



21st Annual RRAS Nature Writing Contest

*Results for 2026: Winners & Honorable Mentions for
Junior (Grades 4-7) and Senior (Grades 8-12) Divisions*

Entries of essays and poems were slightly up (from last year's 75 to nearly 80) submissions. RRAS awarded six cash prizes (totaling \$100) plus five Honorable Mentions to the following students who explored the topic, "What Nature Means to Me."

— Tom Leskiw, Contest Coordinator



***First Place,
Junior Division
Penn Kerhoulas
Grade 6,
Garfield
Elementary***

"What Nature Means to Me"

Clear water flowing from a wild mountain stream, wildflowers enveloping long green fields. Fish darting through the stream like spots of sunlight. A deer gently lifts her head to gaze softly through big dark eyes, the balmy evening air smells as sweet as honey as I breathe it in slowly. Sparkling water glints like diamonds below me as it rushes under the bridge I am perched on. Above me warm Montana sky drifts slowly past me, bugs buzz happily and it seems as if the world has stopped and just gone silent.

Mountains rise up in front of me blanketed in soft evening air and tall green trees, vast fields are spread under the mountains. Grazing horses move slowly and quietly through the fields, they have no hurry or care, they're simply enjoying the night. Chirping grasshoppers and a rustling breeze are the only noises I can hear. I close my eyes and savor the night, and the peace, here there is no tension or sadness, just nature and me. I open my eyes and see a redtail hawk swooping far above. Tentatively a bunny pokes her coffee-colored head out of her burrow as the soft green grass whispers secrets through the night. If only everybody on earth could get to see this. Chimney smoke curls its way through

the night sky forming delicate spirals through the warm air.

Softly two Sandhill Cranes glide gracefully down to the shore. How I wish every night I could spend here, a warm gust of wind blows freely through my tangled hair. Somewhere far away behind me a cow bellows to their herd. The creek bubbles below me, its waters now dark with shadow. Nothing seems real here, there's no worry, anxiety or fear, only thoughts. A burst of joy seems to spill from my heart, through me, into me, it fills me with the great and utter joy for life and love of the world. Nature surrounds me, it is above me, and below me, and nature is in me, it is filling my heart with foaming creeks, whispering grasses, vibrant wildflowers, and soft feathered cranes.

Nature calms me, it nurtures and loves me, Nature whispers secrets in my ears as the wind rushes by, it laughs with me like a bubbling brook, to me nature means peace, and joy, nature means love and acceptance.

Nature is not only here though, it's everywhere, it's flowers overflowing from pots in our garden, it's dusty redwoods stretching for the sky, and it's warm sun soothing my fears and worries. To me nature is like a friend, or a sister, or a spirit. Yes, like a spirit running wild and freely through the honeysuckle and flowers singing and dancing. She is swimming in the cool waters of the creek, she is flying high above me with the hawks, she is sitting beside me watching the evening fade to night. She is inside me, and she is always with me.



***Second Place,
Junior Division
Riley Bergstrom
Grade 6,
Hydesville
Elementary***

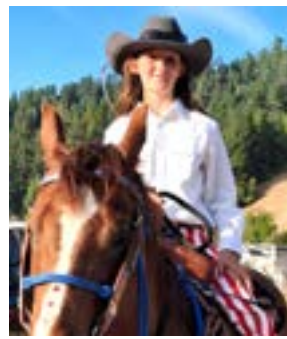
“The Peace of Nature”

To begin, this page is about the peace of nature. For me, nature means peace. This is because I am very emotional and can be overactive. When I fight with siblings at home I get hot and stressed out, so I calm myself down by going outside. I go out in my yard by my playground and lay there in the grass. I stare at the clouds and just think about the problem. I start to think about how I could have handled the problem better and hurt less people’s feelings. I try to make shapes out of the clouds and watch the birds fly across the blue sky.

When I am outside I love to take a deep breath of the amazing fresh air. I especially like all of the flowers and plants. I will pick daisies and make chains out of them. Sometimes I even make a flower crown and run around my yard pretending that I am a queen and rule the world. Nature isn’t just plants and trees and pretty pink flowers, because for me nature is a way of calming myself down and helping get my emotions under control. Nature has helped me a lot by getting me tougher mentally. Even sometimes when I am upset or angry I just picture the outdoors with the butterflies, birds, flowers, and trees swaying in the wind and it helps me calm down. Nature is peace.

