

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell



COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, CONSUMER
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The Pioneer Homestead at Wildlife Prairie Park provides a great venue for Master Naturalists' Larry and Kathy Herron to educate park visitors and help them enjoy time in nature. A total of 25 Master Naturalists volunteer at the park in a wide variety of roles.

Master Naturalists invest time and talents volunteering at Wildlife Prairie Park

Wildlife Prairie Park (WPP) is one of the many natural resource treasures in Illinois. Their mission of conservation, education, and recreation goes hand-in-hand with the mission of the University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists (EMN) which is to provide educational opportunities that connect people with nature and help them become engaged environmental stewards. Within the Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit, 25 Extension Master Naturalists invest their time and talents as members of the 380-person WPP volunteer team.

EMNs Larry and Kathy Herron, began volunteering at WPP in the early 90s and decided to further their impact by becoming trained EMNs in 2013. Their volunteer roles have varied over the years and currently they invest a lot of time working in and educating visitors to the Pioneer Homestead.

"I have always loved history and I saw the homestead needed some help, so I decided to make that my priority," mentioned Larry. "I started making repairs to windows and doors, landscaping, and Kathy made the curtains. I built the pig pen, and Kathy drained and cleaned the duck pond." More recently, Larry added a pioneer garden. Larry reported due to the wet spring, he had to replant the garden, which shows similar hardship the pioneers encountered.

When they first became volunteers Larry said, "We did a little bit of everything from trimming trees, cleaning animal habitats, to replacing toilet paper rolls." The 1,800 acre Illinois native zoological park is home to 150 animals, 50 different species. The team of volunteers assist the 15 park staff members with daily operations and special events.

Kathy said, "I took the Master Naturalist training because I wanted to learn more about our local natural areas, and how we can help." Kathy is one of the tour guides for the Adventure Trek. During park special events, she is also trained to introduce one of the park mascots, Mike the Bison. She also educates visitors about the importance of snakes to our ecosystem. "I used to be afraid to speak in front of people, but now I enjoy narrating and telling guests about the animals."

The Herron's expressed that taking the Master Naturalist training offered them the opportunity to learn about natural areas in Central Illinois. Ninety-five percent of the Herron's volunteer time is spent at Wildlife Prairie Park. This year Kathy and Larry's combined volunteer time reached 800 hours. In the time since both

became Extension Master Naturalist in 2013, the couple has logged 2,900 volunteer hours.

Each year EMNs are asked to complete 30 volunteer hours and 10 continuing education hours, to fulfill their annual agreement.

"Master Naturalist volunteers easily meet and exceed the annually required volunteer time," said Ag and Natural Resource Program Coordinator, Christine Belless.



Photo by Jen McDaniel | Illinois Extension Volunteer