



# Natural Wonder

The natural world is good for your health, and may make parenting easier. Here are some tips on how to get out there.

*by Heather Doherty*



I read an article recently in which a parent claimed that time spent outdoors with her children seemed easier than parenting indoors. Really? Was that before or after their kid fell halfway into a pond and tearfully demanded an exit?

After my initial skepticism (based on the recent real-life incident described above), I stopped to consider my own experiences as a parent of two young children. Barring these kinds of missteps, I've noticed that when we're outside, they often (not always) stop complaining about being bored and demanding new things and activities. They become immersed in what's in front of them, making up games to go along with it.

Being well-fed and having warm clothes, of course, makes this scenario much more likely. Throw in a few tools like magnifying glasses or binoculars, and they're off.

The article I referred to above showcased the experiences of Liza Sullivan of the Alliance for Early Childhood. She claims that "It's very liberating to parent in the outdoors. You don't have to say, 'Be quiet.' You don't have to say 'Don't run.' Your relationship changes because you don't have to constantly be disciplining." While children will follow your lead if

you go outside with them, you might just find that they get lost in their own games, and you get a chance to sit down.

For children, the outdoors offer an unscripted environment where they are free to exercise their imaginations. As much as children love slides and benefit from physical activity at traditional playgrounds, they also need experiences where they decide how to interact and play. Through play, they work through problems and anxieties. Some doctors are even writing prescriptions for outside activity to address physical and mental health.

When we let kids play outside, we're also giving them the opportunity to build personal connections with nature. Unstructured free time and the presence of a mentor have been found to be the strongest influences on a child's likelihood of becoming interested in caring for their environment in adulthood. Though activities at school or elsewhere that teach stewardship are helpful, we must also give them opportunities to develop an affinity for nature through play, which creates the fertile ground for those lessons to take root.

Unstructured free play doesn't necessarily mean unsupervised play. If you are

with children walking in the woods or the backyard, it can mean simply letting go of your own agenda and letting them take the lead. You could also slowly build up time and situations where they do operate independently, which helps them quickly build self-confidence. If possible, let them play in the backyard and periodically check on them through the kitchen window.

Research continues to indicate that spending time in green space tends to make people more patient and cooperative. In his book *The Nature Principle*, well-known children-and-nature advocate Richard Louv states that "Nature improves clarity of thinking, increases productivity and physical health, calms one's natural rhythms, and generally puts people in a happier, freer more receptive state of mind. In other words, to experience our family members in nature is to experience them at their best."

## Adults need nature too

What's more calming than watching a sunset, or lapping waves, or bees visiting flowers? Psychology researchers have dubbed this state of mind "soft fascination," in which a person's mind freely observes and follows interests. This is very different than the focused, goal-

*Continued on page 4*

# Top 10 Things to Do With Family at the BFEC\*

\* or at many other wonderful places to get outside in Knox County and beyond.

"I'm in nature. Now what?" If you find yourself saying these words when you venture into greenspace, we're here to help! See the numbered map on the next page for suggested locations for these easy nature activities at the Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon College. While this list is a great place to start, don't stop here. Let your interests be the guide, or better yet, let children take the lead.

**1) Grab a pond net.** Four small ponds near the BFEC's Resource Center are surrounded by a split-rail fence and are teeming with life. We keep a few nets and a bucket near the entrance. With these in-hand, kids are enchanted by the hour in finding tadpoles and aquatic insects.



**2) Have a picnic.** While having a meal at the picnic shelter, enjoy the perfect view of two bird feeders next to our building, which are always full of visitors. Next, let the kids climb boulders in our kid's natural play area.



**3) Visit the GIANT sycamore.** Hike about 1/2 mile on our river trail to see the biggest tree on our preserve - a fantastic sycamore. Sycamores are Ohio's largest tree species, reaching up to 15 feet in diameter. This one isn't quite that large, but still impressive. Brave individuals may give their friends or children a boost up to reach its massive lowest branch.

**4) Skip stones.** Try skipping stones at this easy Kokosing River access. Or pick up stones and build a sculpture. Or dip your feet in. Or find a big leaf and see how far it will float down the river. The possibilities are endless.



