Fall is an amazing time to get outside and play in nature. Plants and animals are preparing for winter, temps are cooler, and the colors are brighter.

Here, you can find 10 fall-themed nature play activities to get you started. We’ve broken them into two main categories of play,

**Unstructured**, which is directed by the kids themselves but with support from adults for safety.

**Structured**, which includes kids following Instructions and goals for activity, with support from adults for safety.

Keep an eye on massaudubon.org/natureplay or Mass Audubon’s social media channels for weekly videos that will showcase these ideas.
**Build a Fairy House with Natural Materials**

*Unstructured*

The outdoors can become a magical place that comes alive with fairies and gnomes. Look around your neighborhood or park for natural materials to create a home for these mythical creatures and then dream-up a story about who will live in your fairy house and what they do all day (and night).

**Dress-up for a Nature Hike**

*Structured*

Scour the closets, dress-up bins, or dig in to the craft supplies and have your child put together an ensemble perfect for their mood and plan for outdoor exploration. Allow the outfit to open the door to imaginative play. Pirate lost in the woods? Check. Ballerina performing for the birds? Check. A fox kit looking for other fox kits to play with? Check. There’s no one right way to dress for nature play.

**Climb Rocks and Trees**

*Unstructured*

Here’s a great activity that introduces reasonable risk. Taking risks is important for kids – it can build confidence and awareness of what they are capable of. But, safety is just as important. Reasonable risk is determined by the adult based on their comfort level of the situation.

On your next hike, identify how comfortable you are allowing your child to climb on rocks, stumps, or trees. Encourage them to climb on their own or join them on an adult friendly boulder hop!
Go on an Imagination Hike

Unstructured

Next time you go on a hike, let your imagination run wild. Transport yourself to any place or time, real or fictional. Maybe you’re are hiking in the Amazon rainforest, the deserts of the Sahara, or the ice sheets of Antarctica. What kinds of things do you see? Or maybe you’re in a place that you created with your own language, sites, sounds. Write down the “story” of your adventure and share with friends and family.

Stack Rocks

Unstructured

Master your skills of balance and create nature sculptures in the process. While walking along beaches, rocky shorelines, or rocky trails, find a variety of different shapes and sizes of loose rocks. Avoid collecting where rocks are part of an animal’s habitat, e.g. in river beds. With plenty of space to move away from your tower should it collapse, balance your rocks on top of each other (be mindful of fingers and toes!). How high can you get your tower to stay? Can you imagine a small animal (real or make-believe) living in your sculpture?

Build a Fort

Unstructured

Get a primer of architecture and gravity and end up with a super cool hangout when you build an outdoor fort. Find a safe, adult-approved location and map out how big your fort will be (hint: it should be large enough to at least fit your body with some extra room to store items).

Gather sticks, branches, logs, grass, and/or leaves being careful not to take anything from a sensitive wetland habitat or plants that could easily be crushed like flower beds. Start with large sticks and logs for support, make sure they are secure in their place. Then you can add smaller branches, sticks, grasses and leaves to finish out your fort.
Preserve a Fall Leaf Collection

Structured

One of the best parts of fall: the way trees turn into a symphony of colors. Sadly, just as quick as the leaves turn into vibrant shades of reds, yellows, and oranges the leaves fall to the ground and become a uniform shade of brown.

But there are a couple of ways to make the wonders of fall foliage last just a little bit longer by preserving the leaves while they are still colorful.

Option 1: Press Your Leaves
Gather all the leaves you have collected and place them side by side on a piece of newspaper. Put another piece of newspaper on top. Then place a really heavy book on top of the leaves and don't touch for 1-2 weeks. Once dry you may carefully spray with acrylic craft spray or place your pressed leaves between two pieces of wax paper, place a towel over the wax paper, and then briefly iron.

Option 2: Paint a thick layer of Modge-Podge over one side of your leaf, let dry, and then paint the opposite side. Modge-Podge will preserve the color and structures of the leaf for about 5-7 years.

Once your leaves are preserved, use a leaf identification book or app to identify the tree your leaf belongs to. Glue your identified leaf into a nature notebook or journal, and include some details including: date found, location found, type of leaf, and draw attention to any interesting characteristics you notice (i.e. smooth edges, toothed edges, etc...)
Create a Leaf Critter

Structured

Transform ordinary fallen leaves into creatures from land and sea! Once you decide what kind of Leaf Critter you will make (Fish? Forest animal? Monster? Bird?), look for leaves that best fit the shape you want to create. Glue them to a piece of paper and then use markers, crayons, or pencils to decorate the critter and the scene. If leaf critters don’t spark your interest, try making a leaf sculpture!

Note: If you want your Leaf Critters to last longer, you may want to press your leaves ahead of time. To do this, put your gather leaves in between newspaper and then place a heavy book on top. Don’t touch for 1-2 weeks.

Create a Leaf Maze

Structured

Ever see those really cool corn mazes and wonder how it’s done? Here’s your chance, and you don’t need any corn! First start by drawing a very simple maze on some paper – this will be your blueprint for when you go outside to build your leaf maze.

Find a location where there are lots of leaves that have fallen and can be raked into a nice pile to easily access your stockpile of leaves. Once you have a cleared area to work with, grab handfuls of leaves or fill a basket or bucket with leaves and use them to make the “walls” of your maze according to your blueprint. If you are feeling creative, you may create a “Start” and “finish” sign for your maze. Crawl through your maze like a forest mammal or are your walls tall enough so you can walk through your maze?

Play in a Leaf Pile Play

Unstructured

A classic autumn activity where the reward is worth the work! Provide the rakes, let your child build large piles of leaves, jump in, and repeat. Just be sure to do a thorough tick check afterwards – those little buggers like to hide in leaves.