

# Using technology to connect with nature

Fields, Rivers & Streams – February column

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Many of us today have an array of screens to peer into for entertainment whether that be a TV, cell phone, tablet or computer.

Technology's boom in recent years has made it more difficult to not only get kids outside but adults as well. Screen time consumes much of our work and personal lives.

This has created even more of a disconnect from our natural world – the great outdoors – which, not too long ago, were a major source of entertainment for kids and adults alike. Fishing, swimming, wading, boating, paddling and exploring.

While technology is drawing more of us away from the outdoors, we can use technology to help us connect to and appreciate the beauty of nature.

This past Saturday, I took my 7-year-old daughter Aubrey out with a camera to take pictures of nature along the Cedar River State Water Trail behind Austin's Marcusen Park baseball stadium. I mainly just wanted an excuse to get out of the house to enjoy the unseasonably warm, sunny weather for February in Minnesota.

Boy, did we end up getting way more than we expected out of the hour we spent along the river, and much of the experience was enhanced through the use of a camera and smartphone.

Immediately upon getting out of the car, we found a tree with a large chunk missing from its trunk and a heap of wood shavings at its base. All of this was the unfortunate work of beavers. We photographed it from different angles.

We then noticed various mallard ducks hanging out along the river's shoreline and enjoying the ease of riding the Cedar River's stronger current from snow melt. I showed my daughter how to use the camera's zoom lens to get in-focus pictures of the ducks and discussed how some were blending in too much with the riverbank.

We walked down to the shoreline to set up an up-close angle for one of the "Water Wednesday" videos I create weekly for the Cedar River Watershed District's Facebook page. The goal of the recurring video post is to showcase the beauty and relaxing benefits of the Cedar River and other local waterways.

Through the video series, I aim to raise the public's appreciation and awareness for the waterways and have them see our streams from a new perspective, such as the view you only can from holding a camera right above the water. The relaxing views and sounds of flowing water and surrounding wildlife are the only content of the 1-minute videos.

As we tried to refrain from making any sounds while shooting the video Saturday, we enjoyed the sounds of birds, ducks and a gang of Canadian geese starting to fly in. Aubrey then used my smartphone as well to take pictures of the river and wildlife.

Just as we were thinking about moving on to Austin Mill Pond downtown, we did a double-take at movement coming around the river bend. Two kayakers (Jay and Lisa Morehouse of Brownsdale) were paddling our way in handmade, wooden kayaks built by Jay.

Pretty incredible to see kayakers on open water in mid-February but it was a beautiful day and good river conditions for them to paddle down to the state walk-in access three river miles south of Marcusen Park.

After greeting them and taking pictures as they paddled around the next bend, Aubrey and I drove to Austin Mill Pond. We found a huge flock of geese there enjoying an icy “beach” on both sides of an open channel of the Cedar River.

Six people were having watching and listening to the geese from the Mill Pond’s fishing pier. Aubrey and I ventured out there as well and found different angles with the camera to capture artistic images with streaks of white and blue from the ice, snow and water dotted with black and gray from the geese.

We took video of two geese paddling through the open water and hopping up onto the ice. We laughed about things we observed with the geese and raved about some of the images we created.

Technology and the outdoors don’t have to be separated. Part of the fun of using technology in the outdoors is being able to enjoy the scenery again later as a photo or video and, with a zoom lens, seeing everything in greater detail, such as the feathers and colors of ducks. It also provides a fun challenge to try to capture a good picture of geese and ducks in flight.

It also can be a useful tool when you’re out exploring. Last spring, my coworker James Fett and I checked out part of the state’s Ramsey Mill Pond Wildlife Management Area north of Austin and used an app on his smartphone to determine a colorful wildflower we had stumbled upon.

My time outdoors with my daughter last weekend was a reminder of how interesting and enjoyable it can be to explore nature, especially with a camera in hand to help capture the beauty and, in turn, make you pay more attention to all that there is to see and hear.

It proved a great way to hang out and connect with my daughter, and I can’t wait to get outdoors again with her to explore and photograph nature.

*Mower SWCD provides technical assistance to landowners with conservation practices that protect land and water resources. SWCD also administers the Cedar River Watershed District to improve water quality and reduce flooding. This column runs monthly. For more, visit the Mower SWCD and CRWD websites and Facebook pages. Comments can be sent to [tim.ruzek@mowerswcd.org](mailto:tim.ruzek@mowerswcd.org).*