Getting Attuned to the Dark

The world is full of magic things,
patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.
W.B. Yeats

In the wild, there is an eternal conflict between the hunter and the hunted, and creatures have evolved over the millennia to be the victor in this deadly game. Whether predator or prey, wild creatures have found ways to remain unseen when needed and the dark is an ideal environment in which to conceal oneself. This means you'll need to attune your senses to the subtle qualities of the night-time world to uncover the nocturnal animals hidden by darkness. This chapter features activities and games to help a group 'get in the zone' for paying attention in the outdoors with heightened awareness and moving silently along a trail at night.

If your group is new to night-time activities, try some of these at dusk to start, before all daylight has faded away. Remember, for humans, the coming of night traditionally ushered in the fear and trepidation of known and unknown threats. In many ways, though, dusk is the richest time to be out and about, present for the fading light of day and the rising tide of darkness. It's a particularly fruitful time for observing wildlife; the air is heavy with anticipation (or is it trepidation?) and we can notice enhanced fragrances that the cooling Earth sends out to entice us into the dark.

Attunement Activities

Here are two activities designed to provide a direct, one-to-one experience of the outdoors at night. Your discretion as group leader will be required as to the use of torches during these activities. Relying on one's night vision can be a rich part of the experience for people as they walk through the darkness. But on some occasions, such as on darker nights, it will be appropriate to invite the responsible use of a torch to help people find their way.

SIT-SPOT

Equipment required:
Sit mats
Candle lantern
Torches (optional)
Ages: 8 and up
Number of participants: 2–30

Sit alone outdoors for a short period of time at dusk or in the dark. That's the essence of this key activity, which works well in tandem with some of the silent movement games later in this chapter. It's a good way to begin the process of gaining confidence and becoming acquainted with the night.

Also called Anchor Point or Magic Spot, this activity invites us to be in a more direct and simple relationship with the natural world. Through daytime, this can be challenging enough, especially for those not used to being in wild nature, or even to being in their own company or sitting still for longer than a few minutes.

I usually start with an enticement, asking the group to describe any wildlife encounters they have had. Their responses usually reveal a pattern of being on their own, or at least being quiet, at the time of the encounter. I follow this with an anecdote of my own about an animal encounter to illustrate and underline the importance of being still and quiet, and how a sit-spot is the very best way of maximising our chances to see and hear wildlife.

I then invite the group to each take a sit mat and to find a spot on their own for a period of time that is commensurate with my expectations of their capacity. Usually this is between 10–20 minutes for a group of children and 30–40 minutes for a group of adults.

I always bring along a candle lantern on nightwalks, and it works well for this activity. Once everyone has found their way to their spot, within sight of the lantern light, I explain that when everyone is settled I will extinguish the candle, so that we can experience the dusk or night fully. Then, when I relight it, it will be their signal to return.

A sit-spot in the twilight hours or darkness of night could be a step too far for younger children, or those who are not settled or self-contained. If this is the case, they can sit with a parent, teacher or friend, but with a sitspot the aspiration is always for a solo experience, because sitting outdoors is qualitatively different when you are on your own. You are not distracted by the social process of another human; you are more attentive to your surroundings and therefore notice more

activity from birds and animals. Solitude also leads us to a more thoughtful, reflective place, which is good for both physical and mental health.

CIRCLE WALK

Equipment required:
Torches (optional)
Ages: 11 and up
Number of participants: 6–30

A circle walk creates a container that allows the group to safely explore some solo time with some navigational simplicity. Offering this activity during the twilight hours might be preferable to the challenge of darkness. Judgement must be used as to when a group is ready for solo night navigation. Use your discretion – this activity is not meant to challenge unduly.

Walk the group in a wide circle around a predetermined central point, for example the campfire or base camp. Drop them off one by one, spaced apart equidistant from each other around the circumference of the circle you are walking. How far away from the central point you go will depend on the terrain and the capacities of the group. Ideally, the group members will not be able to see the central point of the circle from their drop-off spot. On a given signal, they simply make their way from their drop-off location back to the central point, using their 'night eyes' to find their way. Best if they can be given enough time to dwell, pause, linger and bathe in the night if they choose, rather than rushing back. Invite this to be part of the experience, and suggest they might take note when or if they stray out of their comfort zone in this activity, to reflect on later.

Use a signal, such as a whistle, for calling everybody back after a certain amount of time. The time you allow will be dictated by factors including the terrain, size of the circle, age range and group capacities, but approximately 30 minutes is a guideline.

