The Harvard Museum of Natural History offers numerous engagement activities for visitors of all ages, from children to adults, including hands-on activities in the galleries, family workshops, Summer Science Week programs, lectures, and festivals. Founded in 2008, *Nature Story Time* is especially designed to engage and enhance the museum visit experience for families and caregivers of our youngest visitors. The program happens every Saturday and Sunday at 11:00am and 2:00pm in *Romer Hall of Vertebrate Paleontology*, and in a separate classroom on particularly crowded days. The sessions are brief, each about 20-25 minutes in length.

**What happens at *Nature Story Time***?

- Casual pre-reading conversations, often with plush toys related to the topic
- Clear and deliberate beginning of the program, including welcome and expectations
- Slow reading of book and showing of pictures
- Sharing hands-on specimens after the reading is concluded
- Guided gallery visit to find relevant exhibit
- Good-byes and leave-taking

The audience for *Nature Story Time* is predominantly young families with toddlers, preschoolers, and young elementary students. The program is designed to offer multiple levels of interest and relevancy, and can also be enjoyed by older children and adults through opportunities to explore hands-on scientific specimens and gain insight into museum exhibits. Adults are encouraged to play and discover alongside their children; they are also reminded to take the themes from the story and continue the learning outside the museum. This structure invites children to use their imaginations, encouraging them to be scientists and discover amazing things.

**What are the criteria for children’s books selected for *Nature Story Time***?

- Children’s fiction and narrative nonfiction books
- Approximately 32 pages, suitable for preschoolers
- Scientifically accurate characters and behavior (or not glaringly inaccurate)
- Large colorful illustrations to show while reading
- Books with additional entry points of science content that appeal to older children and adults
- Books that can be linked directly to an exhibit or specimen in one of the galleries
- Positive, informative, and sometimes fun, silly stories

**How do volunteer readers develop their program?**

- Select a theme or topic presented in a museum gallery, or a particular specimen on exhibit
- Peruse our large library of picture books, and choose one or two to share
- Explore the HMNH teaching collection for relevant hands-on specimens to share with visitors, e.g. fossils, animal skulls, furs, feathers, minerals, rocks, or even live marine and terrestrial invertebrate teaching animals
- Conduct research on exhibits and specimens in order to prepare for common questions (follow-up information and activities are often in the back of the books)
- Prepare for logistics including reading techniques, timings, and finding the best route to the gallery

When new exhibits open in the museum, educators and volunteers may need a month or more of training and preparation to teach and interpret the exhibit. The *Nature Story Time* program offers a simple, immediate connection by creating an accessible, entry point with a single story book. For example, when *Honeybee Observation Hive* opened in the *Arthropod Gallery*, the exhibit was easily incorporated in story time. Graduate student beekeepers dressed in their beekeeping gear would read a story, and afterwards show the audience how to dance the “waggle dance”. A quick visit to the new exhibit then let families observe the hive, see the scout bees communicating through their dance, and notice various types of hive activity.