

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

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

Protecting and restoring Illinois' natural landscapes is a team effort, and the University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists are proud to be part of the winning squad. In the spring of 2022, The Nature Conservancy-Emiquon (TNC-Emiquon) partnered with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources Foresters and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to breathe life back into a 62-acre stretch of land. With generous funding from Jim and Rosemary Stuttle and the Arbor Day Foundation, a whopping 27,000 trees were planted, marking a significant step towards a greener future.

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, and that's where the Master Naturalists stepped in. A dedicated squad of five volunteers received expert training from TNC-Emiquon staff Randy Smith and Sally McClure, mastering the art of locating trees using smartphones and Google Earth.

Armed with new skills and unwavering enthusiasm, the Master Naturalists embarked on their mission. They scoured six designated sites within the planting area, meticulously assessing 60 trees across ten different species. Their keen eyes identified 51 thriving trees, with only nine succumbing to the challenges of their new environment. However, the story took a curious turn with two "missing" trees, potentially victims of uneven planting, misplaced markers, or hungry herbivores.

Undeterred by the mysteries of the missing trees, Sally shared the encouraging results: "Even with a conservative approach, our survivability rate sits at a promising 82%. Taking an optimistic stance and assuming the missing trees are simply lost in the tall grasses, we can even boast an 86% success rate!" This news resonated with Randy, who emphasized the importance of ongoing monitoring: "Conservation programs often require replacing dead trees if the survival rate dips below 80%. We're committed to keeping a watchful eye on this project, with surveys planned around the one-year mark, and again at the five and ten-year milestones."

The story doesn't end there. Master Naturalists Ed Coleman and Mike McGraw covered an additional ten sites and 100 locations. Mike describes the journey with a mix of admiration and grit: "It's been a rewarding experience, but not without its challenges. Traversing fields choked with six-foot weeds to find tiny saplings is no walk in the park. But then you stumble upon a three-foot oak, leaves swaying in the breeze, and it makes every struggle worthwhile."

The dedication of the Master Naturalists, paired with the collaborative spirit of TNC-Emiquon and its partners, is weaving a verdant tapestry across the Illinois landscape. One tree, one survey, one helping hand at a time, they're nurturing a vision of a thriving ecosystem for generations to come.



Photo by Ed Coleman, Master Naturalist

Mike McGraw is one of five Extension Master Naturalists who received specialized training from The Nature Conservancy—Emiquon to locate and access trees that were planted as part of a project restoring Illinois' natural landscape.

Christine Belless

Ag and Natural Resources
Extension Program Coordinator
cbelless@illinois.edu