When everyone has returned, take time to reflect together on their experiences, ideally seated around a campfire.

Silent Movement Games

Let's move on now to the matter of movement, or more precisely, the subject of sneaking. These games in particular demonstrate that learning can be fun and are helpful in bringing children's high energy down to appropriate levels for a nightwalk. Some of them are variations on games that you may well have played in childhood, but many are much older than that. These are exactly the sort of games I believe our indigenous ancestors would have played with their children as a way of practising essential skills and building awareness of predator and prey. Humans then were not the top of the food chain in many wilderness environments, and they had to be mindful of what might be stalking there. Learning the art of invisibility was an essential skill, as was learning how to move quietly towards animals and birds they wanted to catch and eat.

Here's a few of my favourites that work well for groups preparing to go out into the dark.

FOX-WALKING

Equipment required:
None
Ages: 8 and up
Number of participants: 2–20

Teaching your companions how to fox-walk will pay dividends on any mission to get closer to wildlife, not least on a nightwalk when the target species have a highly developed sense of hearing. The simple idea of this exercise is to learn how to move silently through the undergrowth in a woods or forest. I advise spending the first bit of time directing the group's attention to the way they all walk naturally when they are not concentrating on being quiet, so that they can 'unlearn' this and instead copy how a fox might walk.

Ask the group to mill about, walking normally, and then encourage them to listen to the sounds their bodies and clothing make as they do so. Next, request the group continue to walk normally but this time to put their fingers in their ears, so they can 'hear' themselves 'on the inside'. This sounds strange I know, but it's very informative. Try it yourself ahead of time and you'll see how 'noisy' our walking is when experienced this way.

Tell the group to stop walking and gather around you. Now it's time to analyse 'normal' walking. Demonstrate how a person usually places their heel down first when walking along, followed by a roll of the foot towards the toes. Then demonstrate a fox-walk, which necessitates placing the toes down first, and then rolling the foot back towards the heel.

Get everyone in the group to try out fox-walking and experience the effect it has on their movement. They should notice right away that it necessitates slowing down from their usual walking pace. Next, ask the group to block their ears again and see what they hear and whether it's different.

Now add another instruction. Suggest to the group that to move as quietly as possible, they have to 'test' the ground underneath their feet with each step to check whether it's 'safe' to transfer their weight from one foot to the other. Most people are accustomed to 'falling' onto each foot when walking, transferring their weight unconsciously from foot to foot because there are no consequences to consider from doing so. Remind the group that the forest floor is littered with possible sound-producing natural debris like sticks and stones. Walking silently in the forest thus requires a softly-softly approach.

Demonstrate how to maintain weight on the standing foot, which enables us to explore the terrain under the toe of the forward foot and to consciously shift over our weight when it's safe to do so. Explain that in this way, we can quickly raise our foot if we suspect the transference of our weight will break a stick or leave us unbalanced on a stone.

Ask the group to practise consciously this method of weight transfer so that they retain precision control on each step. You can turn this into a little game by calling out 'freeze!' every so often, which will invariably cause some of your companions to practise balancing on one leg for a few seconds.

Here's one more challenge to present: stalking wildlife may well involve keeping your eyes up and focused on the creature you are stalking, rather than looking at your feet. (I've been caught out many times by looking down at the ground to secure my footing, only to realise I had lost sight of the deer or fox I was trailing when I looked up again.)

Ask the group to continue fox-walking but to now attempt it without looking at the ground. This presents a new challenge for our sense of balance, which instinctively harnesses our eyes to assist, but now requires our feet to 'see' the ground on which we are walking.

Notes and Variants

One last variation of fox-walking is to travel with your hands clasped either behind your back or in front of you. The point is to avoid moving your arms to help with balance. Any wild mammal or bird you might pursue will be very sensitive to movement. Keeping your hands joined together will not only reduce your visual profile, it will also prevent you from inadvertently drawing the creature's attention to your presence. It's not easy to fox-walk this way, so be patient as you practise.

It may not be appropriate to ask every group to achieve this level of quiet and focus, and you'll need to decide whether a night-time fox-walk is appropriate. Fox-walking outdoors at night may be too ambitious with a class of young schoolchildren, for example. It's still a fun exercise to practise, though, and introduces some basic principles to remember in terms of getting close to wildlife. It is also a skill they can 'take away' to practise on their own and teach others.