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NATURE™

FALL/WINTER 2025

EXPLORING THE
CLASSROOM
WITHOUT
WALLS

DODGE NATURE CENTER AND PRESCHOOL



CAMPERS AT PLAY, MINDS AT WORK

“Who wants a tasty sword?” Naturalist Mick Garrett (pictured top left) calls out to his campers. It’s the last day of Guardians of Dodge summer camp, and “tasty swords”, aka freeze pops, are the perfect parting treat on a hot July day.

Colorful foam swords and shields lay scattered on the ground as campers break for their treat. These third through fifth graders have been playing hard for four days.

As guardians of Dodge, campers “forged” their own foam weapons with pool noodles & duct tape and fought epic (but friendly) battles. They’ve also identified wild edible plants, built shelters, experimented with the flow of water, and sparked fires.

Dodge camps are less structured around school curriculum than field trips at the nature center. But learning is always happening.

“Environmental education is such a broad term,” Mick explains. “Elements like play, crafting, and fantasy all facilitate immersion and learning in the natural world.”

Dodge Nature Center has been offering camps for more than 30 years. Nearly 900 kids attend camp every year.

Naturalists have honed what works best for camp—like simple activities that can be adapted to the needs of all campers—and how to weave in their own interests, so camp feels alive with curiosity and excitement.

“The beautiful thing about teaching at Dodge is the creative freedom we have as staff. We get to build camps around our favorite stories and topics,” shares Naturalist Mary Dybvig.

Mary has developed wildly imaginative and whimsical camps, from themes of Alice in Wonderland to throwing a birthday party for Dodge’s beloved bullsnake, Bowtie.

“Campers are way more excited and engaged when we’re excited and engaged, too,” Mary continues. “That’s when learning happens. I see their imaginations bloom and their love for nature take root in their own unique ways.”

Camp parent and Preschool Teacher Melissa Tobias knows well the magic of Dodge camp. Her daughter Eleanor attended Mick’s Guardians of Dodge camp this year.

“Eleanor has absolutely loved her experience,” says Melissa. “Each day she excitedly shared stories and new facts that lasted the whole car ride home.”

“She got dirty and soaked, came home with a beloved foam sword, and left with her imagination and love of the outdoors fully sparked.”

Melissa’s only complaint? “We wish camp lasted longer than a week!”

Send your school-age child to camp at Dodge! Explore our camp offerings at DodgeNatureCenter.org/Camps.

Left: Pool noodle and duct tape swords crafted by summer campers laying on a picnic table between battles. **Middle:** Campers Amrita (left) and Eleanor (right) enjoying freeze pops after a full day of play. **Right:** Campers chasing each other in a swordplay game.

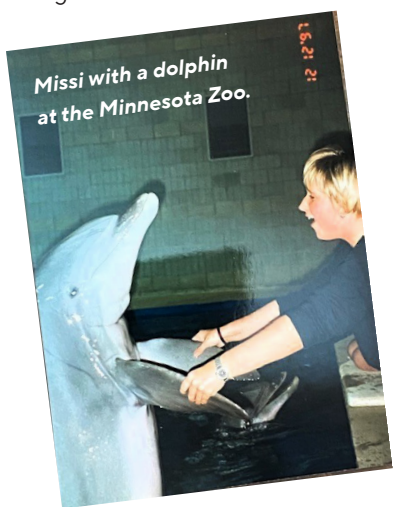




Meet Missi, Dodge's New Executive Director

Dear Dodge community,

I'm thrilled to step into the role of Executive Director at Dodge Nature Center and Preschool. For more than twenty years, I've had the privilege of working in nonprofits that bring people together—through environmental education, youth development, and community connection—and I'm eager to bring that experience and passion to Dodge.



My journey began as an educator at the Minnesota Zoo, where I first discovered my calling: connecting people, especially young people, with the wonders of the natural world. That early spark led to a 17-year tenure with the Girl Scouts of Minnesota and Wisconsin River Valleys, where I rose to Vice President of Funded Initiatives, advancing strategic planning, youth programming, fundraising, and volunteer engagement.

I later served as Senior Philanthropy Officer at the Fairview Foundation and as Executive Director of the American Lung Association of Minnesota. Most recently, at Genesys Works, I held leadership roles as Director of Advancement and Director of People & Operations.

No matter the role, my focus has always been on creating opportunities for young people and strengthening the mission-driven organizations that make those opportunities possible.

I'm honored to join the Dodge team and carry forward its extraordinary legacy of environmental education. I look forward to working with the staff, board, and community to keep curiosity and connection to nature thriving for generations to come.

I can't wait to meet you!

