**Top 10 Nature Places to Take Your Kids in Minnesota**

**The Nature Conservancy**

**www.nature.org**

[**Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and Bird Sanctuary**](https://www.minneapolisparks.org/parks__destinations/gardens__bird_sanctuaries/eloise_butler_wildflower_garden_and_bird_sanctuary/)

A wonderful place to see birds, butterflies and wildflowers, this 15-acre sanctuary located in northwest Minneapolis is open April 1 to October 15. Interpretive trails named Lady’s Slipper Lane and Trillium Trail meander through woodlands, wetlands and oak savannas. At the Visitor’s Shelter, there are natural history displays and helpful staff and volunteers who can answer your Garden-related questions. There are home school and Scout programs on birds, insects, mushrooms and much more.

**[Fort Snelling State Park](https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/park.html?id=spk00154" \l "homepage" \o "Fort Snelling State Park" \t "_blank)**

Located on top of a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, Fort Snelling is a great place to learn about military history in the area, Minnesota's fur trade, slavery in the North and more. The park also offers great biking, hiking and cross-country ski trails as well as picnic sites, a beach and fishing opportunities.

[**Helen Allison Savanna**](https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/helen-allison-savanna-scientific-and-natural-area/)

Just 20 miles north of the Twin Cities is a remnant of Minnesota’s past and one of the rarest habitats on earth.  At The Nature Conservancy’s Helen Allison Savanna, the gnarled limbs of bur oak trees reach for the sky and wildflowers abound. It’s a good place to see what our pioneer ancestors witnessed when they first came to the state and view hawks, songbirds, frogs and other wildlife.

[**Lake Elmo Park Reserve**](https://www.co.washington.mn.us/502/Lake-Elmo-Park-Reserve)

About 10 miles east of St. Paul, Lake Elmo Park Reserve is a fun place to take the kids camping or, fishing in the summer and cross-country skiing in the winter. There are also play areas and a swimming pond with a sandy beach. And if your kids are interested in orienteering, there are courses designed for beginners and more advanced enthusiasts.

**[Minnehaha Falls at Minnehaha Park](https://www.nps.gov/miss/planyourvisit/minnehah.htm%22%20%5Co%20%22Minnehaha%20Falls%20at%20Minnehaha%20Park%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

This 193-acre park overlooking the Mississippi River is just north of the airport and Fort Snelling. It features a 53-foot waterfall, limestone bluffs, big trees and woodland wildflowers. There are gardens, walking paths, a bike trail and a disc golf course. Bike rental and picnic tables are available, and there’s even an off-leash dog park for the canine members of the family. Below the waterfall, a trail winds along Minnehaha Creek down to the Mississippi. Take the second footbridge across the creek, and the kids can wade in the shallow water.

**[Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/minnesota_valley/%22%20%5Co%20%22Minnesota%20Valley%20National%20Wildlife%20Refuge%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

This refuge, about 10 miles from downtown Minneapolis, is one of only a handful of urban national wildlife refuges in the nation. It’s a great place to see bald eagles, wild turkey, songbirds and migrating waterfowl and to hear coyotes. There are two education and visitors centers, with the main center located in Bloomington, one mile east of the Mall of America. The center offers beginning birding and photography walks and many other events for young and old alike.

**[Springbrook Nature Center](http://www.springbrooknaturecenter.org/%22%20%5Co%20%22Springbrook%20Nature%20Center%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

About 10 miles north of downtown Minneapolis in the City of Fridley, you’ll find the Springbrook Nature Center nestled among 127 acres of native prairies, oak and aspen forests, oak savanna and wetlands. There are hiking trails, floating boardwalks and an interpretive center where kids can get a close-up look at frogs, snakes, fish and other wildlife. Especially popular with young and old alike is the Springbrook Bird Banding research project. Visitors are welcome to join volunteers one Sunday each month when they set up mist nets, record data and release the birds they collect.

**[Three Rivers Park District](https://www.threeriversparks.org/%22%20%5Co%20%22Three%20Rivers%20Park%20District%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

Minneapolis has one of the best urban park systems in the world, and the Three Rivers Park District is a favorite with Nature Conservancy staff. Here are a few of their recommended, kid-friendly spots:

**[Richardson Nature Center](https://www.threeriversparks.org/location/richardson-nature-center/%22%20%5Co%20%22Richardson%20Nature%20Center%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

The Nature Center has interpretive displays, live animals and an observation area for viewing birds. Hiking trails take you through marshes, oak forest and restored prairie where you might see deer, fox, coyotes and turkeys. The Nature Center also hosts summer camps and birthday parties.

