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## Summer Hikes for Lots of Fun (and Serious Fitness Too)

As gas prices rise and concerns about the environment grow, many families are looking for vacations that are both less expensive and more natural. Taking a hike can be a fun - and very inexpensive - way to give your family quality time with each other and with nature at the same time. (And, don't tell the kids, but hiking is also a fabulous way to get everyone off the couch and into good shape while enjoying the great outdoors.)

"Montanans are really fortunate when it comes to hiking opportunities," says Thomas Baumeister, Education Bureau Chief, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) in Helena. "Our families can enjoy thousands of trail miles - right outside their front door or just a few minutes away in many cases. Taking a hike on a lovely summer day really is a very special opportunity - for family members to connect and to discover the natural wonder all around them."

In addition to the trails in local, state, and national parks, Montana's Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) offer abundant opportunities for hiking. The primary focus of WMAs is to provide vital habitat for elk, deer, ducks, geese, pheasants, grouse, and other wildlife. Many also allow for public recreational pursuits during the summer months. The FWP has a searchable database of WMA locations and recommended activities at <http://fwp.mt.gov/lands/searchwmas.aspx>

Baumeister sees hiking as a powerful activity. "It's very different than many other things that we do with our kids, like watching them play ball or driving them to dance. On a hike, adults and kids are doing the same thing at the same time. In our hectic world, taking a hike cuts down on the background noise and allows us to really talk - and listen - to each other." Here are a few of his thoughts on how to make family hikes successful adventures rather than intense ordeals:

- **Take advantage of expert advice:** If you are unfamiliar with an area, take a friend or family member who has been that way before. Go with a hiking club or talk to folks at the outdoor store, so you can be properly prepared for any risks.
- **Choose the right distance:** With young folks, it's not the distance you go, it's what you do along the way. Start with short, easy hikes and gradually move up to more adventurous ones, as everyone gets stronger and more confident.
- **Make it fun:** Children love to explore new areas - and to discover the details of seemingly unimportant rocks and pieces of wood. Let your child take the lead and take as much time as they need to smell the flowers or splash in the creek.
- **Take plenty of treats:** Hiking is hard work, especially when you have short legs! Bring plenty of water and snack choices, like string cheese, granola bars, and trail mix (nuts, sunflower seeds, dried fruit, cereal pieces, and chocolate bits).

"Taking a hike is a welcome excuse to get away from our stressful, over-scheduled lives," says Baumeister. "Probably the best, but often difficult, thing for adults is to let children set the pace for a hike. At a child's pace, you can observe the world in the same way that they do and see things that you might have otherwise missed. With a little attention and creativity, each person can have some time to enjoy and to share the inspiring natural world with the rest of the family."

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