

Calling All Night Owls

by Melanie Wagner
and Ann Hardie

As the days turn hot and humid, consider heading outdoors when the sun goes down. *Atlanta Parent* has identified some cool places to hike, stargaze and sleep under the light of the silvery moon.



Mitch perfects the bat hang.

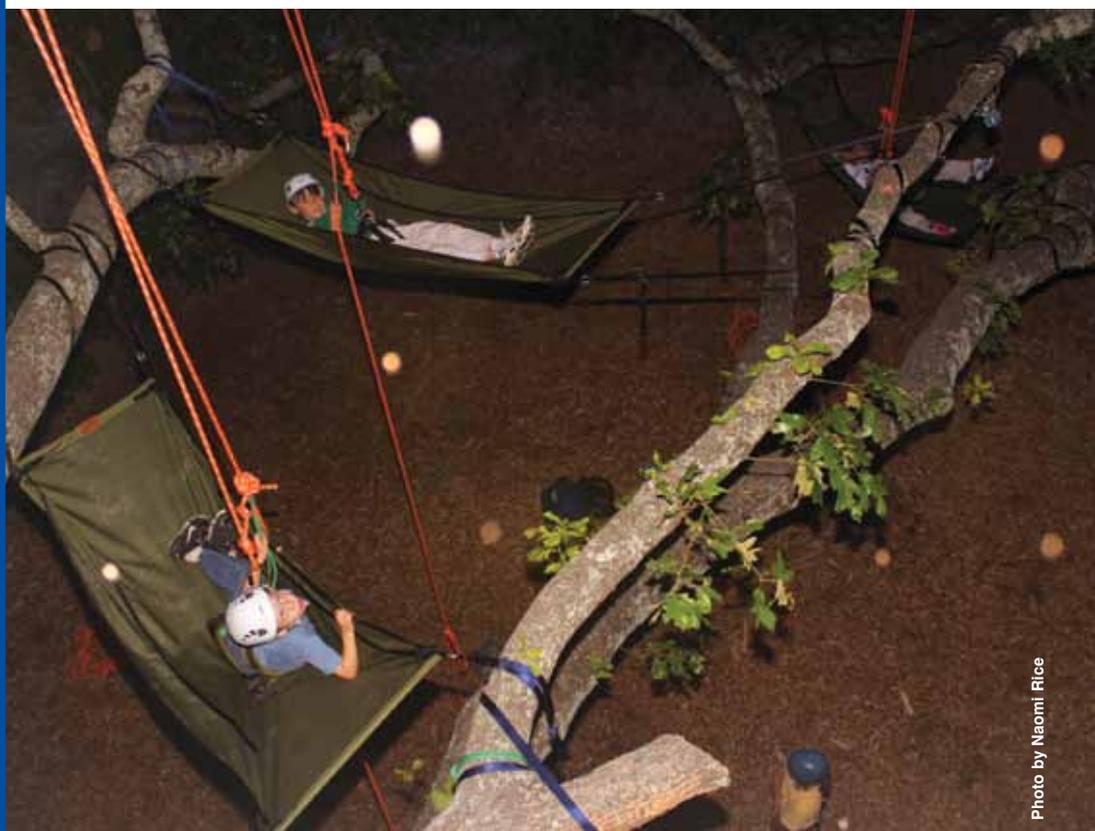


Photo by Naomi Rice

Frankie and Mitch settle in for the night in a 100-foot Southern red oak.

As Mitch Gerding and Frankie Jubera set up their “beds” – green canvas tree boats stretched across the limbs of a 100-foot Southern red oak named Naomi Ruth – they contemplate ditching civilization for good.

The boys will be bunking on this hot, muggy evening some 25 feet off the ground at Panola Mountain State Park. The occasional plane overhead is a reminder that the park is only 20 miles from downtown Atlanta, but the city somehow seems very far away.

“Would you like to live here?” asks 7-year-old Frankie. “Possibly. This could be my bed,” says 10-year-old Mitch. The tree boat resembles a backyard hammock but is constructed not to flip, for obvious reasons. And the two friends from Atlanta’s Garden Hills Elementary proceed to plan their new life among the branches.

Some 10 feet higher, Dan Gerding, Mitch’s dad and the boys’ Cub Scout leader, admittedly is daydreaming in his tree boat while enjoying the bird’s-eye view of the calm lake and field of flowering goldenrod nearby. Farther up the canopy, a pair of feathered creatures play chase.

Panola Mountain’s “ZZZs in the Trees” program is taking camping – and people’s

ZZZs in the Trees

Panola Mountain State Park
Stockbridge. 770-389-7801
Call to schedule a sleepover.

imagination – to new heights. “It is just cool,” says Jody Rice, the park’s resource manager who started the program. “You are still on a campout. You just happen to be 30, 40, 60, 80 feet in the air.”

