

Paying attention

By Tom Dickson

In the 2009 animated movie *Up*, an elderly widower is joined on an adventure by, among others, a talking golden retriever named Dug who is constantly distracted by squirrels.

“Squirrel!” Dug cries, then runs off in pursuit. Over and over again.

I know the feeling. It seems like we all are dogs surrounded by small scurrying mammals in the form of social media, emails, texts, billboards, and TV commercials demanding our immediate attention and asking us to like someone, buy something, or vote for this or that candidate.

Kids are especially vulnerable. At least we adults have learned to weed out some of the distractions. But a 15-year-old with a smartphone offering thousands of funny, sexy, or violent videos and memes on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat? I know I would have found it hard to crack a biology textbook with all that just a click away.

For decades, doomsayers have warned that new electronic media would deaden our ability to pay attention. First it was radio. Then TV. Then the internet.

Social media, however, appears to finally be fulfilling the gloomy predictions. Test scores in math, science, and reading among 15-year-olds are declining globally, according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development. ADHD diagnoses among elementary-school-age children in the United States tripled between 2010 and 2022. High school and college students report struggling to start, much less finish, a book.

Meanwhile, we adults try to multi-task and manage our time—often with apps on the very phones that distract us in the first place.

Thank goodness for bobbers and trailheads.

Offering a break from the growing demands on our attention are simple, restorative outdoor activities like fishing, wildlife



watching, hiking, hunting, camping, and boating. Not only do they take us away from electronic devices and social media—often literally, because so much of the Montana backcountry has no cell service—but these activities help people of all ages learn or relearn how to focus. On a distant birdcall, or the silhouette of a raptor in the sky. On a strike indicator floating in the current. On a bouldery trail requiring deliberate foot placement, or the twitching ear of a mule deer buck bedded down in the shade of a coulee.

It’s amazing what a kid with ADHD can focus on when outdoors. Staff at FWP’s Montana WILD Education Center in Helena say it’s common for children unable to sit still in a typical classroom to head outside and concentrate for hours on fishing or watching wildlife. Normally disruptive students will stand quietly in awe as a volunteer holds a red-tailed hawk or northern pygmy owl and explains how these and

other raptors hunt and feed.

The natural world is a place where kids can learn to tune out distractions and focus on things of innate human interest, like animals, plants, and weather.

FWP helps get them and their adults out into the natural world. The department teaches outdoor skills, provides information on where and when to go, and offers tips for recreating legally, safely, and ethically.

If you or family members need to take a break from the social media din, visit the department’s website and scroll around for resources that will help you find your way into the outside. If not for you, do it for a child or grandchild.

The world is increasingly full of squirrels chirping for our frayed attention. Help kids learn to ignore the chatter. Introduce them to outdoor places and activities where they can practice focusing their young minds on things that truly matter. 🐿️

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