Illinois Master Naturalist



Around the state and in your backyard, University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists connect their communities with the natural world.

The Master Naturalist program leverages the expertise of university scientists and environmental partners to train adult volunteers to be environmental advocates by putting research into action. Our goal is to empower nature enthusiasts to put their unique skills to use through local conservation and restoration activities.

Last year, more than 880 Master Naturalists put in nearly 70,500 hours removing invasive species, monitoring the health of waterways, raising and releasing monarch butterflies, teaching youth about the environment, and investing in the future of our natural areas.

From the oak and hickory forests in the far southern hills to its namesake remnant prairie patches, Illinois is home to awe-inspiring wild spaces. Trees shade our homes, wetlands protect us from floods, and pollinators bring fruit and vegetables to our kitchen tables. But the future of all this is threatened by habitat loss, a changing climate, pollution, and more. While these issues can feel overwhelming, the projects highlighted in this report are an example of how small steps taken by passionate individuals can and do make a difference – one butterfly, one tree, and one river at a time.

Learn how you can be a positive force for change by becoming an Illinois Extension Master Naturalist at <u>go.illinois.edu/MN</u>.

Duane Friend State Master Naturalist and Climate Change Specialist (217) 243-7424 | friend@illinois.edu

The following Extension staff contributed articles to this report: Christine Belless, Stephanie Hale, Nancy Kuhajda, Mary Nelson, and Emily Steele.



"Being a Master Naturalist is all about the next generation. I've planted a lot of trees, and I probably won't get a chance to be under the shade of those trees, but it's for the generations to come. I see a lot of stuff going away that's precious, and I hope we can protect and restore those things for our grandchildren."

Coles County Master Naturalist Terry Smith





Jr. Master Naturalist programs sprout young environmentalists

When you plant a seed, either in the ground or in a young person's mind, beautiful things can grow. Two Illinois Extension units – Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties and Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties – offered the Jr. Master Naturalist program for the first time in 2023 to connect youth with nature and spark their interest in the environment.

At the Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties program, nine students ages 8 to 12 met in O'Fallon to explore topics from pollinators to climate change through hands-on activities every Saturday for six weeks. The students took to the field and put their science skills to the test by determining wind direction, taking soil samples, and making bird feeders. The students also planted a raised bed sensory garden located near an all-inclusive playground. The program culminated with a hike, including learning how to plan and pack for a hike and applying the "leave no trace" philosophy when out in nature. Our goal with the Jr. Master Naturalist 4-H club is to provide hands-on and engaging activities for our 4-H members. Many of our meetings are held outside in local parks so the 4-H members can see what wonderful natural resources we have in our own backyard and return with their families to enjoy together.

Jennifer Beals, Fulton County Jr. Master Naturalist 4-H Club



Repurposed feed and seed bags have become support for pollinator project

If you asked the Master Naturalists of east central Illinois about their latest fundraiser, they'd likely say it's in the bag. The recycled bags, that is.

Bird seed and pet food bags need to be sturdy, so they are often made from woven polypropylene plastic. This also makes them difficult to recycle, so like many other single-use plastics, they often end up in landfills.

Master Naturalist Mona Maas has saved more than 300 bags from this fate by turning them into hand-sewn totes. These rugged recycled totes also have the added bonus of being a fundraiser to support a local pollinator garden.

"I was gifted a repurposed plastic birdseed bag and thought, 'I can do that,' " Maas said.

