

NATURALLY: Deepen your relationship with White's Woods through 'Sit Spot' technique

- By DR. DANA DRISCOLL Special to the Gazette
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Submitted photo

Current statistics from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency suggest that Americans spend almost no time outside.

On average, an American adult spends 93% of their time indoors, including 87% in buildings/houses and 6% in cars. A child growing up in the United States today spends over seven hours in front of a screen and only four to seven minutes a day outside.

And yet, studies show that time spent outdoors can substantially improve one's physical and mental health. Spending time in places like White's Woods can be so beneficial to us. Let me share one technique to enjoy in outdoor places like White's Woods — the Sit Spot.

The Sit Spot is a simple practice where you go regularly, every day or every week, to the same place in an outdoor location, sit and observe using all of your senses. The Sit Spot is a technique of nature awareness first popularized by Jon Young through the Wilderness Awareness School in Washington state. While it appears quite simple — and in many ways *is* quite simple — it can lead to profound and deepening connections with nature and build your knowledge and interaction with our local ecosystem.

Find your Sit Spot by choosing a place outdoors that is easily accessible as part of your normal pattern. You will want to visit your Sit Spot at least once a day or once a week. Once you have found your spot, you can observe in a variety of ways.

First is a sensory meditation, opening up to observe with all five senses. Close your eyes and pay attention to what you hear — birds chirping, the wind blowing through the trees, branches banging together. Keep your eyes closed and pay attention to what you smell — the smell of leaves breaking down into soil, the pollen on the wind. Touch the stone you are sitting on, feel the rough bark of the tulip poplars as you interact with the space. Open your eyes and observe in all directions. Each of our senses has something to offer us.

Focus on the minute details of something. For this, you might choose a single leaf, a single flower, a single small drip or eddy of a stream — whatever catches your eye. If you do this with various plant, insect, and fungal life in your Sit Spot, soon everything there will be like an old friend to you.

Stillness is another part of the Sit Spot practice. The Sit Spot technique asks us to slow down and be present with the land, to reduce our pace to that of nature. When you sit still and simply are present, you become part of the landscape rather than separate from it.

Being part of the landscape is critically important to see animal life. Humans are often very noisy, and when you spend all of your time walking or hiking through the wilds, certain animals or birds signal a warning and the forest life goes into hiding. When you sit still, you will have a chance to see a lot more animal activity. They will become accustomed to your presence, and you, by sitting still and quiet, become *part of the land* rather than simply *traveling through it*.

You can deepen your Sit Spot practice by doing a nature journal, photo journal, or by documenting your practice through social media. You might also want to bring field guides so that you can start to identify what you see.

Finally, consider visiting your Sit Spot at various times of day and in different types of weather. What does it look like in the rain? After snowfall? On a hot summer day? In the morning, daytime, or as the sun is setting? Part of the power of the Sit Spot practice is being able to observe and interact in the spot regularly throughout the seasons.

The Sit Spot practice is a wonderful way to get closer to nature. Try Sit Spot in any of our beautiful parks in Indiana County and see wildlife and the constant cycle of nature.

Dr. Dana Driscoll, a professor of English at IUP, has been teaching wild food foraging, herbalism and sustainable living for more than 10 years.

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.

