

Nature Bags

An Interview with Amy Roberts

C2C Podcast Episode #8



Jody: All this month, we've been talking about incorporating nature study into our homeschool plan and today we are wrapping up this series with a mom who is bound to have a very unique perspective on this topic, because not only does she have a very big family, which always brings its own set of challenges and rewards too, but she's also done nature study in a city environment. So we are super excited to hear what she has to share with us today.

Jenni: Amy Roberts of raisingarrows.net is a Christ follower, devoted wife, homeschooling mother of 10, she's a blogger, a conference speaker, podcaster and an author.

Jody: She busy.

Jenni: Unless I forget, we did say 10. Amy inspires the hearts of weary, overwhelmed mommas, amazingly, she's not one of them, which she would think...

Jody: Right?

Jenni: ...so we got to find out what she's doing, across the whole world as she offers practical and encouraging advice to help simplify the path and enjoy the journey of homemaking, homeschooling, marriage and mothering. Amy, welcome. Thank you so much for coming to talk to us on the podcast.

Amy Roberts: Thank you so much for having me.

Jenni: Okay. So tell us first, why do you believe that nature study is an important part of your homeschool?

Amy Roberts: Well, I believe that, you know, the Lord created this beautiful Earth and we are here to explore it and to marvel in his greatness. And so one of the best ways to do that is to go out and see what he's created and be a part of that and to recognize the majesty of it.

Jenni: Yeah.

Jody: Okay. So we are huge bag ladies. We have a bag for every event in our life. We literally have a bag waiting. That- We have- We take an art class, we have an art bag, we have a co-op bag, we have a bag for everything. But you have an amazing idea for a nature bag. Can you share that with us?

Amy Roberts: Certainly! So, it started with the idea that I needed to have all this nature stuff somewhere and I needed it at our fingertips, so that we could just grab it and go. Um, so I keep it near the back door and it's just, mine is just a little soft-sided bag with handles on it. But you could literally use a basket or anything. It's really just a place to keep all of your supplies for going out and studying nature and things that will make it easier for you to be out and about in nature. And you can grab the bag and take it in your van, when you're headed to the park or you can take it outside or wherever you'll be doing your nature study at.

Jenni: So, what are some of the things that are in your nature bag?

Amy Roberts: So, I have a waterproof blanket that folds up and it just zips, so that makes it nice. So if the ground is just a little bit wet, you're not going to get wet. Um, I have little bug dens or bug viewers, they're just a little plastic thing that has a magnifying glass attached to it. And that's just nice for the kids to be able to put their bugs in and put some grass in it and look at the bugs and just observe them. I really try to teach the kids to be naturalists and to observe more than anything else. Um, I want them to just pay attention to the animals and the plants and really look them over and then let them go. And so that allows them to do some really good observing. Um, we have magnifying glasses there. I did buy some jeweler loupes, which just help, um, to be able to see things up close as well. I get a lot of those, because I don't have a lot of magnifying glasses, which I could, but this way the kids can each have their own and be looking at things really up close. They'd like to lay on the blanket and look over the edge of the blanket and just see what's right in their little area...

Jenni: Oh, how cool!

Amy Roberts: ...of the ground. Yeah. And just observing their section.

Jenni: So, it's like that little thing that goes on their eye like the little...

Amy Roberts: Yes.

Jenni: Like the jewelers use? That's so cool!

Jody: Oh my gosh.

Amy Roberts: Yeah. And they are really not all that expensive. You can get them off of Amazon. They're just little plastic things. They're probably not as expensive as the jeweler's using, but that's what they're called, are jeweler loupes.

Jenni: Oh my gosh. Who would ever have thought of that? That's so cool.

Jody: Wait, how do you spell that? "Jeweler" what?

Amy Roberts: L. O. U. P. E.

Jody: Oh, "Loupe". Okay.

Jenni: Wow. I'm so excited about that. Okay. So then, now, do you ever utilize like, um, field guides to help them figure out what they're looking at or are not as concerned about that? Okay, tell us about that.

Amy Roberts: No, I keep my field guides in that bag, as well, so that they can take them out and be able to just look through the field guide as they're finding things. Um, I also keep our Anna Comstock, um, handbook of nature study in there as well. And that's kind of a big book. Um, so sometimes, I will take that out, but it's just there so that I know where it is. And that's part of the reason this nature bag has been so important for me, is that it's everything is there. So I know where all of my nature study supplies are when I print something off from the Internet that is, like, we do a cloud study, there's a site, um, called "Our Journey Westward" and she has a lot of these nature studies. And so we'll print those off and I'll just keep them in that nature bag so that I know exactly where they are and I'm not scrambling to try to figure out where did I put that nature study we were going to do.