But, nature isn’t just peace. Nature is basically life. If it wasn’t for trees there would be no oxygen for us to live. Because of trees and plants there is fresh air to live in, grow food to eat, and build the homes we live in. Nature helps everyone in certain ways. If it wasn’t for nature none of us would be here. Nature is peace and peace is nature.

In conclusion, my essay is about the peace of nature, and how it helps everyone. Nature is very calming and peaceful, but also life. Nature helps me and can help you too.



***Third Place,
Junior Division
Taylor Kercher
Grade 7,
Miranda Junior
High***

“What Nature Means to Me”

To me nature means a beautiful view. Nature can take your stress away. What nature means to me is that it makes me calm and takes most of my stress away. Nature also helps me breathe and helps me to think and focus on what I’m doing in the future.

Nature helps me provide food for my family. Nature is also cool because you get to see animals. Nature helps me snowboard; breathing in nature makes me feel fresh. Seeing animals is real cool especially when you don’t live in the woods. I live in the woods and I think it’s really cool to leave my house and go for a walk. In the woods you can feel free and breathe in a lot of ways. You can take your dogs out on a walk and not worry about the neighbors yelling at you.

The woods can also help you build fires to keep you warm and a lot of other things. Sometimes when you’re stressed the countryside is better than the cityside; I would rather the countryside because you can feel more free and not have people surrounding you all the time. What’s in nature lets me take time to think. Nature is really pretty although there are some old rusty things out there. Riding horses in the woods or fields is really calm. When you’re riding through the forest you can feel your horse relax and you can feel the bond between your horse and you.

Honorable Mention, Junior Division
Lily Gardner
Grade 7, Sunny Brae Middle School

“What Does Nature Mean to You?”

Nature means hiking through the woods, breathing in the smell of leaves and moss. Nature means camping under the stars, whether in the wilderness or a backyard. Nature means midnight trips to the beach, even when it's foggy. Nature means the crunch of leaves underfoot, the clouds in the sky, the feel of bark under my hands, the beetles and ants and butterflies that constantly remind us: we are not alone. And we were not here first. It's shown in the ivy, poisonous or not, that constantly fills the cracks in our homes and sheds. Even in the grass that grows everywhere is connected to the earth and therefore connected to me.

I feel more at home when I'm in the woods. Being surrounded by trees makes me feel safe. That claustrophobic feeling is comfort for me. The sound of rain makes me want to spin in pure happiness, dirt, real dirt, makes me want to run and the beauty of the fog coming over the tree-tipped hills makes me feel pride in our state, our county. Humboldt is a wonderful place because of the redwoods. Having a species of tree that is found nowhere else is exhilarating. I feel glad that I live here. For me, the forest is my favorite terrain. It's a feeling I can only try to explain. It's my home away from home. I climb the trees, I jump from stump to stump. I admire the mushrooms but never touch.

I see the wildlife and wildlife is the other half of nature. The squirrels, the birds, the mice, and everything else. I always try to pet the cats at our apartments and walk slowly around ravens to not scare them. I see them pumping their wings in the sky and try to imagine what it's like to fly. Deeper than all that, somewhere in my heart, I know I am a part of nature. I am an animal, just like everything else. I was made to hunt and survive in the trees. I feel like I belong when I'm in the woods, like anything could happen, and I'd let it I feel like I could disappear among the trees and never have to deal with social rules ever again.

Being an extrovert, I know that I need people but being with nature always recharges my energy. Whether it's plants, animals or other human beings, I am built for nature and nature is built for us.

Honorable Mention, Junior Division
Maria Lopez Casas
Grade 7, Miranda Junior High

“What Nature Means to Me”
(translated from Spanish)

Nature is incredibly important because we humans obtain oxygen from trees. There are animals that live in trees and if there were no trees, those animals would have nowhere to live. That is why it is so vital.

Furthermore, nature is beautiful, for it offers those places you can turn to when you need silence—when you need someone to listen. In those moments when you feel as though no one else is around, that part of nature is there, listening to you—taking the time to hear that other side of yourself that no one else sees, or rather, the side you do not reveal to anyone else.

It listens even when you are smiling on the outside while on the inside, you are falling apart. Moreover, it serves as a safe haven—for you, for other animals, and for those people who have no one else.

And amidst all of this, it is simply lovely to go for a walk with the person you love, or with a dear friend, or to simply cherish a moment—a beautiful memory of something wonderful that has touched your life.

