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## When nature calls

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By NANCY KIMBALL

### 'Fledgies!' program introduces children to wild Montana

The Daily Inter Lake

It was a crisp October morning in the woods. Sunlight through the upper canopy to the needle-carpeted ground below.

Moms and their mittened toddlers gradually made their way to a small fire ring beside a teepee.

Some were combing the woods for kindling as the rest gathered for the morning's activities.

The bearded guy in the broad-brimmed hat poked a sturdy stick into the ground and piled twigs against its upward arch to form a tiny tent that eventually would house the tinder for fire.

A child or two wandered up to see what was going on.

Brett Holmquist, the fire-starter and leader of Ravenwood Natural Science Center's "Fledgies!" sessions, earlier had shaped a fire-nest from the wispy inner bark of cottonwood. He asked Fledgies! member Chase Coggins to sprinkle on some dried and crumbled flowers collected from an ocean spray bush. Then a bit of fluff from a dried cattail seed-head, and it was set aside, ready for use.

Holmquist opened another bag full of bark and asked Chase's little brother, Sully, and a couple friends whether they'd like to tear the papery bark into strips.

"Do you know what this is?" Holmquist asked.

"Birch bark!" came Chase's immediate answer. "I remember from last week."

That's right, Holmquist said, explaining that birch bark has something in it that likes to burn, something called resin. A few more children pitched in to



add birch-bark strips to the top of the twig tent.

Finally, everything was ready for the spark.

Holmquist knelt on an old coat-turned-ground cloth, positioned a block of wood at the toe of his boot, propped a thick peg into its tiny bowl carved near one end and looped the string of his fire-starter bow around the peg. Holding the bow by its curved stick backbone, he sawed back and forth, back and forth, twirling the peg deeper into the charred bowl.

By now, every child's attention was on the fire-maker.

Holmquist stopped the twirling peg and set it aside to reveal an orange-red spark glowing in the bowl. He picked up the fire-nest in one hand and the block of wood in the other and carefully tapped the tiny coal into the bed of cottony bark.

A wisp of smoke curled up from the nest.

Children shifted for a better view.

Holmquist blew a long, slow breath into it. The first tiny flames licked at the tinder as he cradled the nest in his hands, offering a chance for each child and mother to blow more strength into it.

"I like it when everybody blows their breath into it," Holmquist said. "That's my favorite thing when we have a fire."

Shared work, shared warmth.

It fits nicely with the ethic on which Holmquist and his wife, Laura, founded Ravenwood and after which they designed this fall's new offerings for young children.

"If you want nature to be important and develop a stewardship ethic, you've got to let them go," he said, let them be free to explore their surroundings in a safe setting.

Fledgies! parent/child sessions for 2- and 3-year-olds run from 9 to 10 a.m. every Tuesday in October and November. It's followed each week by 90 minutes of Fledgies! for Big Kids, children ages 4 and 5. With games, songs, stories, crafts, adventures and even frogs and bugs, they're all about exploring nature and nurturing curiosity. (To find out more, call 837-7279.)

Active times address everybody's need to exhale, he said, to stretch and run.

Calm times address the need to inhale, to look closely and reflect.

Half of what happens comes each week from Holmquist's planned activities. He follows themes — birds, shelters and forts, plants, animals, rocks and earth, water, fire, wind, reptiles and amphibians, trees. On this morning, he led a tracking expedition for plants, let them hide in a tiny fort last week's crew made from a hollow stump, showed them how to stretch their arms, backs and legs as if they were cattails growing from a seed. With magnifying loops, they explored the detail in lichens and sticks and each others' fingers.

The other half comes from nature as it presents itself and young minds explore it. This day, children scoured the forest floor to find leaves matching

an array that Holmquist revealed. By chance, they found a mountain harebell surprisingly blooming in the mid-fall chill and inspected its purplish-blue petals.

"That's when kids' passions begin to bloom," Holmquist said of the unexpected delights.

At each session he prompts gratitude for the things that support and delight them, asking whether anyone is thankful for anything in particular. He involves parents at every juncture, teaching them and building new ways to connect with their children. He sings song with them — "We'll build a house, house, house; For a mouse, mouse, mouse; It will keep her nice and warm ... "

Everything he does plays off what he calls "the perfect pattern ... a unique model, nature's blueprint." Things flow in circles — the four cardinal directions, sunrise to sunset, season to season. The east signifies sunrise and spring and its new birth. The south, daytime and summer and its hard work. The west, evening and fall and a celebration of its fruits. The north, night and winter and a time to take in the wisdom.

He aims for his lessons to follow that circle, to focus on that natural cycle in a child's day.

And to focus on the child.

"It's important to me that once everybody gathers, we stay in that kid frame of mind," he said. "I don't talk over the kids [to address moms standing behind]. I want that passion to flow."

But why target children this young with such focus?

"The two-word answer is 'brain patterning,'" he said. Expose toddlers to the natural world now, to that perfect pattern, and they can follow the trail for a lifetime.

"If you want a beautiful mind," Holmquist said, "take them into a beautiful place."

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