**[Hyland Lake Park Reserve](https://www.threeriversparks.org/location/hyland-lake-park-reserve/%22%20%5Co%20%22Hyland%20Lake%20Park%20Reserve%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

After exploring the trails, forests, prairies, lakes and ponds at the Reserve, your kids will love the fantastic, award-winning play area that includes 50-foot long slides! Watch a video of the play area on their web site.

**[Elm Creek Park Preserve](https://www.threeriversparks.org/location/elm-creek-park-reserve/%22%20%5Co%20%22Elm%20Creek%20Park%20Preserve%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

At 4,900 acres, Elm Creek has got it all—play areas, a nature center, swim pond, disc golf course, tubing hills and mountain biking, horseback riding and cross-country ski trails. It’s also a good place to enjoy wildlife including eagles, sandhill cranes, deer, beavers, loons and trumpeter swans.

**[Gale Woods Farm](https://www.threeriversparks.org/location/gale-woods-farm/%22%20%5Co%20%22Gale%20Woods%20Farm%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

Introduce your kids to a real working farm on beautiful Whaletail Lake. They can meet the cows and sheep, learn about cooking and gardening or have a picnic by the lake. There are also summer camps and programs for aspiring farmhands.

**[William O’Brien State Park](https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/park.html?id=spk00283" \l "homepage" \t "_blank)**

This beautiful park on the St. Croix River is just an hour from the Twin Cities. You and the kids can walk the trails and enjoy the prairie wildflowers, canoe on the St. Croix River, camp or stay overnight in rustic cabins, cross-country ski and snowshoe in winter and learn about Minnesota’s early Voyageurs and how to geocache.

**[Wood Lake Nature Center, Richfield, Minnesota](http://www.richfieldmn.gov/around-town/wood-lake-nature-center%22%20%5Co%20%22Wood%20Lake%20Nature%20Center%2C%20Richfield%2C%20Minnesota%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

Three miles of trails and boardwalks wind through the marshes, prairies and forests at this 150-acre natural area in the City of Richfield. The nature center offers classes year round on topics ranging from reptiles and migratory birds to making apple cider and beeswax candles. Before you go, check out the Kids section of their web page for a scavenger hunt list.

**Great Outdoor Places Farther Afield**

[**Bluestem Prairie, Near Moorhead, Clay County**](https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/bluestem-prairie-scientific-and-natural-area/)

At more than 5,800 acres, the Conservancy’s Bluestem Prairie is one of the largest and best remaining prairies in the United States.  And it hosts one of nature’s most remarkable spectacles each spring— the courtship antics of male greater prairie chickens, a species once common in Great Plains prairies that today is a rare sight. Make plans to reserve a viewing blind next April (we start taking reservations in February at our [Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecoregion Office in Glyndon](https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/minnesota/contact-us/)) and show your kids a sight they’ll never forget.

**[Camp Du Nord, Northwest of Ely](https://www.ymcamn.org/camps/camp_du_nord%22%20%5Co%20%22Camp%20Du%20Nord%2C%20Northwest%20of%20Ely%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

This YMCA camp on the North Arm of Burntside Lake is a great place for a family getaway in a wilderness setting.  The camp features comfortable cabins or tent camping sites, home cooked meals served family style and plenty of outdoor fun including hiking, fishing, canoeing, swimming, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. It’s a beautiful place near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness to reflect and refresh.

**[Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve, Duluth](https://www.hawkridge.org/%22%20%5Co%20%22Hawk%20Ridge%20Nature%20Reserve%2C%20Duluth%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

If you want to see one of nature’s most magnificent spectacles, then a trip to Hawk Ridge in the fall is a must. Migrating eagles, northern goshawks, sharp-shinned hawks and other raptors headed south for the winter concentrate in massive numbers on the bluffs overlooking Duluth and can be easily seen from Hawk Ridge starting in mid-August and ending in late October. Many programs on raptors and other birds are offered during this time period.

**[Sugarloaf Cove, Minnesota’s North Shore](https://sugarloafnorthshore.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)**

Sugarloaf Cove, located on Lake Superior about 70 miles northeast of Duluth, is well-known for its 1.1-billion-year-old lava flows and beautiful cobblestone beach. In the mid-1900s, Sugarloaf was a pulpwood landing, where logs were collected before being rafted across Lake Superior to Ashland, Wisconsin. Today it is a natural preserve where young and old alike can enjoy guided nature walks and learning about the plants and animals, unique geology and logging history of the area.