Jenni: Oh, that's so good. Um, tell me about that, like, do you do the same things with all the age group kids or do you take different segments of your kids at a time and do you use different tools for different age groups?

Amy Roberts: We really do this all together, but I am focusing on the younger kids when it comes to nature study, because when you give them that love of nature, that's going to carry through as they get older and then we start to hand them, you know, regular science books like apologia and things like that as they get older. Um, but they'll come out and sit with us and catch fireflies and look up at the stars and all of those things as a group. But I'm really focusing my attention on that like 10 and under age group.

Jody: Okay. So I have, actually my now 20-year-old and believe it or not, my little two-and-a-half-year-old that I have here, they are both terrified of bugs. Have you had one afraid of bugs and what do you do?

Amy Roberts: Oh, not so much, but...

Jody: Great! I need help!

Amy Roberts: I mean, they are scared of other things for sure. Um, you know, we had a snake out in the yard and like nobody was going to go out in the yard. And so...

Jenni: Yeah, that'd be me, too. I'm right there with them.

Jody: They'd be like "Nope. Not today, maybe not for a week."

Amy Roberts: Right. Yeah. But I think that it's just good to just encourage them to continue to try to get close. And with those bug dens, it kind of gives you that safety of "I can put the little glass over it and I'm safe and I can look and then I can like slide it off the table."

Jody: Right.

Amy Roberts: "They can fly Away," you know? And it gives them a little bit of a safety net, there, to have that between them where they can observe the bug and feel like it's safe to be looking at it. So, yeah, that's, that's one idea to just kind of get over that.

Jenni: You know, you said fireflies. And when we moved to Florida 11 years ago I could- I was devastated when I found we do not have fireflies.

Amy Roberts: Yes.

Jenni: What a loss that was. Oh, my gosh! But we do have absolutely gigantic cockroaches. I mean, like, Palmetto Bugs! They're gi- Palmetto bugs are like, they're huge. Like the size of your palm, practically.

Jody: So, are lightning bugs and fireflies the same thing?

Jenni: Yeah, lightning bugs and fireflies are the same.

Jody: Yeah. We had them in Illinois, too and...

Jenni: We used to make the little lanterns in a lot of mason jars, no more. No, my little kids don't even know what they are. They're like make-believe in a movie.

Amy Roberts: Yeah. My daughter says that lightning bugs are what catching fireflies are what you watch.

Jenni: Oh, that's so cute.

Amy Roberts: They're the same thing.

Jody: How do you figure out- Okay. So you know, I grew up in the woods. I didn't go back and research anything. So this is kind of new to me. So, how do you figure out like what the different plants are, what the different bugs, like the- how do you know how to look it up? How do you do that?

Amy Roberts: Well, you know, Google is an amazing thing and I really appreciate that I can come back and if I can't find it in a field guide that I can Google weird bug with things on its back that are brown. You know, I can Google stuff like that and something comes up and I look through the images until I find it. We had a junk bug...

Jody: What the heck is that?

Amy Roberts: I know it's crazy. This thing actually carries a bunch of junk on its back.

Jenni: Stop it! I am looking this up today. I'm so excited about this.

Amy Roberts: So we ha- we saw this bug that looked like it was carrying dead bugs on its back and dead things and it had sticks and all kinds of stuff on its back.

Jody: What?!

Jenni: How big was this thing?!

Amy Roberts: They're not all that big actually. Maybe like, I don't know, an inch? And so yeah. So I Googled brown bug with like things on its back and like carrying sticks and stuff and it came up as a picture and it's called a junk bug and craziness. And so, Google is your friend. Yeah. Google's your friend when it comes to nature study, because you really can Google very obscure things...

Jody: So you just tried to-

Amy Roberts: ...and find pictures.

Jody: So you just try to Google a description?

Amy Roberts: I do. Yeah. And then go through the images until I find what it looks like.

Jody: Have you ever had a problem not finding something you were looking up?

Amy Roberts: Not really. Not if I keep after with the descriptors.

Jody: Okay.

Jenni: Now I have an app on my phone, cause the one kind of nature I do kind of like, nature's a little tough for me. I'm a city girl. Um, but the one nature that I do like is I like birds. I think they're really cool. And I have an app, I'm trying to find it on my phone. Um, what it's called, but it's from the Cornell lab of ornithology. Are you familiar with this?

Amy Roberts: Yes. That is a fantastic app. Yes. And it has the bird's song.

