



## Planning and Leading a Guided Nature Hike

A nature hike takes a different type of planning than a program held in one spot—you are moving! It takes practice to keep everyone's attention, and to keep them engaged as you go through your planned route. Here are some tips to help you plan and present a successful program:

### **Inventory the area.**

Before the day of your program, pre-hike and look at the route you'll be taking through the eyes of a first timer—what would you want to know more about? You can begin to lay out your hike, as an outline, listing each stop and the key ideas to be made at stops.

### **Be Prepared.**

Drop by the VN Center to get first aid kit, copies of *Images* magazine, park brochures, props, etc. Wear your VN t-shirt and nametag. Arrive at least 30 minutes before start time so you can observe any last minute changes and be ready to go when your first participants arrive.

### **Set Expectations.**

Briefly inform the group about distance, return time, restrooms, etc. Also, it's a good time to remind everyone to bring drinking water, walking sticks, raingear, etc. Review any pertinent park regulations, especially reminders not to disturb wildlife or collect anything, including wildflowers (it's better to mention this at the beginning than have to talk to a parent and child about it after the flowers have been picked).

### **Be Time Aware.**

You want to respect the time for your participants. Start on time as much as possible and be sure you end on time. Even if you don't cover everything you planned, your group members may have other commitments afterwards and you want them to hear your conclusion.

### **Don't Forget Your Theme.**

Even though a nature hike is more informal than other programs, you still need to have an overall theme. Be sure to do an introduction with your group at the beginning, introducing your theme, and acquainting them with the site.

### **Keep stops brief.**

Plan your first stop be close to the trailhead so that any latecomers can see you and join the group. Most stops should last five to seven minutes. None should go more than 10 minutes unless you are conducting an activity or allowing the group to sense their environment. People attend nature hikes to walk as well as to learn. Heat, terrain and physical conditions of participants also play a part in deciding where to stop and length of stops when actually on the nature hike.

### **Stay in front of the group**

The pace of the group should be determined by you. You should have at least two naturalists on your hike—one of you can stay at the very back of the group; your goal is to keep the group together. When you stop, wait for everyone to catch up so all may hear your presentation. Don't start talking until everyone arrives. If you are on steeper terrain, make note if participants in the back look like they need a few minutes to catch their breath. You can spend a couple of minutes chatting with the group, or asking questions about what they saw on the trail since the last stop. If children are present, they often like to run ahead. Remind them that you are the leader and that they need to stay behind the leader.

**Face the group and speak loud enough so everyone can hear you.**

When outdoors, it may be difficult to hear you because of wind or other activities taking place in the area. Most of us will need to speak louder than we normally do. You may also want to ask participants to move in closer while you're speaking. It's a good idea to occasionally ask the group if they can hear you. Remember to talk to the group—not to the object which is being interpreted. Look around and talk to the entire group. Look at people's faces—not past them to something unseen. Make sure you have plenty of water to drink also—talking loud makes you thirsty!

**Be sure everyone can see.**

Arrange each stop so everyone can fit. Invite children to come up front since adults can usually see over their heads. Respect other trail users by having your program participants step off the trail to allow others to pass.

**Know when to be quiet.**

Allow program participants to hear the sounds of nature. While observing wildlife, or a spectacular view, it is appropriate to be quiet and let everyone enjoy the moment. You can ask everyone to be quiet for a few minutes, and then ask them afterwards what they noticed. Their own observations may be the most remembered.

**Be flexible during the hike.**

Enjoy the surprises and “teachable moments” you may find along the way, whether on the trail or from a member of the group. If a bear shows up in the distance during your hike, stop your presentation or the walk for a moment and just enjoy the view! One of your participants may also have a great story to share about seeing a bear. Part of the fun of being an interpreter is learning from others and from your surroundings. If you weren't able to include something in your hike, keep it for next time you lead an interpretive program. One of the most difficult parts of planning a hike is preparing just enough. Remember, it is better to leave an audience hungry, than overfed!

**Have a definite conclusion.**

At the end of your planned hike, be sure to share a conclusion. A conclusion reinforces your program theme and wraps up the messages you've shared, and also helps participants know it is the end of the hike. A good ending or conclusion often brings applause and an appreciation of what they have learned, more than just having information trail off. If you are ending at a different spot than where you began, make sure they know how to get back to where they parked, or met, at the beginning.

**After Your Program**

- Return all props and materials to the VN Center at Walden Ponds as soon as possible.
- Complete feedback form from Discover that will be emailed to you the day after your program—report attendance, volunteer hours, and share comments.
- Return any evaluation forms received from the group to the Natural History Program Coordinator.
- Report any emergencies or unusual situations to the Natural History Program Coordinator or Natural History Program Specialist as soon as possible.