The program – which runs \$125 per person – is pricey. But it also is labor intensive. Brian Lanier, an architectural draftsman who volunteers at the park, has been working up a sweat swinging from limb to limb, setting up the tree boats. Nine people will be sleeping in the magnificent oak this evening. First they’ll have to hoist themselves up into the branches.

Earlier, the Panola Park team taught Gerding and the boys how to operate the system of ropes and harnesses used to climb the tree. The campers will sleep in their harnesses for added safety. Because tree climbing takes coordination and is somewhat strenuous, Rice recommends that ZZZers first take an introductory climb, which the park offers on other days for \$15 a person.

Gerding has no trouble mastering the climb. Neither do the boys who will progress to the bat hang (flipping upside down on their ropes) before the adventure is over. As night sets in, there is a possibility that the sleepover will have to be canceled due to heat lightning in the distance. While grounded, Rice treats Gerding and the boys to a nighttime tour of the park in what resembles a glorified golf cart.

Around 11 p.m., the storm passes, the stars come out, and everyone heads up into the boughs. The temperature has dropped and Frankie snuggles into his sleeping bag and uses his headlamp to write down just a few thoughts. "I had fun today. I'll finish these notes later. I need to go to sleep." The boys sleep, well, like logs.

Gerding wakes up a couple times during the night – sleeping in a tree takes some getting used to. Around 6 a.m., he wakes up for good to the sound of birds, lots of birds, chirping. With the mist on the lake as a backdrop, he pulls out a book and reads for 45 minutes until the boys' heads pop up. Finally, it is time for everyone to come back to earth. Twenty miles away, there are chores to be done, ball games to be played. "I think this is a unique thing – I never would have expected it in a state park," says Gerding, who plans to return soon to do this again with his wife, daughter, and, of course, Mitch.

Given how late he went to bed, Mitch seems especially chipper. "I got some good sleep," he says. He had a vivid dream about being in a tree, only the leaves were like those in the film *Avatar*. When he awoke, the tree part was true. "It was cool," he says. □



Jody Rice teachers Frankie how to climb a tree.

Some More **Super Sleepovers**

Family NightCrawlers at Zoo Atlanta

Tusks at Dusk – June 5
Father's Day After Dark – June 19

Imagine the cool, dark, eerie reptile house at Zoo Atlanta. During daylight hours, the snakes and lizards slither under rocks waiting to emerge after the hoards of visitors go home. Zoo Atlanta NightCrawlers will be ready when they do.

Zoo Atlanta's monthly Deluxe and Family NightCrawlers programs give families the opportunity to explore the zoo after hours. The programs are almost identical – the difference is that Deluxe NightCrawlers get to go behind the scenes of an animal exhibit. This month, they can have a personal encounter and feeding experience with the elephants.

The nightlong event (which lasts from 6 p.m.-10:30 a.m.) begins with a 45-minute class that includes games and animal interaction. Participants tour the animal nutrition kitchen to see what zoo residents dine on. They then grab a red, green or blue flashlight (white light can damage a reptile's eyes) and head to the reptile house for the flashlight tour and scavenger hunt. (What reptile shares the same name as a popular breakfast food? The pancake tortoise!)



Courtesy of Zoo Atlanta

When lights go out at 11 p.m., everyone curls up in a sleeping bag in the Action Resource Center, Living Tree House, Willie B. Gorilla Conservation Center or Base Camp Discovery Cabins. Breakfast and exclusive tours are provided following a rousing 8 a.m. wake-up roar from the African lion.

To reserve a spot, register at least two weeks in advance. Kids must be 6 or older to participate and be accompanied by an adult. Family NightCrawlers events are \$55/person; Deluxe NightCrawlers run \$80/person. (Zoo members receive a \$5 discount.)

Dunwoody Nature Center

Nite Owls and Camping 101
Through June, 7:30 p.m.-8 a.m.

Take advantage of the DNC's "Nite Owls" program to learn more about Georgia's nocturnal hooters. Guides will assist nighttime hikers with dissecting owl pellets and calling the solitary creatures. Campers can pitch their own tents under the trees or sleep in the nature center. "Camping 101" teaches how to construct a tent, tend a fire and properly leave a campsite. Both programs wrap up the night with a serving of s'mores. The following morning, campers will take a sunrise stroll through the woods before heading home. For both programs, one adult per six children must be present. The program is great for scout troops, youth groups, birthday parties and family reunions. The programs cost \$25 per child for members; \$35 for non-members, with a \$200 minimum per group. Adult chaperones are admitted free.

