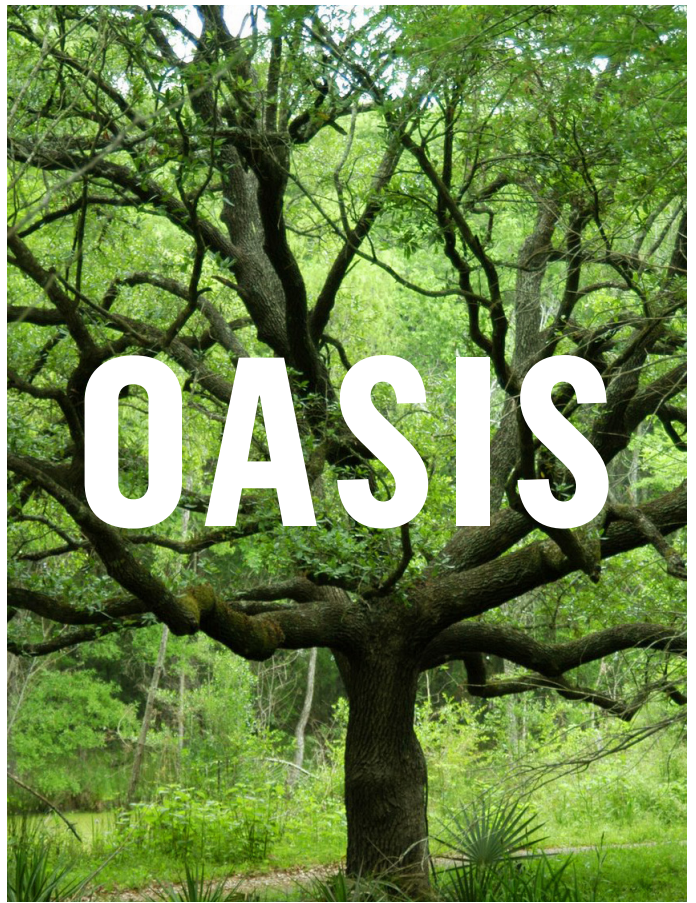


URBAN

OASIS



Here's the really great thing about nature centers: They offer the best features of parks, zoos, and museums all in one place. Way more than just a walk in the woods, these educational institutions get kids up close and personal with the animals and plants that call them home. And you don't need to head way out into the country to reap their rewards—many are located in protected lands smack-dab in the middle of urban areas. Check out five of the most kid-friendly options.

BY SUZAN L. JACKSON

BUTTERFLY: GETTY IMAGES

BLUFF LAKE NATURE CENTER

Denver

This western city's largest open space gives you a chance to enjoy the outdoors in five distinct habitats: lake, wetlands, short-grass prairie, riverbanks, and wetland woodland. This means that your family can catch a glimpse of a huge variety of creatures—from beavers to owls to foxes. Bonus: The center's website (blufflake.org) features videos from its wildlife cameras, so kids can check out their new furry friends long after they've gone home. Also available: preschool programs, family exploration hikes, and bird walks, as well as sunset viewings by the lake.



EL DORADO NATURE CENTER

Long Beach, CA

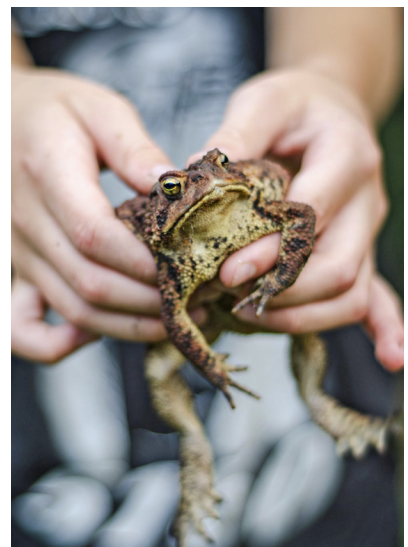
Built in the 1960s, this 105-acre haven of natural beauty features miles of hiking trails that bend around two lakes, a stream, and through forests that are home to all kinds of feathered, furred, and scaled friends for your kids to spot. The visitor center is also a big hit, with hands-on exhibits, an insect zoo, a gift shop, and a wildlife art gallery to explore. Or sign up for family programs such as animal habitat tours, bird-watching walks, a nature sensory event for preschoolers, and more. (Plus, file this away for next year: The center has expansive summer-camp options for kids ages 3 to 8.)



CINCINNATI NATURE CENTER

Cincinnati

Mother Nature has been extra-good to Cincinnati, with two beautiful locations for its nature center—Rowe Woods in Milford and Long Branch Farm & Trails in Goshen—which together provide 1,600 acres of forests, fields, streams, and ponds, with many miles of hiking trails. But the pièce de résistance for younger nature lovers is really the PlayScape natural playground, where kids are encouraged to engage with nature as they dig, pick flowers, splash in a stream, and more. Also seriously cool: a daily nature-focused preschool, bird-watching programs, and guided full-moon walks.



STAMFORD MUSEUM & NATURE CENTER

Stamford, CT

No need to party till the cows come home—they're already here! Kids love hanging out with the animals at Heckscher Farm at this 118-acre nature center in the middle of the state's third-largest city. The whole family will also enjoy exhibits on history, science, and pop culture in the museum. And don't forget to stick around after dark and try to spot constellations and planets with the observatory's 22-inch research telescope. More than 80 forested acres of trails and family festivals in March, May, and October provide extra fun!



TACOMA NATURE CENTER

Tacoma, WA

The Tacoma Nature Center features 71 acres of protected land, wetlands, and forests. Start with a walk around 17-acre Snake Lake, which gets its name from its long and curvy shape. As you cross the trail's first bridge, be on the lookout for the turtles and ducks that like to use the area's floating logs to catch some sun during spring, summer, and early fall. Once you've completed the loop, head over to the Discovery Pond area, where kids can enjoy nature as they climb into a tree house, slide down a hollow log, and scramble across boulders.