

PRAIRIE SCOUTS

Midwin for Kids urges
youngsters to
explore nature

READ ANNA TESAURO'S ARTICLE ON D6



Midwin intern Britany Block (back) helps to identify spiders during the two-hour spider hunt.



A group heads out on a spider hunt at the Midewin Tallgrass Prairie in Wilmington. PHOTOS BY ANNA TESAURO – SOUTHTOWNSTAR

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What has two body parts, eight legs and anywhere from six to eight eyes?

For the children who attended Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie's nature program on July 9, the answer is a no-brainer.

SPIDERS.

The sinister, fast-moving predator was the topic of a two-hour children's outdoor class at the Wilmington nature center.

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Midewin for Kids urges youngsters

This is another in an occasional series looking at the summer camp experience in the Southland.

BY ANNA TESAURO
STAFF WRITER

Britany Block and Dina Izenstark, summer interns and nature guides at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie led an outdoor hunt by a group of visitors to the Wilmington nature center July 9, first explaining the anatomy of spiders and the difference between funnel, sheet, orb and mesh spider webs.

With a handy worksheet, kids identify what-is-what on spiders, including eyes, legs, abdomen and spinneret.

Block shares that all spiders can create silk and while they give people quite the scare, the quick movers can't hurt us. "The spider is great for the environment, because it eats other bugs," she says.

Midewin intern Izenstark led the first two outdoor sessions and says Midewin's summer programs exist to make children "more aware of the web of life that exists around them, and that they share the environment with wildlife."

In recent weeks, prairie outings have discussed butterflies, bees and other pollinators as well as our web-spinning friends.

Opened in 1996, Midewin includes more than 20,000 acres of land, with 8,000 acres open to the public. The land was acquired from the Joliet Army Arsenal Ammunition plant and is the largest piece of protected open space in northern Illinois. It is the first national tallgrass prairie in the country.

As the children finished up their worksheet, Block offered up some more spider trivia.

"Did you guys know that spi-



Midewin intern Dina Izenstark (middle) points out a spider to children during a two-hour spider hunt at Midewin. PHOTOS BY ANNA TESAURO — SOUTHTOWNSTAR

ders, after mating, the female eats the male?" The young faces nod in agreement as if to say they already knew that and don't think it's gross.

Block then shares that the Harvestman or Daddy Long-Legs, are not spiders, as all spiders have two segments, a body

and a head. "Daddy Long-Legs have a round shape and long legs," she says.

10-year-old Jacob, from Aurora, first came to Midewin the week before with his grandmother, Lynn Michels, from Crest Hill. Jacob decided to come back with his grandma for today's program,

as he loves spiders. "They're creepy," he says.

"My favorite insect is spiders. The Mexican redknee tarantula is the most poisonous. That's one of the reasons I don't want to visit Mexico."

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Brothers Tom, 7, and Brandon, 12, are from Wilmington,

and have been coming to the various nature programs at Midwin since last year.

Their mother, Darla Neises, says her boys liked last year's outdoor nature classes and they keep coming back.

This summer, they've already learned about pollinators and a

variety of birds.

"There's so much that you think you know about nature, but when you come here you learn more. I planted a pollinator garden at my house," Brandon said.

That garden includes milkweed, sun flowers and rattlesnake master plants.

For today's adventure, each child is handed a butterfly net and told to "swoop" the tall grass in hopes of catching spiders.

With their nets in hand, the boys set out as 'spider hunters' on the newly opened Iron Bridge Trail Head, one of four trails that amount to over 20 miles of paved hiking, biking and horseback riding.

As everyone travels down the trail, Daddy Long-Legs, crickets, hopping spiders and even two praying mantis are unearthed.

With his spider guide in tow, Jacob swooshes dead brush in hopes of meeting a cobweb weaver, which likes dry locations. So far, he's come back empty handed.

As the hunt winds down, Tom says his favorite part of the session was the few spiders he caught, including the flesh-colored oblong running spider.

Brother Brandon says he liked finding the spiders that blended in. "I learned that spiders aren't really a mean type of animal. Actually, they help you. I learned you don't have to be afraid of spiders."

Those interested in the free children's classes can come out from 10 a.m. to noon July 23, or 26, Aug. 13 or 16 and Aug. 27 or 30.

Nature programs are free, but reservations can be made at (815) 423-2170. To learn more, www.fs.fed.us/mntnp/

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Midwin intern Dina Izenstark (middle) points out a spider to children during a two-hour spider hunt at Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie in Wilmington. PHOTOS BY ANNA TESAURO - SOUTHTOWNSTAR

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Midewin intern Britany Block holds a male praying mantis. Block led a spider hunt for young children at the Wilmington nature center and one child stumbled across the large green bug.