

Tick, tick, tick: Woods walk a time bomb

By Esther Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. - My in-laws recently moved to Connecticut where they bought a house in a beautiful hilly neighborhood full of woody enclaves. Their home, in many ways, feels like a gigantic tree house especially since their back yard plummets down into a small, boulder-and-creek-filled, suburban forest.

Because I grew up on 20 acres of forest and meadowlands, I am continually looking for ways to expose our girls to adventurous outdoor play. But it's not always easy here in Beverly — we don't exactly have a forest off our back deck, though we do have a lovely view of town.

So when we arrived at my in-laws home, I eyed their mini-woods with eager anticipation.

“This will be a great place to explore!” I exclaimed. “The girls can climb trees, build forts and take little hikes.” No one seemed enthusiastic. My father-in-law said, “Actually there are a few types of snakes that live around here.” My mother-in-law mused, “I heard that coyotes snatched Kathy Lee Gifford's dog in a town south of here.”

“Huh.” I said. “I hadn't thought to worry about snakes, let alone coyotes. Maybe they just didn't like Kathy Lee?” She shook her head while eyeing her three small dogs. “I don't know. Who ever thought suburban woods could be dangerous? Not to mention the problem with ticks and Lyme disease.”

Well, yes, of course I'd heard about the tick problem. It seems that every park on the North Shore has signs posted each spring warning us about the horrors that await us down their wooded trail, though they hope we enjoy our walk.

Still, it felt a bit overwrought. When I was a child I played in the woods where I picked up ticks, caught snakes and was even attacked by a groundhog. It was all formative and character building — not to mention fun. Well, except the groundhog part.

Later that day we took a walk down the street to the bottom of their property. Looking back up, I announced that my older daughter and I were going to hike home through the wooded lot rather than return on the paved road. With all due respect to celebrity-dog-snatching beasts, I felt up to the task. With that, I set off with my daughter.

My mother-in-law, in a burst of explorative spirit, or perhaps viewing herself as the last line of defense between us and any winter-starved snakes, hopped off the road and joined us.

It was short, easy and fun. We emerged on my in-laws back lawn refreshed and happier for having bits of leaves and twigs stuck to us — and nary a snake or coyote in sight.

Later that evening we gave the girls their nightly bath. It was especially warranted because we'd had a cake-smashing, crumb-flinging, first birthday party for our younger daughter involving much chocolate cake. Both girls were frosted from head to toe.

As I was scrubbing, I found a stubborn bit of chocolate on the center of my daughter's back. Scrub. Scrub. Rinse. Rinse. Nothing. I leaned in. To my horror I realized that there, embedded in my daughter's skin, was a deer tick!

Within minutes three separate laptops were up and searching on Lyme disease. From a wealth of childhood experience I knew how to properly dislodge the tick, but suddenly all the threats of the woods seemed real. Maybe coyotes did lurk in the backyard, perhaps snakes were ready to strike, after all there were deer ticks pouncing on us in March — March! There were still patches of snow on the ground!

A bit of research put our minds at ease about my daughter's tick; it had only been attached for about three hours. Still, I noted the spot and the date and have since watched carefully for a rash or other telltale signs.

The entire encounter left me feeling as if there is no safe place for our children to play. It's easy to be cavalier about perceived threats when they are merely perceived. But when it's your child with the deer tick in the epicenter of Lyme Land, it's a different matter. Thankfully I believe our beaches are still scourge free, as of now. So this summer you can find us in the middle of a large patch of sand far from any bug-harboring trees or coyote-camouflaging bushes. Perhaps Kathy Lee will come and join us.

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