**5) Catch salamanders and walk the creek.** This family fun requires hiking about 1 mile but it's well worth it. Park at the New Gambier Road lot and follow the New Gambier Loop Trail to the Bishop's Backbone Trail along Wolf Run. Stop at our big bridge over the creek (see dashed line over Wolf Run), then hop in the water for a cool summer walk. Turn over stones at the stream's edge to see salamanders. Check out #6 on your way back:

**6) Check out this boardwalk.** For some reason, boardwalks are kid magnets. This one (pictured right) will not disappoint - it walks over a wetland to a graceful white oak tree that is at least 250 years old, with limbs that sweep the ground to create a "tree room."



**7) Visit the garden.** In our native plant garden located next to the Resource Center and BFEC House, let kids follow paths, watch fish and frogs swim under the small waterfall in our pond, and marvel at butterflies flitting from flower to flower.

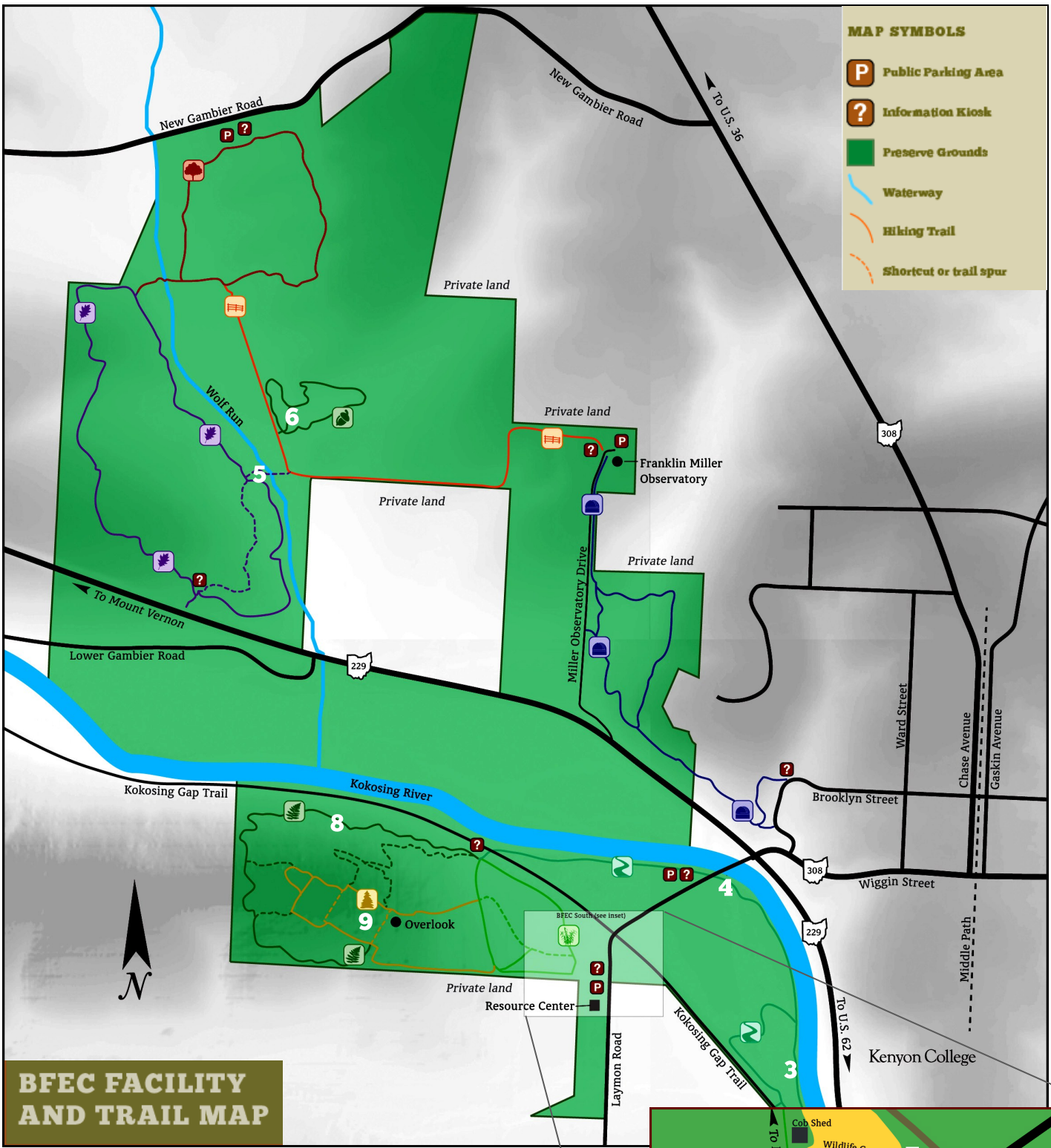


**8) Find a log to walk on or roll over.** Our fern trail's cool shade is a good choice in hot weather. Find a stable log and use it as a balance beam. Ask children to observe what lives on, in, and under it. Roll it over to discover scurrying bugs. Be sure to roll this mini piece of a habitat back in place when you're finished. Continue to #9, below.

