activity. Copies are available from your county Extension office.

2. Resource People are another source of help with subject matter for hikes. You or your club members may know local people who are knowledgeable about various facets of our natural resources. Usually, such people are happy to help others learn about their favorite topic. They should not be overlooked.

### Getting Back Safely

To have a good nature hike, the guide needs to bring back everybody that he or she started out with. With a small group this is relatively easy, but with ten or more, you need a reliable way of keeping track.

It is always a good idea to have other adults along, especially with a group of young hikers. An adult at the front of the group or line and one at the end will prevent anyone getting ahead of the group or being left behind. Others can be interspersed here and there if necessary.

The "buddy system" is one successful method of keeping track of hikers. They keep tabs on each other and being with a friend starts everyone off in a happy mood and ready to enjoy himself or herself.

Another simple method of organizing is to have the youngsters "count off". A casual way of doing this is to first start walking down the trail or straight through the woods. It may take a hundred yards, or a quarter mile, but soon the hikers will find their friends and form a pattern of compatibility. When this happens, stop for the count and record the number for later reference and verification if needed. If the number is large, dividing the hikers into groups, with a counselor in charge of each group, will also lessen your worries as a leader.

It is good insurance to have counselors take roll call both before and after the hike. Every so often (about every mile on a long hike with fifteen or more) also stop and have a "buddy check" or have the hikers "count off" with the group. This "nose count" serves two purposes: (1) If any are missing, you can start looking for them before they are really lost and (2) you will have a better idea of where to look if it is necessary.

### Points to Remember

1. Keep in control. This is a major challenge, but it's a must. Lead the group. To let some hikers walk ahead usually erodes discipline and control of the group.
2. Have a signalling device. An ordinary policeman's whistle can be used. Horn or gongs have also been helpful for assembling a group.
3. Have jobs ready. Some youngsters will have more curiosity than others. The ones that aren't interested can become a nuisance unless kept busy. Plan to have them carry equipment, specimens, lunches or extra clothing. Sometimes they also make good guides at forks in trails.
4. Be prepared for collecting. Since collecting seems to be a human trait, having equipment to carry specimens is handy. A few bottles or small containers will hold insects and other living, creeping, jumping forms. A simple plant press can be made by using pieces of cardboard and newspapers held together with one-inch strips of old innertube or belt. A jackknife will also be useful and a small hand lens for viewing various objects.
5. Don't "over-teach." Qualified and competent people sometimes bring dark clouds over a nature hike by trying to teach too much, too long, and in too great a detail. Teaching within a youngster's scope of understanding and aptitude is the number one challenge for a resource person on a nature hike. If not met, the group can become bored, and a bored group will soon require a kind of discipline that can take the pleasure out of the hike.
6. Enjoy yourself. It's contagious!



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Extension's 4-H/Youth program assists young people, their families, and adult volunteers to become productive and self-directing by developing their practical skills and knowledge. Professionals and volunteers together provide educational projects and activities in animal science, home economics, engineering, natural resources, and expressive arts.

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