



ILLINOIS MASTER NATURALIST ANNUAL REPORT



Illinois
Master
Naturalist



Duane Friend
Climate Change Specialist

A Message from the State Coordinator

Every year, I'm amazed at the projects collectively University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists achieve. This report includes tree restoration projects, youth nature camps, community partnerships with natural areas, and more.

In 2024, several exciting things occurred for the Master Naturalist program, including:

- Several new natural resources, environment, and energy educators and coordinators have joined Extension across the state, increasing the number of offices able to provide the Master Naturalist program. Counties in orange on the map have active Master Naturalist programs.
- For Master Naturalist training, a hybrid option, with both online and in-person training, was developed for statewide use.
- More than 150 volunteers and staff attended the annual conference in western Illinois for field trips and ongoing learning opportunities.

- We added a new chapter to the volunteer training curriculum on natural resources and diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice issues.
- Master Naturalists coordinators can now learn from other staff through a new informal mentor program.

There were several units that also worked with Master Naturalist volunteers for the Junior Master Naturalist program, and there are some more of these projects planned for 2025.

I want to take this opportunity to once again say how impressive Master Naturalist volunteers and Illinois Extension staff are. Whatever projects you are involved with, the community benefits from your actions. You are truly amazing people, and I am honored to work with you.

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Learn more about how Master Naturalists bring positive change to communities across Illinois at extension.illinois.edu/MN.





What is an Illinois Extension Master Naturalist?

Across the state, Master Naturalist volunteers share their knowledge and talents by putting research into action to help sustain and support the prairie state's natural resources. Master Naturalists learn about botany, environmental ethics, archaeology, climate, forestry, geology, prairies, mammals, birds, insects, urban systems, and more from University of Illinois experts. They then share their time and expertise through local environmental stewardship projects such as invasive species removal, restoration projects, wildlife monitoring, and more.

2024 Engagement



70,834
Hours Volunteered



898
Master Naturalist
Volunteers



go.illinois.edu/MNimpact

Fulton County

Master Naturalists partner with The Nature Conservancy to survey and assess new trees

Written by Christine Belless, agriculture and natural resources program coordinator

Protecting and restoring Illinois' natural landscapes is a team effort one tree at a time. In spring 2022, The Nature Conservancy-Emiquon partnered with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources foresters and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to breathe life back into a 62-acre stretch of land by planting 27,000 trees.

But planting trees is just the first chapter in this ecological saga. Monitoring their survival and growth is crucial to ensuring the project's success. That's where Master Naturalists stepped in. A dedicated squad of five volunteers received training from Natural Conservancy staff to locate the trees using smartphones and mapping software.

Armed with new skills and unwavering enthusiasm, the Master Naturalists embarked on their mission. They scoured six sites within the planting area, assessing 60 trees and 10 different species. Of the originally planted trees, 51 were thriving, and nine had succumbed to the challenges of their new environment.

Ongoing monitoring of how the newly planted trees are doing is important to the success of projects like this. "Even with a conservative approach, our survivability rate sits at a promising 82%," said Sally McClure with the Nature Conservancy.

Master Naturalists Ed Coleman and Mike McGraw reviewed an additional 10 sites and 100 locations. "It's been a rewarding experience, but not without its challenges," McGraw said. "Traversing fields choked with 6-foot weeds to find tiny saplings is no walk in the park. But then you stumble upon a 3-foot oak, leaves swaying in the breeze, and it makes every struggle worthwhile."



Piatt County

Identification projects give names to trees on nature walk

A walk through the woods is always nice, but knowing what species surround you and how they benefit the ecosystem makes a woodland hike even better. In October 2024, Master Naturalists and Master Gardeners in Macon and Piatt counties came together to host a Fall Tree Crawl at the Monticello Forest Preserve Park where the community could learn more about trees.

The preserve was an ideal location because the trees had recently been identified and labeled by a team of volunteers. Master Naturalists Mary Kay and Mike Randall saw the need after a walk through the woods and connected with four other Extension volunteers: Jane and David White, Jane Smith, and Kim Dancey, who had recently taken Illinois Extension's Mastering Urban Tree Health program. Together, they worked to identify the trees in the park and label them with signs that had scannable QR codes to connect people with more information at any time using their smartphones.



Fulton County Youth explore the world of nature with the Junior Master Naturalist program

When you're young, the outside world is a big, and sometimes scary place to explore. The Junior Master Naturalist 4-H SPIN Club in Fulton County, now in its third year, gives youth the chance to play and learn together outdoors with monthly adventures in partnership with the 4-H youth development program.

Through meetups with hands-on interactive activities, 13 youth ages 9 to 12 learned about wildlife, native plants, fossils, weather, and camping. The camping program helped the young adventurers learn how to be prepared to safely spend time outdoors. Leaders talked through what they would need to pack, and then they built their own mini first-aid kit. Together, they learned how to put up a tent and roll a sleeping bag and then finished some s'more snacks.

"As leaders, we feel the Jr. Master Naturalist program was a great success," said Jenny Beal, a Master Naturalist volunteer who helps lead the club. "The kids were very enthusiastic, and over the six sessions, they built relationships and friendships while learning about nature and developing good stewardship. We all had a great time exploring science in nature.

