

By TRACI LANGWORTHY

If you look it up in the dictionary, the term "alpenglow" will probably be followed by a description of rosy light enveloping a snow-covered mountain peak at dawn or dusk on a clear day.

The inspiration came from the Alps — which immediately made sense to 10-year-old Christopher Boone.

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The more glowing discovery actually came earlier, when he caught his own glimpse of another light trick, right in his own back yard.

One night after he had learned about "alpenglow," Christopher and his mother, Barbara, spotted a "purplish glow" on the darkening horizon visible from their home's back window. Christopher was inspired to review how, "white light, when it

reflects off something, makes all those colors." Meanwhile Mrs. Boone was inspired to remember how, "nature is all around us," even in her family's "postage stamp" of a yard in the city of Jamestown.

"You don't have to live on a farm or by a lake," she said. "Appreciate what you do have around you."

It's a lesson at the core of a new, at-home program in nature education developed for children everywhere by the Roger Tory Peterson Institute in Jamestown.

At a time when television and computers either keep children's attention indoors or offer second-hand views of everything from the Alps to the inside of a bee hive, the "My Place" initiative, as it's called, is designed to help children between ages 8 and 11 discover the wonders they can experience outdoors and in person, in the place they know as home.

While partly inspired by the historical success of the Boy and Girl Scouting programs, the new curriculum's holistic

and individualized approach to nature study is closer to that of Henry David Thoreau and the namesake of the Roger Tory Peterson Institute. A celebrated naturalist and wildlife artist who died in 1996, Peterson was known by a broad audience of Americans for his Peterson series of "field guides." The goal of the books was, and still is, to make the natural world accessible to everyone, in a portable form capable of being used in the field.

As part of the "My Place" program, children whose families join RTPI are eligible to receive Peterson's *Field Guide to Eastern Forests*, along with a field pack, sketch book and hand lens.

"They're really the same tools used by Thoreau and a lot of naturalists in history," noted Mark Baldwin, director of education at RTPI.

The only thing missing is the 1800s, in the case of Thoreau.

"The prevailing thinking is that children are spending so much time in front of computer screens now. They don't spend a lot of time imagining or in unstructured environments," Baldwin said. "We hope this will help make inroads in reversing that trend."

Or, make use of computers in a supportive way.

"I think we've got to accept the fact TV and computers are here to stay and we should utilize them as a tool," said Tina Nelson, who developed the "My Place" curriculum for RTPI. "I know when I started out I was computer-resistant, but now I can see you've got to go where the kids are."

In addition to parental involvement, which RTPI staff members encourage, one of the key components of the program is the interaction between children and volunteer adult "mentors" who monitor the youngsters' work, answer questions and share in discoveries. Eventually, "mentors" and children may keep up their dialogues electronically. In fact, RTPI staff members expect the Internet will provide them their best means of reaching the largest number of children as they work to expand the program nationwide.

"It's just in its infancy now, but as the program grows, we hope there will be hundreds of thousands of kids participating across the country," Baldwin said.

Christopher, for one, thinks there's a good chance of that happening.

He agreed last year to become a



Above, Bliss studies some tree fungus on an outing to the woods near her home in Falconer. At right she studies tree branches overhead, in preparation for a sketch.