Jenni: Oh here it is. It's... Yes!! It's Merlin Bird Id. That's it. We'll link to it in the show notes. But that's so cool. Cause there's been so many times that I've been out and about and I'll say, you know, um "Oh my gosh, what is that thing?" Especially down here in Florida we get a lot of migrating birds. So, sometimes you're like, "What is that?" And you can just look it up and it'll, it'll... It- GPS tracks you, which is I guess maybe scary, but it's like, "Are you in this town?" "Yep, I am." "And what size is it? And then what color?" And then it gives you some pictures and you're like, "Oh yeah, there it is!" So cool.

Amy Roberts: The other really great thing, too, with the Internet is that you can snap a picture and I do you encourage my kids to try to take pictures that I'll just load in my phone, but if you find something you don't know what it is, just put it on Instagram or Facebook. There is bound to be somebody who knows what that is.

Jenni: Yeah, that happened to me. I was- when we were new to the area, my son found, what is that?

Jody: Walking catfish?

Jenni: No, the walking catfish was a whole different story. I called Jody on that one. I was like, "There is a fish in my garage! A fish! What the heck?! How did they get there?" And she told me it was a walking catfish. But no, this was a, is it called a crawfish.

Jody: A crawfish.

Jenni: Okay. So I was like, this thing looks like a little lobster and it was in my grass. I was like, "How did a lob- baby lobster get in my grass?" And then the people told us what it was on Facebook. But the walking catfish really freaked us out.

Jody: That's the most hysterical-looking. Have you ever seen it? A walking catfish?

Amy Roberts: A walk- No, I haven't.

Jody: Oh, you got to look that up. Your kids will laugh their heads off.

Jenni: No, it is the funniest looking thing!

Jody: Well, what happened was we first moved down here and you know, we've got water retention ponds everywhere behind our houses. And, of course, we get gators all the time and we, one day, I- I don't, my oldest I think at the time came out and he's like, "Mom, there's a fish in our garage!" And I'm like, "What?!" And actually it wasn't in our garage, it was walking toward the garage.

Jenni: Oh, gosh!

Jody: He's like, "MOM, MOM!!!!" And I run out there and I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, this can't be real. This is fake. Like somebody got some mechanical fish or whatever!" You know, and I'm panicking, I'm freaking out, calling my husband at work. I'm like, "There's this thing and it's coming in the house! Like is there- are there more?! Like... It's the apocalypse! What's happening?!"

Jenni: You gotta watch that video of it, your kids will crack up.

Jody: But what they do is they go from pond to pond and that's how they do it. They eat up everything in the pond and they go to the next pond.

Jenni: Yeah, it's pretty crazy.

Amy Roberts: Wow.

Jenni: Actually, you know what, the whole alligator thing is an issue here, too. Cause we started homeschooling in New York, in New Jersey and you know, we would go do nature study out in like, you know, a stream you saw stream and that was a big invitation to come play. You know, like, "Take off your shoes! Run in the water, we're going to find all kinds of fun things." So here, if there's water, you stay away.

Jody: Right.

Jenni: Because you've got, you know, venomous sneaks in there and you've got alligators. And so, we were watching with some of our kids who only knew Florida. We were watching "The Karate Kid" and he's standing up on the edge of the rowboat, you know, to practice his balance and all of a sudden he falls in the pond and my kids freak out. They're like, "OH, MY GOSH!!". I'm like, "No, there's no alligators there. He's good. It's good- It's good to swim in a pond up there."

Jody: It's really fun, though, depending on where you live and, you know, what is there, what you're accustomed to. And so it's really interesting.

Amy Roberts: Yeah, you really have to adapt to where you are and do your nature studies based on where you are and not necessarily on a curriculum that's telling you to go swim in a stream and pick up things, you know.

Jody: Go play with the gators.

Jenni: Yeah. And yeah, there's a park nearby. It's interesting, cause I, I was, when we first moved here, the whole gator thing freaked me out, of course. And but now there's a par- a big state park in the area and we'll go, and it's funny, we'll be a few feet from a gator and you don't really have to worry. They're not, they're lazy. And, you know, maybe your little dog would have to worry, but like, and you might keep your toddler, you know.

Jody: Yeah, no toddler! No toddler near a gator.

Jenni: But like a big adult, they're like, "Oh, that's too much work. I'm not doing that." So it's interesting how, you know, you learn about where you live. Um, tell us some of your favorite things to do when you're out doing nature study. Some of the different things that you like to do.

