

EXTENSION  
SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, CONSUMER  
& ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

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*Extension Master Naturalist Julie Robinson created a new website, [localopal.org](http://localopal.org), with the goal of helping people go outside and enjoy our local natural areas.*

## Local Master Naturalist Volunteer Builds Website to Encourage People to Enjoy Local Natural Areas

"I just want people to spend more time outside," explained University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalist Julie Robinson.

This was the passion driving Robinson to build a website called Local OPAL, which stands for Outdoor Playing And Learning, [www.localopal.org](http://www.localopal.org). She created an online resource that helps everyone easily find publicly accessible outdoor locations in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, Tazewell, Marshall, and Woodford counties.

Shortly after attending the Master Naturalist training in June 2018, Robinson started working on the website. She has spent her career teaching high school math and has first-hand experience with the challenges of spending too much time inside. "I am always encouraging my students to go outside, take a hike, but they often say there is nowhere to go," she explained.

"Time in the Extension Master Naturalist (EMN) class convinced me that, as a community, we needed a way for ALL our local outdoor public access areas and information about them to be more easily found. My students need to know what is in their backyard. In fact, we all need to know what is in our backyard.

"It was on that bright June morning, driving the hills into Singing Woods, that I could not escape the overwhelming feeling that I needed to do something to help these places be known and shared. If it was easier to find the places to go, maybe people would go more. It was kind of the 'if you build it, they will come' idea. If you tell them where they can go, they will go!"

Part of Julie's inspiration came from the fact that the local EMN training is coordinated in such a way that introduces trainees to natural areas that may be new to them and are typically lesser-known in general. Places like Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy Emiquon, McNaughton Park, and Camp Wokanda are a few "hidden treasures" that EMNs enjoy during their training.

With the help of family, friends, colleagues, and EMN volunteers, Robinson has identified almost 300 local natural areas, noted their exact location, and documented details about each one. What Robinson had originally thought would be a document she could hand to her students listing outdoor parks and natural areas. The list soon outgrew what could be managed in a printed handout.

Robinson knew if she wanted Local OPAL to be a useable tool for her students and their families, she would need to build a website. This was a first for Robinson, but with passion and enthusiasm, she was determined to develop a website for all to easily access for free. She has reported over 430 volunteer hours in her EMN volunteer role and she is not done yet. The website is a work in progress as new details are added and areas updated.



Photo by Anita Wilkinson | Illinois Extension

Robinson has stated many times, "I just want people to go outside!" Her students are challenged to go outside and visit areas listed on Local OPAL. In return they receive classroom incentives called math bucks and share their experiences with Mrs. Robinson and classmates.

The next Illinois Master Naturalist training is June 8-19; [go.illinois.edu/MNtraining](http://go.illinois.edu/MNtraining).