

Growing Green Kids

Guiding children outdoors is a gift for the whole family *By Matt Villano*

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF ICONIC SIGHTS you hope to witness when you visit Yosemite National Park with your kids. El Capitan is one, Yosemite Falls another. You might even get a glimpse of Half Dome.

A “giant” bobcat isn’t on the list.

Imagine my surprise, then, when my 4-year-old daughter and I were tossing rocks into the Merced River one evening last fall and she exclaimed, “Daddy! Look at the big kitty!”

The kitty *was* big. Bigger than a golden retriever—or so it seemed. The creature had been scouting for food along the riverbank when we spotted it. Then, just as my daughter exclaimed, the cat froze, staring at us with eyes the colors of moss and gold. I remember the colors because the cat was not far away.

I stood up, with my daughter behind me, to make sure the animal understood it should keep its distance, and after a moment the bobcat moved along in search of less garrulous company. The whole experience lasted 20 seconds. They are 20 seconds of Yosemite my daughter will remember forever.

Which was exactly the point of the trip: to create the memories in nature that will inspire my children to keep coming back.

Outdoor exploration always has been a big part of my life. Growing up near New York, I escaped to the woods of local state parks whenever possible. After college, I moved from the canyons of Manhattan to the comparative open spaces of Seattle. Since then, I’ve visited more than two dozen national parks. The grandeur therein has moderated my Type A personality, calmed me and helped me to appreciate every second of this life.

Yosemite is one of my faves, and I had been awaiting the time my oldest daughter would be able to appreciate the landscape that inspired conservationist John Muir 150 years ago. I didn’t want to postpone this too long: A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study found that the majority of young people today average more than seven hours a day of electronic media use, or 53 hours a week—more than a full-time job. While my wife and I significantly limit our kids’ screen time, it’s a cultural epidemic.

To be honest, I wasn’t sure how our kids would respond to four days in and around the wilderness.

Thankfully, they loved (most of) it. On a hike from our hotel,

The Ahwahnee, out to Mirror Lake, the girls stopped to feel moss on a granite boulder, then hopped off trail to find fairies hiding in the woods. On a bridge over a creek, they grabbed pinecones and played a version of “Pooh Sticks,” dropping the

cones over one side, then rushing to the other to see which would emerge first.

One night, after my older daughter went to bed early, I took my little one (age 2.5) out in the stroller, which inspired her to serenade the night sky (and me) with *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*.

Both girls had recalcitrant moments. They hate bugs, and there were lots of those. And even the most amiable toddlers can’t hike 2 miles without complaints.

But the lasting impression of our experience in Yosemite was exactly what we hoped it would be: avid curiosity. Since we returned, the girls have been asking when they can “have new adventures outside.” They’ve requested longer hikes. They want to camp. They even have suggested that we bring sketchpads to draw what we see.

The fact that they’re asking for more nature is a win. The fact that they want to slow down to experience it means they already understand something it took me decades to learn. That my wife and I get to provide this to them is a gift we all share together. I’ll remember these moments the rest of my life, too.

Matt Villano is a writer and editor in Healdsburg, California.



Matt Villano's family explores Yosemite National Park.



One day outside can make a huge difference in the lives of young Americans—and in American life. The National Park Trust’s annual event invites school pupils to plan their own park trip; visit kidstoparks.org.