**9) Build a fort.** Follow our fern trail about .5 miles to our pine woods for a perfectly magical fort building spot. Its deep shade makes it great owl habitat (barred owls are known to sleep here by day), and its Harry Potter-esque aura makes it perfect habitat for kid's play. Watch for poison ivy on the edge of the pine grove and invite your children to build with their bare hands (i.e. without string, which can be difficult for BFEC staff to deconstruct).

**10) Pick up a BFEC calendar.** Newsletters with calendars can be found at our Resource Center. Add an upcoming event to your calendar and plan to come back for a guided program to learn more.





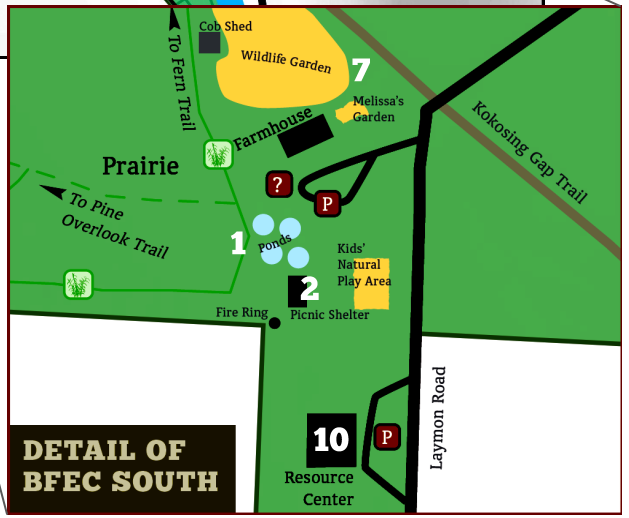
**MAP SYMBOLS**

<b>P</b>	Public Parking Area
<b>?</b>	Information Kiosk
<span style="background-color: green; color: green;"> </span>	Preserve Grounds
<span style="color: blue;">—</span>	Waterway
<span style="color: orange;">—</span>	Hiking Trail
<span style="color: orange; font-style: dashed;">—</span>	Shortcut or trail spur

**BFEC FACILITY AND TRAIL MAP**

The BFEC is located at 9781 Laymon Road, Gambier, four miles east of downtown Mount Vernon on SR229. Our 500 acre preserve, including seven miles of nature trail and native plant gardens, is open to the public, down to dusk. Pick up a complete trail map at our Resource Center, or visit [bfec.kenyon.edu](http://bfec.kenyon.edu).

- \* Other places to get outside in Knox County*
- **Knox County Park District** - [knoxcountyparks.org](http://knoxcountyparks.org). In addition to parks, check out the Kokosing Water Trail for access points to boat, fish, or swim.
  - **Kokosing Gap Trail** - [kokosinggaptrail.org](http://kokosinggaptrail.org)
  - **Heart of Ohio Trail** - [heartofohiotrail.org](http://heartofohiotrail.org)
  - **City of Mount Vernon parks** - [mountvernonohio.org/departments/public-parks](http://mountvernonohio.org/departments/public-parks)



**DETAIL OF BFEC SOUTH**

# Home Sweet Kokosing



by Jennifer Seeley '16

*Jennifer Seely, pictured here with Associate Professor of Anthropology Kimmie Murphy, is a senior anthropology major whose research took her out on the Kokosing River during the summer of 2015. She sought to understand what Knox County residents think about the river, plus research a new form of water pollution - microplastics - and how people might be motivated to take action.*

How do you connect with the Kokosing River? Some Knox County residents enjoy summer kayaking trips with big groups of friends, while others seek quiet alone time, just listening to the water. Some encounter it as they drive on the bridges over the river's many branches and creeks, while others get in the water as often as they can.

These responses aren't surprising, so why did I go to the trouble this past summer of surveying two-hundred-twenty and interviewing twenty-seven Knox County residents? I'm an Anthropology major at Kenyon, and this crazy broad discipline purports to study humanity in all its complexity, from primates and bones to food and rituals, including how people live in and connect to their environments.