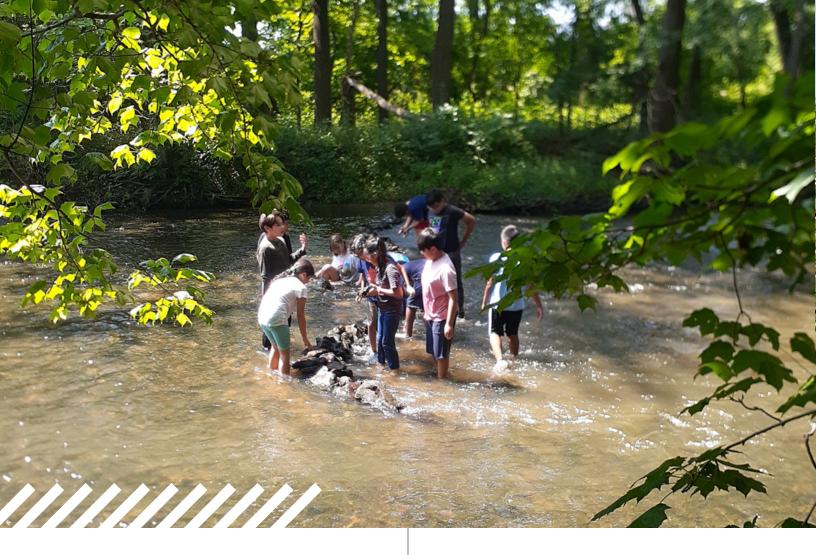
She had also been looking for a way to raise funds to support the Elkhart Pollinator Habitat, which was planted in the village in 2020. "The habitat is well established and a joy to maintain, but I want to see it thrive for a long time," Maas said. With an agreement from the Elkhart Village Board to match \$500 of the funds she raised, Maas connected with Illinois Audubon Springfield Chapter and the Illinois Native Plant Society Central Chapter to start collecting bags.

Maas coordinated a group of 10 Master Naturalists from Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties, and Logan, Menard, and Sangamon counties for six days of cleaning, cutting, folding, and sewing more than 300 bags. Even after the workdays wrapped up, Master Naturalist Cindy Intravartolo and her sister Diane worked on bags at home.

"It didn't take us long to learn how to quickly churn out the bags," Maas said. "So far, we have completed more than 225."

Maas added that she hopes other Illinois Master Naturalists will pick up the bag repurposing project in their own communities.





A walk in the woods transforms fourth graders' relationship with nature

The deep, heart-shaped tracks stand out clearly in the soft mud of a leaf-covered ravine in Joliet's Pilcher Park. Will County Master Naturalist Amy Gibson asks a group of curious 9- and 10-year-olds clustered around her, "What do we have here?"

Two energetic boys zigzag through the group. "Don't you remember? You taught us! These are deer tracks, and it looks like they are heading this way. Come on!"

They scamper onward, leading 40 of their classmates and some Master Naturalists on a mission to find more tracks. This is Kids 'n Nature Adventure.

The unique immersive afterschool and summer program is a partnership between the Illinois Extension Will County Master Naturalists, Joliet District 86 Grade Schools, and the Joliet Park District that gives 200 fourth grade students from six underserved schools a chance to experience the natural world. The program began in 2005 and more than 2,000 youth have participated. After school in the fall and spring, students are bussed to the park to join Master Naturalists and park staff to learn and experience the natural world. In the summer, they come two mornings a week. Although Pilcher Park is less than 10 miles from their homes, most of the students and their families never knew it existed until Kids 'n Nature.

At the first session, the students are tentative, even sometimes fearful. They hold hands and walk wide-eyed quietly down the center of the paved path. Within a few weeks, they are transformed — climbing trees, splashing in the creek, rolling down hills, and turning over a rotten log to see who they can find.

Their teachers have noted even bigger changes they've seen at school. The students show increased teamwork and empathy skills, they have better concentration, and demonstrate leadership skills. Many of the former program participants return to be junior leaders and, even later, in high school, to do their community service at the park.

The change continues at home, with students encouraging their parents to take them to the park. As one student put it, "I didn't even know nature and that I love it. And I will take care of it for the rest of my life."



Discovery of remnant prairie leads to educational outreach and conservation

In 2018, three Master Naturalists from Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside counties were exploring natural areas at the Lake Carroll Association community when they stumbled upon remnant prairie patches. Now, the association has more than 35 acres of native areas, a one-acre demonstration prairie, a pollinator garden, a new wetland filtering water before it enters the lake, expanded hiking trails, and so much more.

The Lake Carroll Association is a 5,000-acre private community located in northwest Illinois that includes restaurants, a campground, fish hatchery, and nature trails surrounding the lake. After the discovery of the prairie plants, the Master Naturalists formed the Lake Carroll Association Prairie Club to encourage the protection of these areas, manage the areas, and help residents establish native plantings, all while providing educational opportunities.

