



Exploration and Fun for Preschool-Aged Children by Erin Johnson, Program Development Manager



While The Schuylkill Center offers many programs for adults and students, several of our special programs are created for our region's youngest citizens, our children.

Our *Seasonal Art Workshops for Children* and our ongoing *Nature Tots Programs* are specifically geared towards parent/child teams in order to foster an early familiarity with the natural world. During these programs, children are led into the natural world within a context of exploration, positivity, and observation. They are encouraged to interact with and react to nature as it presents itself during each season through nature walks geared especially for them.

Richard Louv's important book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* asserts that early interaction with nature can have a lasting positive influence on the well-being of a child that lasts through adulthood and that early exposure similarly inculcates a regard for the natural world in all of its permutations. Louv writes:

"Healing the broken bond between our young and nature is in our self-interest, not only because aesthetics or justice demand it, but also because our mental, physical, and spiritual health depend upon it."

Within the urban area we define as Philadelphia, communities of native flora and fauna have persisted for thousands of years. At home we may be living among concrete structures, and within the walls of our homes or apartments. Yet nature presents itself again and again, even here, where the native woodlands have largely been replaced by our own communities. Even yesterday, as I walked home from some errands, I saw a puddle of water forming on an otherwise dry sidewalk. Upon looking up, I discovered three small birds, bathing in a pool of water that had collected at the corner of a gutter. Through their resourcefulness, creativity and awareness, these birds were persisting in a concrete bound world.

The qualities displayed by the birds and other natural teachers are the very same qualities we seek to introduce in our programs for pre-school aged children—to be able to see the impact of natural systems everywhere they look, even in the most heavily constructed and populated areas of our region. And not only do we seek to enhance their awareness of the natural world around them, but also to create a familiarity with it, so that as they grow and become adults, they will also see elements of that world within themselves, to feel connected to it, and because of that a sense of well-being and belonging.