

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

March 2025



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Master Naturalists launch new Accessible Nature Exploration program

After years of leading active nature groups, University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists Peggy West and Jen McDaniel suddenly found themselves unable to keep up with fast-paced groups. So they started a different kind of group that elevates the priorities of accessibility, inclusion, and healing, Accessible Nature Exploration or ACORN for short.

When people experience barriers such as mobility limitations, sensory and processing disorders, or phobias and overwhelmedness, it can limit their opportunities to engage with nature. With a passion for encouraging everyone to enjoy the outdoors, EMGs knew they could provide the leadership and expertise to offer a different approach to help people connect with nature. Since their first adventure in September 2024, ACORN adventures have happened in the Peoria and Central Illinois region almost every week.

“Accessible refers to ease of mobility and experience for those with disabilities, processing or other support needs, or anyone who is interested in a slower paced nature walk in an accepting and supportive setting,” McDaniel shared.

“The group walks slowly, stays together as a group, stays within a certain range of facilities and public emergency services, and generally stays on low elevation grade trails with few hills and ADA trails when available. Outings are usually 30 to 45 minutes.” McDaniel explained, “We are not medically trained in any way to deal with individual needs and inform participants they will need to provide for their own medical and accessibility needs. We encourage advocates and helpers to join with anyone who needs assistance.”

West added, “We also integrate creative and mindfulness experiences to some of the hikes. The combination of art plus nature can be truly powerful to healing and mental health. Creative exercises that allow us to experience our environments through all of our senses can lead us to wholeness and feelings of connection, acceptance, and self-love.”

McDaniel shared the story, “We had a participant say they almost cried at ‘no one left behind’. We were hiking, slowly, in the most accessible area and had asked if anyone needed a break. This person apologetically said yes. We responded supportively and said ‘No one gets left behind.’ Later, they contacted me to tell me how important that was, how it helped them feel included, like they belonged, find self-acceptance for their own ‘limitations’, and made them want to come back! You never know how much inclusion like this can matter to a person. It took us less than a few minutes to take that break. But it meant the world to this individual.”

Even during the winter, West and McDaniel have been able to plan events that included outdoor time exploring and indoor time learning and connecting. Some of their locations included Luthy Botanical Garden—Traveling Seeds, Lakeview Library—Illinois Geology, and Springdale Cemetery—Managing Remnant Prairie. To learn more about ACORN Accessible Nature Exploration you can visit their page on Facebook.



Photo by Christine Belless | Illinois Extension

Extension Master Naturalists Jen McDaniel and Peggy West launched a group inviting nature lovers to go on adventures together at a slower pace where “no one is left behind.”

Accessible Nature Exploration or ACORN for short meets weekly at locations throughout the Peoria area and is open to everyone.

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