This experience taught me that nature has its own special way of talking to you but only if you'll listen. It changed my perspective in many ways knowing that whether the sun shines or not, it's still there. Instead of thinking negatively about the bad in my life, my perspective is now that the positive in life may be hiding but it'll always be right there with you waiting for it's time to shine. Nature brings a peace with it that overcomes the chaos. Spending time in nature brings that peace into my life and calms the negativity.

Today I carry that peace with me in my everyday life. I hold the importance of nature and what it brings me. A brand new perspective to guide me through life and all of its challenges. When I'm feeling upset, anxious or on a bad day nature will always be there to share its peace.



***First Place,
Senior Division
Amaya Teraoka
Grade 9,
McKinleyville High***

“River Time”

As the glass-clear arms of the Smith wove their way through the carved rock of the gorge, I remembered the smiles in my pictures from all those years ago. Here I was, still doing the exact same, extraordinary thing. Whitewater rafting. I still hear the rushing water sculpting out the serpentine of the Smith. I still feel the rush of adrenaline after dropping into a rapid I know by heart. I will get to remember my experiences, not just as the boater I have become, but as the little girl, squealing with joy after gulping down a mouthful of water after a tiny, seemingly-insignificant wave. I am still her, and she will always be me.

When I arose the morning of February 16, 2026 I felt the rush of excitement, mixed with a tinge of fear, that I always feel before embarking on a new run. Racing the dawn of the transcendent day, we made our way to the fern-covered Craig’s Beach put-in. Our dazzling green boats appeared even brighter when glissading down the immense wall of forest green that comes alongside the Smith River. As we navigated our way through boulder fields strewn across the river we tried to keep pace with the kayaks of every color and the boats guided by my best friends.

After a countless number of drops and pools, I caught my first glimpse of the canyon walls, still slick with early morning droplets of rain, cascading straight down into the superficially bottomless Smith. I went quiet with awe. When I’m on the river I’m too joyful and surrounded by love to ever become silent. As we drifted through the ravine we hoped would never end, we fell behind the rest of the group. Nobody made any effort to catch up. We were surrounded by everyone and everything we would ever need.

Sometimes I forget to look around, notice all the miniature details in life. I get caught up with all the “important” things, I forget to look at the simple ones. The way Darlingtonias look like cobras, the smiles after dropping into a rambunctious hole, and the way the river curves its way into the ocean. My experience on the south fork reminded me to slow down, and just look.

At the take out there is an arched bridge spanning the width of the river. Attached to that wonderful structure there is a rope swing. It was there, at the highest possible place to swing into the clearest river, that I hesitated, just for a moment. I was slightly scared. As I reflected on all the beaming moments, I wouldn’t have it any other way. When faced with fear, the best thing to do is leap. And so I did. It seems to me that that tiny, seemingly-insignificant wave from back when all I had to worry about was covering my mouth before a rapid, was the most important part of life. It led to all of this, it led to me.



***Second Place,
Senior Division
Albee McCovey
Grade 9,
McKinleyville High***

“A Trip on the River”

The alarm I had set on my watch rang out breaking the silence of the morning. I woke up in a tent filled with me and my cousins, we groggily woke up and stretched. We were on the Klamath River paddling down from the headwaters to the mouth and we were about halfway down the now free-flowing Klamath River.

For breakfast we had oatmeal and hot chocolate, it was a stark contrast to the cold morning air and it made us feel very warm. Then we had to do the tedious task of packing up all of our things and loading them into the rafts. After, we could finally put on our gear that had been drying from the day before, though they weren’t fully dry, I was still relieved to put our gear on.

I got into my kayak which was sitting by the river bar baking in the sun. I was accompanied by 345 other people from around the world joining us in this momentous moment. We set off from the riverbar the water enveloping our kayaks, rafts, and cataracts, as we paddled through the murky water ,still recovering from the effects of dam removal, we talked about our cultures and how interesting each other were. There were people from all over the world, from China, Chile, New Zealand and many other places. We docked at a village called Ah-Pah at the mouth of Ah-Pah Creek. We had a big spaghetti dinner provided by the village caretaker. I

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slept in a family house with my cousins telling scary stories all night.

The actual kayaking was rather anticlimactic in comparison to how it was farther up the river. It was like the river had slowed down to accommodate the large number of people going down it. It was like a slow moving lake aside from the occasional rifle. Being there on the river with all those people gave me a strong sense of solidarity and belonging. I had had fun on the river by myself but I had come to find that it was better when it was shared with others. At the end of every day I went fishing in the creeks with friends and family. Sometimes if the fish was big enough I would eat it and share it with my cousins.

