

# THE MAGIC OF A SPIDER'S WEB

- The story of a wonderful days out in the countryside

**The Forest Nursery, Høndruphus, is on the edge of Lindum Forest. The nursery has its base in a picturesque, thatched, half-timbered cottage belonging to the local manor. Here, 28 children between three and six years old spend their day in a cosy family like atmosphere.**

**When the children turn up in the morning they are met by the welcoming smell of homemade bread being prepared for the morning meal. A solid breakfast makes a good start for an energetic day of playing and working outdoors.**

Breakfast time is also a good opportunity to think of the day ahead and make plans. Perhaps a wee girl wants to sit in the "storyteller chair". Often a story, told by a child at breakfast time, becomes a theme in an activity later in the day.

For example, a boy tells about finding a dead owl. He has brought the owl to "circle time". We talk about the owl's anatomy. "How can we see that it is a bird of prey?" Eager hands shoot up, everyone is keen to give their contribution – to share their knowledge of birds of prey.

"Its beak is hooked!"

"It's got strong claws!"

The adult follows up, why is the beak hooked? What does it eat? What does it use its long sharp claws for? They investigate the wingspan and admire the plumage. Why do the feathers have these particular colours? Where does it hunt? What would happen if the feathers were blue, yellow and green, like a parrot?

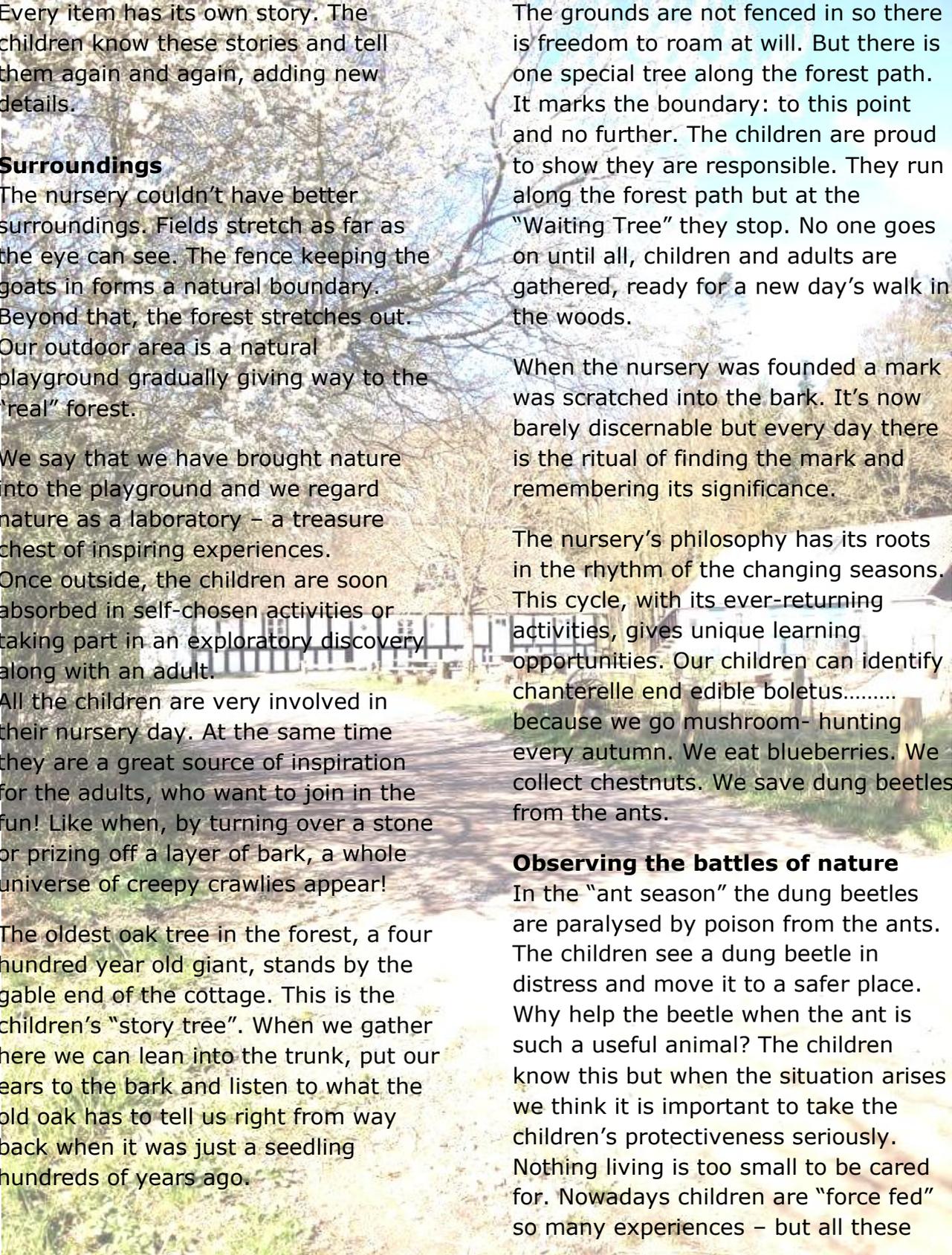
In this example we took the owl out with us into the woods. We went hunting for owl pellets. When we found a place that looked like "owl country" we left it underneath a tree, in the undergrowth and new questions arose:

I wonder what will happen to the owl?

Who eats owls?

