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## It's the Little Things in Life

### Next Generation

By Barbara Bray – Oakland (MI) Chapter



Life today is filled with big things – super-sized sodas, big pickup trucks with extra powerful engines, movies with multi-million-dollar special effects, amusement parks with not just one, but a dozen screaming roller coasters, and so on. With this world we have created, how do we distract our children long enough to see beyond the flashing lights and enticing sounds that are constantly drawing them away? The hum of a bee or the pillowy soft fuzz of the thimbleweed stretched out

waiting for a breeze to snatch it away are surely experiences that can't compete with modern-day amusements. Or can they?

My own quest to bring my children closer to the natural world has been at times frustrating and at other times very rewarding. One of the tricks that I have learned is very simple – you do not need to plan an elaborate, well-thought-out nature hike for your children, you just need to get them outside. When they are outside, there is almost always something happening around them. Maybe their ball bounces away into a patch of weeds. When they stop to retrieve it, they might be surprised to see a grasshopper jump out of the way, or a bubbly mass on the stem of a plant. Soon, they come running back asking all sorts of interesting questions such as, "What does the grasshopper eat?" Or, "Why are there bubbles on that plant?" At this point, their minds are open to the mysteries of the natural world, and their attention is focused on seeing things on a different scale. They can be shown the leaf with the munched edges and the spittlebug in the middle of its frothy home.

One of my favorite experiences was an early fall walk that I took with my daughter, who was four at the time, on a nature trail close to our home. The leaves on the trees were starting to turn colors and the asters and goldenrods were still in bloom. Above the treetops, several geese glided by on their way to some nearby marsh or pond. As we walked along the trail, soaking up the sights and sounds of fall, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, a strangely shaped leaf. We stopped walking. To my surprise, the odd leaf was not a leaf at all, but a small bird! The bird was lying upside down with its wings awkwardly spread out. Its feathers were tangled up in the small triangular seeds of a tick trefoil plant (*Desmodium* spp.), Every time the bird tried to move, even a little bit, more of the

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jointed pods would stick to the bird's feathers. Running out of energy, the bird stopped moving. I carefully pulled the small bird out of the plant and held it in my hands. It was a ruby-crowned kinglet, a very small, olive-gray colored bird with a small red patch on the top of its head. I showed it to my daughter and she gazed at it with sheer wonder as if she couldn't believe that it was real. Then suddenly the kinglet squeezed out of my hands and flew up into a nearby tree.

Recently my daughter showed me a feather she had found on the ground. And she said "Mom, remember the little bird with the red hat that we saved from the sticky plant?" Not only had she seen the feather lying on the ground, but she had related it to the kinglet, the *Desmodium*, and its habitat. For my part, I was pleased to note her awareness.