At the end of the journey I had found a place where I could get along with everyone where there was no discrimination. My time during the first descent of the free-flowing Klamath River was filled with trials and hardship but most of it was a lot of fun. I enjoyed all of it, even the hard times. It was probably the most interesting thing I will do in my life, and in the end I think it was a story of me learning how to walk, not in a physical sense but in an adolescence to adulthood kind of way.



***Third Place,
Senior Division
Cameron Bunnell
Grade 9,
McKinleyville High***

“Creatures’ Reliance”

I was camping at A-WAY in Petrolia last year. The sun was hot and bright as I was relaxing at the river. It smelt woody from the forest surrounding us and this moment I’m about to tell is important because of peace and lesson learning.

I stared at the river in front of me with the sun’s heat shining down on me. My family was with me, some were swimming, some just eating and sitting in the shade. I layed there just enjoying the sun and tanning, after about 30 minutes I decided to get in the water. I swam around with my cousin enjoying the peaceful feel of it all.

I smelt a mix of the foresty woody scent mixed with the refreshing cool scent coming from the river. The water wasn’t too cold when I got in but cool enough to refresh me from laying in the hot sun. I felt calm, happy, and very at peace. There was a mild

warm breeze that kept my upper body warm when it wasn’t under the water. Then as I was relaxing in the water just floating there I noticed across the river bank a bobcat slowly walking down and getting a drink of water from the river. As it looked up and held eye contact and then ran this made me think about just how much this river means to so many other creatures besides us.



***Honorable Mention,
Senior Division
Alejandra
Villagrana-Torres
Grade 9,
McKinleyville High***

“Always There”

My mom doesn’t like sunsets. She would rather watch the sunrise, again and again, before watching it set. She prefers beginnings not endings. Not me, I’m mesmerized as the day comes to an end, and the sky fills with all the colors. The oranges, the yellows, the pinks, and the reds. The beauty in endings. My favorite thing to do is seeing sunsets at the beach, whether it’s sunny or gloomy. The sun is always there whether it’s shining or not.

My story begins on a warm summer day. It was nice out so my mom and I decided to go to the beach. Once we got there I could see the waves crashing against the shore in the distance. I felt a warm breeze on my skin and the salty air in my lungs. I follow my mom out onto the beach feeling the warm sand beneath our feet. Once we reach the shore we watch as the birds hop around just barely escaping the wave coming at them. It never reaches them but it’s close. We move onto looking at all the rocks and shells on the shoreline as I wait for the sun to set.

It’s finally sunset time and we watch while the warm breeze turns cold. I run out onto the water splashing it everywhere as I go. It’s freezing and I shiver when the water splashes onto my body. My feet are turning ice cold. As I do that something stands out to me. A rock shaped like a heart. I pick it up and walk over to the water to rinse it off. It’s marbled and shaped like a perfect heart. I felt awe and appreciation for the land around me. I set the rock back down and left for the next to stumble upon it.

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This experience taught me about just how many creatures rely on this river not just for leisure but for life. It made me think more about the fact that this river is slowly dying; Getting shallower every year. I started to imagine the fact that eventually this river will be completely or almost empty, providing not enough water for any of us to enjoy or survive off of. This just shows how much people take for granted this river and don't treat it the way it should be treated. This whole experience shows how deeply and critically I think into my life and also how I notice the chain of effects between us and other creatures' interactions with nature.

Every year when I go camping at this same place and go swimming in this same river and I see the water getting lower I think about that day with the bobcat and how it changed my perception of nature. Nature will continue to be important in so many ways to me, like how much I enjoy my outdoor activities and how much healthier I feel overall the more I'm out in nature. So, when you go out and go camping or to the beach, river, forest, or any other place of nature I hope you think about all the other creatures that rely on the same nature that we take advantage of and abuse blindly.



***Honorable Mention,
Senior Division
Lilia Mendes
Grade 9,
McKinleyville High***

“Sparks in Darkness”

I sneak away from the campfire and end up at the dimly lit picnic table, where all the s'mores ingredients are waiting patiently to be assembled. I admire my perfectly golden marshmallow for a moment, then carefully slide it in between the two graham crackers.

I hear padding footsteps creeping up behind me, and feel like I'm being swallowed by the eerie surrounding darkness. I peek over my shoulder, catching my Mom right before she gets the chance to scare me. The smile she gives me appears warm and playful, but I don't return it.