Speaker 2: Um, well like I said, we love to just lay out a blanket and choose just the section in front of us to look and see what's there. Um, we like to go to parks to kinda change it up. But often, I am doing a lot of my nature study in my own backyard or if we travel, we are, we have a Colorado cabin and we'll go out there and that's a totally different world for us. So there's new white flowers and there's new things to explore. And so we do try to, as we're traveling, stop and take a look at some of the things that are new to us and then look them up and try to figure out what they are. We're always collecting rocks that seems like I have tons and tons of rocks. Um, new vegetation, just all kinds of things that we're just pointing things out as we go. We're taking walks and even just around our backyard we're taking walks and looking at things that have cropped up during the different seasons, take a... sorry about that. Take a walk through our, um, take a walk through our neighborhood and just see the different trees and what people have growing in their yards and point things out to the kids. That's really what I'm doing when it comes to nature study. I am not a full-blown, um, sit-down-and-draw. I- we do some drawing, but then like the genus species name and all of that, I really don't do a lot of that. Um, it's very difficult with this many kids. I tried at one point in time to do the nature notebooks with everybody where everybody had a nature notebook. It's really hard to have seven notebooks on your bookshelf that are all nature.

Jody: No, I just got a whole picture of you traveling and realize you have to have a 15-passenger van.

Amy Roberts: Yes, we do.

Jody: And, like, traveling has got to be an experience. You're probably looking out the window, getting a million questions from the kids as you're traveling.

Amy Roberts: Yeah. Yeah. And we don't have a DVD player or anything like that in the van. And so we're encouraging them to look out- (Bursts out laughing.)

Jody: Bless you. Bless your heart.

Jenni: We only look at the clouds.

Amy Roberts: We look and see things.

Jody: Right.

Jenni: Yeah.

Amy Roberts: Yeah. So, like, as we head to Colorado, there's a prize if you're the first one to see the mountains.

Jody: Oh, that's so cool!

Amy Roberts: You know. So there's little things like that that we want the kids to be observing. We want them to be paying attention to God's beautiful Earth and what's in it and not be staring at screens all the time.

Jenni: Yeah. That's awesome. So now you did this even when you lived in a city environment.

Amy Roberts: Yes.

Jenni: Tell us about that. You use something called a nature table.

Amy Roberts: Yes. And part of that was being in the city and part of that was also just having so many kids and not being able to have all these nature notebooks. We do have one nature notebook that's a community one, but on the nature table, it's just a small little table that they can bring their treasures in, put them on the nature table, observe, play with them. I really encourage them to bring things in that they can play with and move around.

Jenni: So, not snakes.

Amy Roberts: No, please, no. Not snakes.

Jenni: Or big cockroaches.

Amy Roberts: No. No hugely animals of any kind.

Jenni: Yeah, nothing alive.

Amy Roberts: No, no. So it's rocks and sticks and acorns and different leaves. In the fall, we have tons of different colored leaves. I'll take a muffin tin or a, like a silverware divider and you can just set it on the nature table and that way they can sort the different things that they have. Um, it just makes for a fun environment where they're interacting with nature, but you can clean it all up at the end of the day or at the end of the week, switch it all out. It gets to stay in the house for a little bit. And then it can leave. And so I, I liked that idea because it was rotating all the time, and it was fun for the kids. It's at their level. But um, it doesn't have to be permanent.

Jenni: Right. I love that idea.

Jody: My wheels are turning. This is so exciting.

Jenni: I was like, "Oh wait, we were supposed to talk." Because my brain is so engaged right now. But then, for, like, a half a second, I forgot we were supposed to talk. I am, like, so excited. We're going to be doing some nature study this year, um, with the new, you know how it is when you have a big family, you have like new batches of kids. It's almost like you have different families along the way. And sometimes, I don't know if this happens with you, but sometimes I'm like, I do something with my older kids and I sort of check it off my mental list and then I forget like, "Oh, we have to go back and do that all over again. Cause there's a whole new crop of kids."

Amy Roberts: Yeah, that's exactly what happened to me about two years ago, I realized that I had this whole set of kids who'd never done some of these things and so I really started gathering materials again and started over and they have so enjoyed it. I did not realize I- you know, you kind of grow up with those older kids and suddenly, you look back and go, "Wait a second, there's more!"

Jody: Right.

Jenni: Yeah. This wasn't nature-related, but I have a seven-year-old and when he was in co-op last year, at the start of the co-op day, all the kids meet together and they do the pledge of allegiance and my kid is looking around like, "What are these people doing? And how come they all know the same thing?" And he looks at me like with his eyebrows all twisted up like, "What is this?" And I was thinking, "Oh my gosh, I total- we did this with the big kids. We totally forgot to do it again with the little ones."

Jody: Way to go.

Jenni: I know.

Jody: It happens though. You mean, like you said you check it off your mental list. We did that.

Jenni: Yep.

Jody: Yep.

Jenni: We've got to do it again.