Their most exciting find was the discovery of three separate prairie remnants on the property. One area had several conservative species indicating minimal human modification, including green milkweed, Illinois tick-trefoil, pale purple coneflower, and leadplant. The team located another remnant prairie while scouting for where to establish a firebreak and noticed Virginia mountain mint and wild bergamot. A closer inspection also revealed sneezeweed, Robin's plantain, and pale spiked lobelia. The third remnant revealed itself through a 6-foottall lead plant growing along a woodland edge nearly smothered by bush honeysuckle. Club members cleared some of the area and found at least 28 other native species, including midland shooting star, yellow pimpernel, and Leiberg's panic grass.

Biologists from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and The Prairie Enthusiasts verified the remnants, helped identify plants, and provided management options. Other projects the Master Naturalists have been involved in are establishing three new miles of hiking trails that are safer for walkers and helping to develop the East Fork Creek Watershed Plan in collaboration with local farmers. They also communicate with residents about the importance of native plants for insects and wildlife through a monthly newsletter, social media, displays, and programs such as native plant sales, invasive removal demonstrations, nature camps, and more. In 2023, they sold more than 1,000 native plug plants to help promote a healthier watershed.

The volunteers are currently focusing their efforts on protecting the remnant prairies by proposing that the association board pass a native plant bylaw.



Volunteers built an informational kiosk at an eight-acre prairie to share information about native plants, restoration efforts, and upcoming programs.





Master Naturalists get outdoors to connect with, support natural spaces

"Take a hike" takes on a new meaning when you go on a field trip with a Master Naturalist. You could be in a forest identifying plants when a birdcall overhead has someone ask, "What was that?" You could be having an honest conversation about how to make outdoor spaces more inclusive. You could even be scooping fish out of a lake into a tank on a boat to help track aquatic wildlife populations.

In September, more than 100 Extension volunteers and staff headed south for the annual Master Naturalist State Conference to connect and gain new skills, tools, and programs to bring back home. Participants explored sessions including bird watching, plant identification, climate change, inclusivity, citizen science projects, nature journaling, an Underground Railroad site in Southern Illinois, and more.

Set among the bluffs, forests, and lakes of southern Illinois' natural landscape and hosted at Touch of Nature in Makanda, the event included a keynote presentation on native plants by the Illinois Botanizer Chris Benda, hands-on sessions, service projects, and regional field trips. Benda, who is a naturalist, photographer, author, and teacher, shared his passion for the natural areas of Illinois with tales of his work surveying plants around the state.

On day two, participants headed out on a field trip to search Snake Road for migrating reptiles, hike Pomona Natural Bridge, tour SunnySide Acres native seed farm, canoe Lake Murphysboro State Park, or explore geological features at Millstone Bluff and Millstone Lake.

The conference was hosted by the local Extension offices in Franklin, Jackson, Perry, Randolph, and Williamson counties and Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties.



Youth spread their wings with Monarch Madness

Monarch butterflies, like many migrating wildlife species, are in trouble. At every stage, from egg to chrysalis to adulthood, they face hurdles. Kids of all ages learned this first-hand at the annual Monarch Madness celebration, where they made their way through a butterfly life cycle obstacle course.

The annual event is an opportunity to showcase the beauty of butterflies and their importance to the ecosystem with handson crafts, activities, and demonstrations. Since first spreading its wings in 2016, Monarch Madness has been coordinated by Central Illinois Master Gardeners in DeWitt, Macon, and Piatt counties. In 2023 it expanded to also include volunteers and programs led by Master Naturalists and 4-H youth development. Broadening the program allowed for a wider variety of activities.

On the day of the event in late September, monarchs fluttered over the nearby Rock Springs Conservation Area prairie in Decatur, fueling up on nectar to fuel their 3,000-mile migration to Mexico. Hundreds of people showed up to play butterfly bingo, see through the eyes of a butterfly with a virtual reality program, and participate in community science by safely netting a few monarchs to tag and track on their journey.



























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If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs. College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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