“Who's this one for,” I ask, with a hint of annoyance in my voice, though I try my best to mask it. My family has been camping in Tannery Gulch for the last few days, and I'm longing for the comforts of home.

“For Cameron,” my mom replies, pausing to study my expression. “I'll put everything away. Go sit down and enjoy the last bit of time we're here together.” She turns away quietly and begins closing up the bags.

I gently sigh and stroll back to where everyone is laughing about the game they're all playing. I hand the s'more to my little cousin, and can see his face light up in the warm glow cast by the fire. I take my seat at the opposite end across from him, and sink into my chair.

Immediately after, all three dogs start barking. It is a stark contrast to the quiet night, which had only previously been filled with the gentle crackling of wood and rustling branches in the soft wind.

When the ruckus they are causing shows no sign of stopping, my irritated family makes an effort to calm them down. I reluctantly take our young, energetic, golden retriever back to my place at the fire.

I put my hand on his side, and whisper into his soft ear, “Everything is alright.” He lays down beside my chair, and I reach my hand into his thick fur, which appears to shimmer like streams of gold.

I breathe in heavily, taking in the smell of damp, earthy air. I feel the warmth of the fire touching my skin, and watch the flames leap in hot orange flicks. I look up to the sky, observing the bright moon just visible over the tops of the high trees, who stretch their arms high to meet the sky. I gaze at the stars, more visible tonight than I've ever seen at home.

This is when the realization clicks in my mind. This place—even though I've never been here before—feels like home. I live on the earth, amongst thriving plants, alongside diverse animals. I am privileged to see crashing waves, bold sunsets, vibrant rainbows slashing through calm skies.

I am one with this scenery, and the feeling flows through me. The nature around us isn't just a place we travel through, or a momentary visit in our continually moving lives; this is home.



***Honorable Mention,
Senior Division
Autumn Stonecypher
Grade 9, Academy
of the Redwoods***

“What Nature Means to Me”

My purest memories come from my time out in nature. I remember diving into the blue, blue waters of Hawaii’s warm ocean, soothing the soles of my bare feet after they raced across the scorching lava rock. “Tang town!” We would laugh as we watched the schools of little yellow tangs swayed with the waves lapping at the rocky shore. I loved the guava fruit and lychees we would snack on while playing in the tidepools full of unique little creatures. We would swim out past the urchins to swim with the beautiful parrotfish and the humuhumunukunukuāpua’a, or reef tigerfish. We would visit one-of-a-kind beaches, like Punalu’u Black Sand Beach. My favorite, Two Step Beach (Honaunau Bay), was so full of green sea turtles that I discovered one had swam right beneath me, his shell slippery and aged.

My family always tries to be outdoors whenever we can. The moment spring gives way to summer, we race to our favorite campgrounds, along the Van Duzen with its rich forest or the Smith with its pretty waters. We’d be pitching the tent to the familiar song of the Steller’s jay and running across the rocks to the riverside to search for frogs and wade in the water. We would play our favorite board games and relax around the campfire before cozying up in our sleeping bags to listen to the owls and frogs chatter. I love waking in the morning for cocoa by the campfire as the forest came alive with all the birds you could imagine. We pick huckleberries for our delicious pancakes. My sister and I will run ahead to plunge into the fresh waters of the swimming hole, chasing the young trout and diving for what we call “fossil rocks.” We would swim for hours in those rivers, rolling in the sand when we’re cold and diving off the sides of cliffs for the thrill.

I remember our lovely hikes in the redwoods of Sequoia Park, where we would see who could spot the first banana slug or salamander. We would snack on redwood sorrel and admire the trilliums after they bloomed. Walking down to the duck pond was always fun; the mallards and wood ducks were always curious and very pretty. A fallen tree stretched over a small ravine, with a small

mushroom I grew fond of. There was one particular fallen tree over a small ravine that I cherished for its one small mushroom that sat halfway across.

Memories of kayaking in Freshwater Lagoon among the reeds and waterfowl, backpacking in the South Fork Mountain among boulders and ice-cold lakes, and watching the mountains blur while Lord Huron sings of the woods and love. These memories are very special to me. The warm waters of Hawaii, the chatter of the lively Steller’s Jay, the tangy redwood sorrel; nature floods me with comfort and passion. I feel an affection beyond words for each wonder nature possesses. Nature means everything to me.