We revisited the "owl place" regularly until one day there was only one single feather left!! We took it home with us to put in our treasure cabinet. This cabinet is full of strange and wondrous finds:

- Small lizard babies
- A butterfly
- A snail's shell
- A frog that's been run over!
- Transparent leaves
- A wasp's nest



Every item has its own story. The children know these stories and tell them again and again, adding new details.

### **Surroundings**

The nursery couldn't have better surroundings. Fields stretch as far as the eye can see. The fence keeping the goats in forms a natural boundary. Beyond that, the forest stretches out. Our outdoor area is a natural playground gradually giving way to the "real" forest.

We say that we have brought nature into the playground and we regard nature as a laboratory – a treasure chest of inspiring experiences. Once outside, the children are soon absorbed in self-chosen activities or taking part in an exploratory discovery along with an adult. All the children are very involved in their nursery day. At the same time they are a great source of inspiration for the adults, who want to join in the fun! Like when, by turning over a stone or prizing off a layer of bark, a whole universe of creepy crawlies appear!

The oldest oak tree in the forest, a four hundred year old giant, stands by the gable end of the cottage. This is the children's "story tree". When we gather here we can lean into the trunk, put our ears to the bark and listen to what the old oak has to tell us right from way back when it was just a seedling hundreds of years ago.

The grounds are not fenced in so there is freedom to roam at will. But there is one special tree along the forest path. It marks the boundary: to this point and no further. The children are proud to show they are responsible. They run along the forest path but at the "Waiting Tree" they stop. No one goes on until all, children and adults are gathered, ready for a new day's walk in the woods.

When the nursery was founded a mark was scratched into the bark. It's now barely discernable but every day there is the ritual of finding the mark and remembering its significance.

The nursery's philosophy has its roots in the rhythm of the changing seasons. This cycle, with its ever-returning activities, gives unique learning opportunities. Our children can identify chanterelle and edible boletus..... because we go mushroom-hunting every autumn. We eat blueberries. We collect chestnuts. We save dung beetles from the ants.

### **Observing the battles of nature**

In the "ant season" the dung beetles are paralysed by poison from the ants. The children see a dung beetle in distress and move it to a safer place. Why help the beetle when the ant is such a useful animal? The children know this but when the situation arises we think it is important to take the children's protectiveness seriously. Nothing living is too small to be cared for. Nowadays children are "force fed" so many experiences – but all these



everyday episodes of meeting the small wonders of nature become entrenched in our memories, they leave a mark.

It is so important that we, the significant adults in the children's lives, are involved and that we follow the children's initiatives. We help them put into words the many questions that arise on our walks through the woods. There is an endless potential of learning opportunities at child level. This potential is stretched where there are knowledgeable, enthusiastic adults are at hand. The children's involvement and urge to learn, to see, to touch, to experience is contagious and this fires the attentive adult.

The spider's intricate web is studied closely. It's a magical experience to wander through a grassy area, against the light, and seeing web after web stretch out from the tip of one blade of grass to another, full of glistening dewdrops. A fantastic sight!

Or see a little blade of grass weighed down by a dewdrop, shining like crystal. If you are very careful, you can transfer the dewdrop to your fingertip or drink the dewdrops running off a blade of grass.

Animal tracks of all sorts lead us on our way. Following the tracks and seeing signs of wild deer are another exiting experience. But where there is wildlife there will also be battles, the ongoing struggle between life and death. We find traces of the buzzard's fight with a wood pigeon.

One day we found a dead squirrel. Maybe it had made an unsuccessful leap or maybe it had been attacked by a bird of prey. We don't know for sure, but we brought it home and "relived" its story, using our knowledge of squirrels. We put it in the freezer until it could be stuffed. Then it could join our collection of stuffed animals.

Children nowadays know so much about fantasy creatures but until they come to nursery here, they have no idea how small a fox really is..... a lot smaller than a wolf! And in this real world of nature you can't just press the standby button or edit what's happening. We have to get out there, with our eyes and ears wide open. There will always be some animal inviting us to watch:

a spider moving its eggs around

a dung beetle playing dead when it is alarmed (after a while we

see it moving again).

the toad that peed when it got a fright.

Children see it all. Our job is to get down to child's height to see it too, through a child's eyes. Nature is a gallery of beauty and at the same time, full of drama.

**One day something happened that we will never forget!!**

Yes, as always, it happened completely out of the blue on a, until then, ordinary day.

We had just come through a forest of

ferns out into an open clearing in the middle of the woods. Suddenly we saw a wounded roebuck blundering helplessly about between the trees. It ran again and again straight into tree trunks. Everyone, children and adults alike, could see that this was an animal in distress. Quick, get out the mobile and phone the forest ranger. Soon he was there, rifle in hand.

From a distance we watched as he shot the deer. The children were quite calm about it all. We all knew that it was now relieved from great pain.

The roebuck was loaded onto the ranger's car and driven back to the nursery. We hurried home and those who wanted to could gather round the ranger and watch him disembowel the animal. We could hold the still warm heart in our hands! What a breathtaking but beautiful moment!

The children had experienced at first hand an authentic drama of life and death. No background music, no special effects, no editing!

We believe that in our daily life, so close to nature, we can encourage the children to be protective and to be empathic. We believe that this is a step on the way to becoming protective and empathising adults who care about and respect all things living.

**Bitten Pedersen**

e-mail:

[naturboernehaven@hoendruphus.dk](mailto:naturboernehaven@hoendruphus.dk)