Stone Mountain Park

Ready, set, camp! This super-simple camping solution is available throughout the summer. Enjoy camping with the family without the stress of pitching a tent. For \$99, park employees will set up a four-person tent, complete with four sleeping pads before you arrive. (Families must also pay a fee to rent the campsite, which range from \$25-\$45). Bring your own sleeping bags, food, toiletries, bug repellent and lanterns. As an added bonus, families can keep the tent and sleeping pads for their next outdoor adventure. 770-498-5710

Join the Great American Backyard Campout

June 26

The National Wildlife Federation invites American families to pitch a tent in their own back yard. Register your campsite on the Great American Backyard Campout's website to join the movement, and opt to fundraise or donate to support the NWF. The event is part of the federation's "Be Out There" campaign, which encourages families to enjoy and protect the great outdoors. Visit backyardcampout.org to register your campsite for free.

Other **Nocturnal Activities**

If sleeping with owls and squirrels just isn't your thing, consider stargazing or night hiking.

Spot Shooting Stars: Gaze into the galaxy's swirling nebulae inside city limits or under wide-open country skies. Visit space.com before you go to find star charts, moon phases and viewing times of planets and constellations.

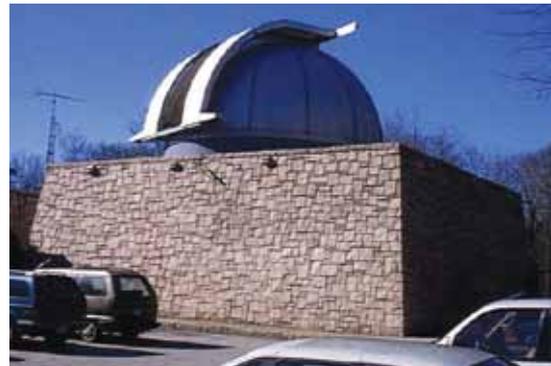
Hard Labor Creek Observatory

Georgia State University at Hard Labor Creek State Park
2010 Fairplay Rd., Rutledge

More than 50 miles from Atlanta, gaze at the wonderfully dark night sky from the observatory. This summer's open house dates are June 19, July 17 and August 14. Tours and observations run from 9-11 p.m. In case of bad weather, the facilities are open for a tour and a brief slideshow. No reservations are required, but large groups (more than 20 people) should confirm times with the GSU Department of Physics and Astronomy. 404-413-6033. Observatory: 706-342-9051.

Sidewalk Astronomy

The Atlanta Astronomy Club's public outreach program will bring telescopes to churches, parking lots and private events to teach your group about the night sky. Sidewalk Astronomy is a free program, but donations are accepted. E-mail Daniel Herron at observing@atlantaastronomy.com to schedule an event.



Jim Cherry Memorial Planetarium

Fernbank Science Center / Every Thurs. and Fri., 9-10:30 p.m. (except holidays) weather permitting.

Stars and planets will look surprisingly sharp despite Atlanta's lights and pollution thanks to Fernbank's 36-inch reflecting telescope, one of the largest available in Georgia to non-astronomers. A Fernbank astronomer will be on hand to point out planets and stars. Throughout the summer, stargazers can spot ringed Saturn high in the eastern sky, a polar ice cap on Mars straight overhead, and Venus in the west. With the help of a telescope, lunar craters 100 miles wide will be visible. Admission to the observatory is free. Arrive at 8 p.m. and watch the planetarium show "Rocks From Space," which is \$4 for adults, \$3 for children. 156 Heaton Park Dr., Atlanta. 678-874-7102.



Sweetwater Creek State Park



Tallulah Gorge State Park

Take a Twilight Hike: Find a flashlight and don your headlamps before hitting the trails.

Family Night Hike and Stargazing

Chattahoochee Nature Center / June 4, 8-10 p.m.

Take a naturalist-led hike around the CNC and spot the nocturnal creatures that you won't find on a daytime tour. Following the two-hour tour, cap off the night with a roaring campfire and marshmallow roast. Ages 5 and up. 9135 Willeo Rd., Roswell. 770-992-2055. \$10/person.

Ruins to Rapids Full Moon Hike

Sweetwater Creek State Park / June 26, 8-10 p.m.

This moderately difficult 1.5-mile, ranger-led hike explores the Civil War-era textile mill ruins inside the park. The trail follows the rushing rapids of Sweetwater Creek. Bring a flashlight and wear sturdy shoes. Ages 6 and up. 1750 Mt. Vernon Rd., Lithia Springs. 770-732-5876. Register in advance. \$5/person; parking, \$5.

Full Moon Suspension Bridge Hike

Tallulah Gorge State Park – Tallulah Falls

Saturday, June 26, 9:30-11 p.m.

Sunday, June 27, 10-11:30 p.m.

Join Tallulah rangers on a moderately difficult moonlit hike down into the gorge. Hikers will meet at the center and walk down 310 steep steps to the suspension bridge where they can howl at the moon. Then they will hike back up the 310 steps to the center. Register in advance. \$5, plus \$5 parking. 706-754-7981.