Amy Roberts: I know, cause in my head, my 21-year-old is still like five.

Jenni: So, like when you're out doing, um, like a walk with your kids, I think one of my concerns is that I would be like, "I don't know what to talk about." Like, I don't know what to point out. Like, I'd be like, "Oh look, there's a tree. But then what?"

Amy Roberts: Yes. And in some respects, it's good for us, as moms, to try to start learning the names of things. Um, you really- but really, just point out the things you know. You can point out the shapes of leaves and have them look at different shapes. You know, your shapes. So, even if you don't know- (Bursts out laughing.).

Jody: Well.... I'm just kidding.

Amy Roberts: Even if you don't know the name of the tree, you can start to show them the shapes, the way that the veins run in the leaves, touch, the bark. It's all about your five senses and really observing and recognizing the different aspects of the different things you're looking at. So it really doesn't have to be "This as a catalpa tree. This is an oak tree," it doesn't have to be that. If you don't know that, it would be good for you to start learning that. And that just comes from, "Hey, we're going to go inside and research this or figure this out, or we're going to look at our field guide and figure this out." Um, and then sometimes we will -- and this is especially helpful when you live in the city -- we'll go in and watch a YouTube video about a certain thing, because there's YouTube videos for everything.

Jenni: Everything!

Amy Roberts: Yeah. And so like, I, you know, I'm going to look up those walking catfish. There's not walking catfish where I live, but I can look it up and show the kids and explain it to them.

Jody: They're going to be so excited to see that. Oh, my goodness. You have to videotape their reactions, because I want to see that.

Jenni: Hopefully you could find some really good ones. Cause some, there, it is so weird looking. And then, you have to say to your kids, "Now, imagine going into the garage and seeing this thing walking towards you."

Amy Roberts: They will never go into the garage again.

Jenni: I mean, they're harmless. They don't do anything, but man, they're weird looking.

Jody: How often are you taking these nature walks?

Amy Roberts: Well, I'll be honest with you, not real often and honestly most of it's out in our backyard, because it's like herding cats to take them out somewhere.

Jenni: Right! Right!

Jody: Oh, we use this phrase all the time. It's typically about our extended family.

Jenni: Yes. You live in the vacation capital of America. You know, everybody comes here for vacation and so all year long, we have visitors and they are like herding cats.

Jody: You know, it's funny you mentioned like checking out, like knowing all the names of the trees and all the stuff. We have like one tree down here.

Jenni: I know. The whole time she was saying that, I was like, "And there's a palm tree."

Jody: Well, you know what? There are different species of palm and we do have this nasty oak tree that makes everybody full of allergies.

Jenni: Yeah, but you know what's cool in the oak trees is we have the Spanish moss and that's cool, because it doesn't have a root system. So that's kind of a cool thing. Yeah, we have those Banyan trees, which is so cool, because they look like, um, we've got the Edison Ford estates down in, in Fort Myers, not far from us. And, um, he was the first one to bring it here. So he's got the biggest one on his property.

Jody: So cool.

Jenni: Amy, it looks like 35 trees.

Jody: Yeah.

Amy Roberts: Wow.

Jenni: No less than 35 trees. It's all white.

Jody: It looks very eerie. Like it's very Lemony Snicket's to me for some reason.

Jenni: Yeah, because the roots grow out of the branches and then they come down to the- they make their way down to the ground from the branches and then it's like...

Amy Roberts: Aw, yes!

Jenni: ...another tree grows a little bit, but it's all the same tree.

Amy Roberts: Very cool. Yeah. See, you guys know that! See, you just told me the whole thing about trees.

Jenni: See? We know a thing. We do know a thing here and there.

Jody: We know one thing.

Jenni: We know A thing. Maybe about three or four.

Jody: Maybe.

Jenni: But it's a start.

Jody: I know what an acorn is.

Amy Roberts: The great thing about being a homeschool mom is if you're just like half a step ahead of your kids, you're good. Look up on the internet, "This is a...", and you're good.

Jenni: Or we challenge them to be a half a step ahead of us and we say, "Okay, today I want you to teach me something." That's the mom- that's a homeschool mom cop-out that I love. "You know what? I want you to teach me, then I don't have to do the research." Amy, and has been so much fun talking to you. Thank you so much for talking to us. Tell us again, um, your website so people know where to find you.

Amy Roberts: I'm at raisingarrows.net.

Jenni: And we'll go ahead and link to that in our show notes and we'd love to have you come back again, sometime, and talk to us again. You've got so many cool things that you talk about and you're just such a joy.

Amy Roberts: Well, absolutely. I would love that.

Jenni: Thank you.