I wanted to learn about Knox County residents' relationships with the Kokosing River as a prism, refracting the many ways they think about nature. I've been working with Professors Murphy and Schortman in Kenyon's Anthropology Department, and am currently writing a thesis about the project that will be available on Digital Kenyon at the end of this year.

Survey responses came from those who saw articles about my project in the Mount Vernon News and KnoxPages.com, paper copies distributed through the Knox County library system, and Kenyon employees who took the survey and forwarded the link to friends and family. Of Knox County residents who

responded to the survey, two thirds agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I am an environmentalist.' To be honest, I assume that there are as many definitions of environmentalism as there are residents of Knox County, Ohio (about 60,000). Environmentalism is connected with people's different ideas of how to manage natural resources, as well as how comfortable people feel taking on the label and identity with all its complex associations.

In thinking theoretically for my thesis, I reflected on the relationship between humans and the natural world and wondered whether there is a difference between them. A broad-minded physicist could point out that at a certain level, everything is merely energy slowed down as matter in an eons-long biogeochemical project of making up dinosaurs, ocean currents, earl grey tea, humans, and much, much more. But in our daily lives, it is more useful to think about humans and nature as distinct yet entangled in order to be reflective about how we use and preserve natural places.

I am amazed by how many ways we use the word 'natural.' The word 'natural' can describe old-growth trees, pulpy orange juice, a face free of make-up, a wild rushing river, someone who is good at something without trying, or an idyllic mountain lake. Nature often 'does its own thing' free of human intervention, like a stream flowing downhill guided by gravity.

Of twenty-seven interviewees, twenty-

five agreed that the Kokosing is currently in a natural state, and nineteen agreed that it is currently wild. Most think the river has been transformed by human action, and fewer think it *looks* like it has been transformed. For me, the most interesting part of this process was reading between the lines, because though most agree that the Kokosing River is in a natural state, they may not all agree on what that actually means. I didn't give interviewees definitions of the words, but rather listened to their reasons and beliefs to learn about their personal meanings.

Paradoxically, natural places – seen to be free of human control and intervention – take a lot of sound management in order to stay that way. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) State Scenic River designation is an important part of how the Kokosing River is managed, and I learned from surveys and interviews that not everyone knows what it does for our beautiful river.

Because of the designation, publically funded building projects need to be reviewed by the local community together with ODNR before they can be carried out. Program staff make their expertise available to property owners that border the river. And finally, the Scenic River designation holds the quality of discharge from places like the Mt. Vernon Wastewater Treatment plant to a high standard. All of these measures help to tangibly preserve and protect the Kokosing River and its banks, or riparian zone.

Beyond the hard work of the people at the wastewater treatment plant, there are some things that residents themselves can do to protect the health of our river. This summer, I also worked with Biology Professor Siobhan Fennessy to discern whether there is microplastic, or pieces of plastic smaller than 0.5 millimeter-spollution, in the Kokosing River. I'm still trying, because it takes stringent methods to be sure one way or the other. Regardless, I think it's worth it to be aware of the risks posed by invisible pollutants. Tiny pieces of plastic could be ingested by microorganisms in our waters, which you don't need a scientist to tell you isn't the healthiest snack for a tadpole. In the marine environment, microplastics have been shown to release and absorb chemical contaminants and work their way up the food chain.

There are lots of ways that tiny pieces of plastic can sneak into our river, such as polyester fibers from laundry lint, microbeads from facial cleansers, and little Styrofoam pellets that break down from bigger pieces. The good news is that you have control over some of them. Microbeads in face wash were just federally banned, but won't be off the shelves until 2017 – you can avoid face wash that contains polyethylene or polypropylene.

More broadly, it's worth considering how plastic litter from the Kokosing, much of which isn't purposeful, makes its way down to the Gulf of Mexico and affects people downstream.

A question I asked each interviewee was some variation of: How do you help someone become connected to nature? Most spoke of their belief in the importance of environmental education at an early age, like the BFEC's school field trip program for kids. Becoming connected to nature at an early age can translate into environmental stewardship as an adult.

Lastly, I asked interviewees: How can you create in someone an environmental awareness that impels to action? I take this phrasing from the Sacred Heart School I attended for middle and high school, one of whose goals was to educate to a *social* awareness that impels to action. Social and environmental awareness are often intertwined, and nationally and internationally, many disadvantaged social groups are expected to bear the brunt of environmental problems like toxic waste, unsafe outdoor work environments, air pollution, and of course, poor water quality. Awareness of these unequal patterns is the first step toward

helping the people working to resolve them.