I had so much fun in the Junior Master Naturalist 4-H club and can't wait for it to start again!
Aaliyah, first-year participant



Bond County Educational park projects a sign of new beginnings

Signs in two parks in Greenville welcome visitors to the pond and hiking trails with information about native aquatic life and wildflowers, thanks to the efforts of Bond County Master Naturalist Pat Kious.

Kingsbury Park houses a pond that is used for fishing and other recreational purposes. Kious recognized an opportunity to create two interactive and educational signs sharing photos and information about the native fish, turtles, and snakes in the pond. Together with Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Educator Christina Lueking and the Bond County Farm Bureau, they secured funds for supplies ordered through local vendors. The local garden club funded another sign for spring ephemeral wildflowers along the walking trail in Patriot's Park. The signs were installed and dedicated in 2023 and 2024.



Livingston County Partnership with central Illinois nature preserve creates outdoor learning opportunities

By Darci Webber, natural resources, environment, and energy educator

Natural areas can sometimes be hard to come by in Illinois, but outdoor experiences are one of the best ways to learn about the environment. In Livingston County, Master Naturalists partner with the Fugate Woods Nature Preserve and the Prairie Lands Foundation to host events and hands-on learning opportunities at the preserve, which is home to more than 150 acres of trails, native timber, and restored prairie.

Through the partnership, Extension offers a variety of outdoor learning experiences for all ages. In 2024, more than 250 people gathered to explore environmental topics like bugs, bats, meteors, wellness, and more. Master Naturalists also launched a community-wide challenge encouraging visitors to the preserve to get outdoors and explore. The Fugate Challenge shares ideas on how anyone can experience events at the preserve, develop skills, join volunteer activities, and attend programs. Information about the challenge can be found at www.FugateWoods.org.



One event in November, the Night Owl Prowl, gave visitors the unique opportunity to explore the preserve after dark. More than 100 people attended the family-friendly event to learn about owls and take a hike to listen for them.

“Families were enthusiastic to be out in the woods, and when dusk came, everyone became still, listening and watching for owls,” said Alison Meanor, Extension Master Naturalist Program Coordinator. “We were rewarded with two screech owls flying into the grove and perching in the tree above us.”

Learn more about the Master Naturalists in Livingston, McLean, and Woodford counties at go.illinois.edu/GrandPrairieMN.



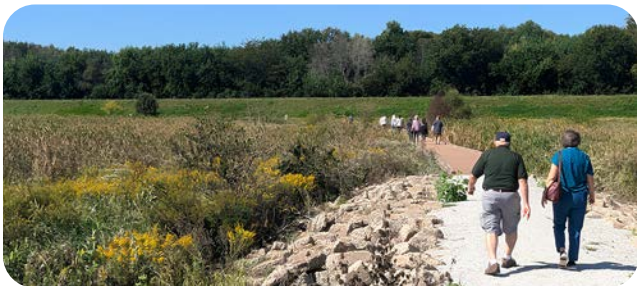
McDonough County Master Naturalist annual conference sows seeds of hope

By Emily Steele, media communications manager

The beauty of autumn in west central Illinois is not subtle. Amber swaths of blooming goldenrod are adorned by monarch butterflies under a bright blue sky, which only ends when it meets the expanse of Illinois River wetlands, filled with the calls of migrating birds. This vibrant ecosystem filters water, slows floods, provides food and shelter for wildlife, improves air quality, and does so much more, but like many natural spaces across Illinois, it is threatened by climate change, pollution, habitat loss, and more.

It was here in the last week of September that more than 150 Extension volunteers and staff gathered for the annual University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalist state conference hosted by staff in the Extension offices in Henderson, Knox, McDonough, and Warren counties. The annual conference is an opportunity to connect and gain new skills, tools, and programs to bring back home.

“Master Naturalists are a link between studies happening at the university and the real-world application of research findings within communities across Illinois,” said Shibu Kar, Illinois Extension’s assistant dean of natural resources, environment, and energy, who gave opening remarks at the conference. “From invasive species removal days to monitoring water quality in local creeks, these passionate and innovative environmental volunteers pursue opportunities that have a positive impact at home, in public spaces, and beyond.”



This region of Illinois is nestled between the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers and is home to wetlands, prairies, and woodlands that share the landscape with fields of pumpkins and horseradish alongside more familiar Midwestern crops of corn and soybeans. On the first day of the conference, local experts led tours of the rivers, a sustainable and regenerative farm, the state’s native plant nursery, and more to share firsthand insights on local research and conservation in action.

Later that day, after the sunset, excited choruses of “Did you hear that?” and “Look at this one!” filled the air at the Lakeview Nature Center in Macomb. With a flashlight in one hand and an ultrasonic recorder held to the sky in the other, volunteers took turns listening for the calls of bats guided by U. of I. researcher and Extension wildlife specialist Joy O’Keefe. Down below in the prairie grass, bright lights shining against a hanging fabric sheet summoned moths and other nocturnal insects, allowing insect expert Angella Moorehouse to confidently pluck and identify them for an eager audience.

On the second day, participants gathered to learn together, starting with a presentation by arborist and landscape architect Guy Sternberg, who spoke about how climate change will continue to impact native oak trees. Other session topics included communicating about climate change, insect pollinators, woodland ferns, research at the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, the return of bald eagles, and the ecology of urban bats.





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