Missi Arens

Missi Arens



Nature Activities

OCTOBER 2025 - JANUARY 2026

For activity details and registration, visit DodgeNatureCenter.org/Activities

OCTOBER

16, 17	Fall Break Camps*^	Grades K-8
16-23	Trivia on the Trails: Bats^	All Ages
18	Personal Pumpkin Pie*	Families
21	Women in the Woods: Cryptids^	Adults 21+
20, 27	Girls Explore Science: Autumn Adventures^	Grades 5-8
24-26	Yakutian Knife Workshop with Coal Forge*	Adults 18+
25	Halloween Extravaganza*	All Ages

Family-friendly fun awaits boo!

Trick-or-Treat Trail
Wagon Rides
Animal Encounters
Axe Throwing
Apple Slingshot



\$8 Tickets: DODGENATURECENTER.ORG/Halloween

NOVEMBER

3, 10	Girls Explore Science: Autumn Adventures^	Grades 5-8
4	Nature After Dinner: Full Moon Hike^	All Ages
5	Full Moon Forest Bathing^	Adults 16+
13	Pride Outside^	Grades 5-12
21	Nature Tots: Animal Fun^	16 mo.-3 years old
27-28	OFFICES CLOSED, TRAILS OPEN	

DECEMBER

6	Survivor Kids: Outdoor Adventure Skills*	Ages 7-12
20	Winter Solstice Bonfire^	All Ages
24-25, 31	OFFICES CLOSED, TRAILS OPEN	

JANUARY

1	OFFICES CLOSED, TRAILS OPEN	
13	Evening with an Owl: Paint + Portraits^	Ages 10+
24	Snowshoe at Shepard Farm*	Ages 10+

*Located at Shepard Farm in Cottage Grove

^Located at the Main Property in West St. Paul



EVERY BRAIN BELONGS OUTDOORS

Time spent in nature offers physical and mental benefits for people of all ages. For students who identify as neurodivergent, outdoor learning is more than beneficial—it’s transformative.

“In a traditional classroom setting, success is measured by a rubric,” Michael Harrison, Naturalist and Elementary Liaison, explains. “Outdoor learning offers new ways for neurodivergent students to feel successful and build confidence.”

The term neurodivergent describes people whose brains work, learn, or behave differently than what’s considered “typical”. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are examples of neurotypes that fall under the umbrella of neurodivergence.

About one in five children who take part in a Dodge program, whether at the nature center or in their school classroom, have higher support needs. Meeting students where they are is at the heart of how naturalists teach.

Michael has spent years supporting neurodivergent students, intentionally designing lessons to meet their needs—smaller groups, sensory-friendly activities, flexibility in participation, and the freedom to move rather than sitting at a desk. The outdoor classroom naturally complements this approach.

“There’s an element of choice and movement,” Michael says. “When we’re teaching outside in the real world, physically being able to do something, see something, feel something—that’s where learning clicks.”

Michael identifies as neurodivergent himself; he has ADHD. For him, this is a strength in the classroom.

“I’m very honest with kids; I don’t hide it.” Michael shares. “It helps me teach with more empathy and connect with them. What you’re struggling with is something my brain struggles with, too.”

Building relationships through repeated visits is another way Dodge supports students in meaningful ways. Over in Bloomington, Naturalist Pam is doing exactly that with Special Education Teacher Sara Gokey’s classroom.

A standard Dodge outreach program is usually just a one-time visit. Sara knew her students would need more time to engage with and fully benefit from a nature program.

“Pam visits four different times which allows her to get to know the students,” Sara explains. “I can tell her about their needs and help her understand when students are ready to engage.”

On each outreach, Pam introduces a new animal: turtles the first visit, frogs and salamanders the next, then snakes, and ending with chickens (a classroom favorite). The big finale is a field trip to Dodge in spring for a farm tour.

Sara sees how the groundwork laid by Pam’s visits comes to fruition on the field trip.

“The best part of working with Dodge is seeing my students grow,” Sara says. “I have my students for multiple years—some won’t enter the barn until their second or third year. When they finally do, it’s a milestone.”

The impact of outdoor learning for neurodivergent students goes beyond what teachers see in a single classroom. Parent Ted Hall describes how Dodge has made a difference for his daughter.

“Our bright-eyed, adventure-seeking daughter has high energy and ADHD. Emotional regulation is tough,” Ted explains. “Dodge has helped reinforce her confidence and competence—two traits that are among the most difficult to foster in a child with ADHD. We go home with a happy, grounded girl.”

Connect more kids to nature! \$10 sends a student on a field trip; \$250 funds an outreach program. Give online at DodgeNatureCenter.org/Donate.

Michael leading a group of students outdoors at Crestview Elementary School in Cottage Grove.

A chicken sitting on a student’s communication device in Sara Gokey’s classroom during a visit from Pam.



THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING DODGE!

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