What does all this mean for you, reader of the Brown Family Environmental Center newsletter? It means come on down to your river! There's no better place to feel connected to nature. And when you're not at the river, remember that you haven't actually left it – in Knox County, you're always a part of the Kokosing River watershed.



*Photo by [unclear]*

*'Natural Wonder,' continued from page*

oriented attention required while working at a computer screen to finish a report. Being in green spaces, or even looking at *pictures* of natural environments, offers a freedom from focused attention and stress that our brains need. And it is powerfully restorative of our mental capacity when its time to get back to that focused task.

Plenty of research also shows positive effects of green space on lowering blood sugar, blood pressure, and stress hormones. Studies have also begun correlating neighborhood green space with community-wide health benefits, some of which are as powerful predictors of health as unemployment. (See article at [marksdailyapple.com](http://marksdailyapple.com) titled '16 Ways Green Space Improves Your Life' for a review of recent literature).

**Build it and they will come**

If you find yourself at a loss for what to do once you reach your park destination, see page 2 for our list of fun kid activities to try out at the BFEC. But while making a trip to the BFEC to enjoy nature at our

expansive preserve is great, let's be honest; it's not something that's feasible weekly or even monthly for some of us.

What's even better is discovering nature in your own backyard or neighborhood on a more regular basis, especially considering that the American Association for Pediatrics recommends at least one hour of free play for children every day. Almost any yard is bound to have a lightning bug or two, or birds flying through that you might not have previously noticed. And while the cluster of trees or dry creek bed in the neighborhood doesn't seem like much to grown-ups, it can be as good as wilderness in the eyes of a child.

If your yard seems nature-poor, let us suggest native plants, which will have it buzzing with birds and butterflies in no time. Visit the BFEC's native plant garden to get ideas, or see our short list of ringers to the right.

If you plant shrubs, think about clustering them to create "secret" spaces for children. (You will feel like the kids are

safely playing in the backyard, they will feel like special agents.) Add stumps for seating, or for tipping to find beetles or salamanders underneath. Stop periodically to smell the flowers you plant; the whole family will be happy that you did.

*Photo by [unclear]*

**BACKYARD NATURE STARTS HERE**

While getting to a park for a nature-fix is great, creating nature in your backyard is even better. Here are a few plants that are ringers for bringing in the birds and butterflies.

- \* **Serviceberry:** a small tree with white flowers in April, followed by berries that people and birds find delicious. Enjoy visits by robins, bluebirds, and orioles.
- \* **Milkweed:** butterflies love the flowers, and monarchs require this plant for laying eggs. Look for "butterfly milkweed" (*asclepias tuberosa*) at nurseries, or come to the BFEC on May 21st to get your **FREE common milkweed plant** (see calendar page 6)!
- \* **Purple coneflower:** Another bee and butterfly favorite, plus gold finches dine on its seeds in winter.

# Calendar of Events

All events are free, open to the public, and start from the BFEC Resource Center unless stated otherwise.  
9781 Laymon Road, Gambier Ohio | 740-427-5050 | kerkhoffj@kenyon.edu | bfec.kenyon.edu

## CELEBRATE EARTH DAY!

### Sunday, April 17 - Kenyon Athletic Center

#### EARTH DAY CHALLENGE Half Marathon & 4 Mile Run/Walk

Participants of all abilities are invited to walk, run or a little of both for a half marathon or 4- miler. Race begins at 8am, then stay to enjoy post-race amenities and the Earth Day Festival. Info and registration at <http://www.racepenguin.com/event/earthdaychallenge/>

#### EARTH DAY FESTIVAL: Healthy People ~ Healthy World

Keep yourself and the planet healthy - two goals that go hand-in-hand! This FREE event uniquely brings together the best in local resources. From 10am - 2pm, enjoy exhibits, vendors, kids' activities, farm marketers and animals, information on gardening with native plants, live music & more.

Live in Mount Vernon? **BikeIt!** to the event on the Scenic Kokosing Gap Trail from the CA&C Depot on South Main Street and receive special give-aways. Everyone who attends the events will have the chance to WIN A BIKE from Why Not Cycling & Fitness. Details at [kenyon.edu/earthday](http://kenyon.edu/earthday).



## Spring Wild Edibles Hike

### Saturday, April 23, 1pm. Miller Observatory Trailhead

Join local self-sufficiency enthusiast Shawn Dailey for a hike to identify wild edible plants. The tour will start at the Miller Observatory and cover 2.5 miles of hilly terrain, followed by a wild-foods tasting. Bring water, hiking footwear, and an adventurous spirit. From downtown Mt. Vernon, travel 4 miles east on S.R. 229. Just before reaching Laymon Road, turn left on access road marked with observatory sign.

## Miller Observatory Open House

**Friday, April 29, 9am.** Enjoy the stars with Kenyon Physics Professor Paula Turner. Events are canceled in cloudy weather; email questions to [turnerp@kenyon.edu](mailto:turnerp@kenyon.edu). All ages welcome. Mark your calendars for summer open house dates: Friday, July 29th and Friday, August 26th. From downtown Mount Vernon, follow SR 229/Gambier St. east 4 miles. Turn left at observatory sign onto an access road prior to SR 308 intersection.

## The Great Migration Bird Walk

**Saturday, May 7, 9am.** Birds that wintered in the tropics are returning to their temperate homes in Ohio and points further north. If ever there is a time of year to grab binoculars, this is it! Join us for a leisurely hike in search of these species and enjoy spring wildflower along the way. Hiking boots recommended.

## Milkweed for Monarchs

**Saturday, May 21, 10am.** Join us in the garden for this kid-friendly event. Follow a scavenger hunt through our native plant garden to learn how it provides habitat, and take home a free common milkweed plant! Monarch butterfly populations are on the decline, but you can help by planting milkweed, which monarchs require for laying eggs. Make a label for your new plant and learn about how to make your yard butterfly-friendly.



## BFEC Nature Camps

Have fun while connecting with and learning about nature with hiking, creeking, games, art, and more.

**For 5-7 year old children:** Two sessions will be offered starting on June 6 & June 13 in partnership with the Science Play-Space Initiative (SPI). Camp runs 9am - noon, Monday through Friday. Cost is \$50, scholarships are available. Register at [spispot.org](http://spispot.org).

**For 8-11 year old children:** Two sessions will be offered:

\* July 5-9: held in partnership with SPI from 9am - noon daily. Cost is \$40, register at [spispot.org](http://spispot.org).

\* Aug 3-5: This camp will run from 9am - 4pm daily. Registration will open in May; call 740-427-5050.

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*\* In the office, on the trails and in the garden:* Beth Waller, Kathleen Dean

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*In Memory of* Suzie Bowden - Barry Bowden, BFEC Field Trip Fund

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After Kenyon Society



### Now is the time to join for 2016!

There are many reasons to give, including the satisfaction of knowing you're a part of critical education and conservation programs. Receive preferred access to events, a hard copy of our newsletters, and 10% discount on bird seed. Return the form below with your contribution or give online at [support-bfec.kenyon.edu](http://support-bfec.kenyon.edu). Thank you!

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Membership level: Student \_\_\_ \$20    Individual \_\_\_ \$35    Name \_\_\_\_\_ ✂

Family \_\_\_ \$50    Friend \_\_\_ \$100    Patron \_\_\_ \$250    Address \_\_\_\_\_

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**Mail to:** BFEC, P.O. Box 508, Gambier, Ohio 43022

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# Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon College

9781 Laymon Road, Gambier, Ohio 43022 ~ (740) 427-5050 ~ [bfec.kenyon.edu](http://bfec.kenyon.edu)



## *Our Mission*

The BFEC at Kenyon College exists to engage Central Ohioans of all ages with nature, and to support the goals of Kenyon College by conserving the natural diversity of the Kokosing River valley and providing opportunities for education and research.

## *Our Staff*

Heather Doherty, director  
David Heithaus, director of facilities

Jill Kerkhoff, facilities & volunteer coordinator  
Shane McGuire, land manager naturalist

## Upcoming Events

### Earth Day Festival

Sunday, April 17 | Kenyon Athletic Center | 10am - 2pm

- \* Earth Day Challenge 1/2 Marathon & 4 Miler at 8am
- \* Over 90 Exhibitors \* Live Music \* Kids' Activity Zone
- \* Local Artisans \* Farmers Market & Farm Animals \* Health Screenings
- \* Bike Maintenance Workshops \* WIN A BIKE from Y-Not Cycling!

*New this year:*

- \* **RideIt!** to the event on a KAT shuttle, or **BikeIt!** from Mount Vernon on the Kokosing Gap Trail!
- \* Details at [kenyon.edu/earthday](http://kenyon.edu/earthday)



**Brown Family Environmental Center**  
**at Kenyon College**  
P.O. Box 508, Gambier, Ohio 43022





