



Prairie Islander

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

A Natural Partnership

Ethan Snively

For over a decade, Dr. David Horn's biology classes at Millikin University have assisted the Macon County Conservation District with various natural resources projects, totaling well over 1,000 volunteer hours. This partnership with Millikin has been important for both the students and MCCD. While the Conservation District gets hands-on help for projects that would otherwise not get completed, the students get real-world experience, which Horn says better prepares them for their professional careers.

"At Millikin University, we emphasize both theory and practice," Horn said. "Ecological principles can be taught in the classroom and those concepts can be applied by working on projects that make our students better while simultaneously improving our local natural areas. Rather than talk about the natural world in the classroom, students should experience it outside the classroom."

Projects that Millikin students have helped with include collecting and cleaning native prairie seed, fence removal, stream cleanup, invasive species removal, tree and prairie plantings, tree measuring, and other miscellaneous tasks. We



Thistle removal at Griswold Conservation Area.

incorporate these classes into our existing work schedule to not only assist with current projects, but to demonstrate how our job changes with the seasons. I think students find that aspect of our job in the conservation field appealing.

According to Horn, "Students in my courses love working with the MCCD to improve our local environment. While most of Millikin's biology majors will not have careers in ecological fields, work at the District provides them with a better perspective of our natural world and how individuals can work with local organizations to make a difference."

While some workdays are one-time experiences and forgotten, such as fence removal, others such as tree and prairie plantings will be around for generations to enjoy. Horn often jokes with his students that they can come back for their 25-year reunion and visit the forest and prairies they helped plant. While most students' laugh at the joke, there's an important message behind this - they are creating something that will outlast them and benefit generations to come.



Students posing with the trash and tires they cleaned out of Stevens Creek.



Homestead Prairie Farm

What do a foundry worker born in Poland, a Lutheran minister born in Pennsylvania, and a coal miner born in Germany have in common? At various times in the 1900s, they owned what we now call Homestead Prairie Farm. From its beginning in the 1840s to the 1970s, research shows at least 8 families as owners.

The history of these many people presented a challenge when the farm was planned as a historic site. What can you fit in during a short tour? How do you furnish it? It was decided to focus on what was missing among historic sites in Central Illinois and what makes the farm unique.

Several historical groups had already preserved pioneer cabins or famous residents' homes. Instead, the farm was interpreted circa 1860

featuring a humble house still with its first log room and owned by an ordinary family. It would stand on its original location not far from a river, near a town that grew rapidly due to several railroads, and close to farm fields that were once forest, savanna, and prairie.

We acknowledge the farm's 70+ years of 1900s history. Our previous and current archaeology projects, research into the newly released 1950 Census, and meetings with owners' descendants help us to keep learning. We hope these new pieces of the past help future generations continue to tell its story. We also believe that in the farm's many different chapters, you might also see something that reminds you of your own family's story and that you take pride in our shared local history.

Restoration in Progress

If you have visited Griswold or Fort Daniel Conservation Areas recently, you may have noticed some changes. The Conservation District is currently working on major restorations at each site. At Griswold, a five-acre restoration area has been cleared of all invasive and non-native shrubs, resulting in a savanna-like ecosystem, which is a prairie with a few scattered trees. Historically, Griswold would have had very few trees, if any, due to its topography and soil type. This site was formed when the Illinoian glacier receded, leaving behind a cone-shaped hill of gravel, known as a glacial kame. This is what we refer to as a gravel prairie and fire would have determined what plant species survived. Woody species, such as trees, would not have been able to survive these intense, frequent fires.



Fort Daniel Conservation Area is going through a different type of change – from agriculture to prairie and wetlands. In 2019, the Conservation District acquired 173 acres south of the existing Fort Daniel boundary. There were approximately 113 acres in agriculture and by the end of this year, all 113 acres will have been planted as native prairie. Multiple wetlands will also be installed at this site as part of a partnership with the City of Decatur. The goal is to slow down runoff and reduce the amount of sediment that gets into Big Creek and ultimately Lake Decatur.

While these restoration projects may look unsightly in the beginning, over time they will develop into beautiful prairies, savannas, and wetlands.



Briefs

SKI AND SNOWSHOE RENTAL

Explore the Conservation Area trails on cross country skis or snowshoes this winter. If you don't have your own, you can rent the equipment from Rock Springs Nature Center. Borrow skis, boots, and poles, or one pair of snowshoes for \$10 for 2 hours or \$20 for 24 hours.



Equipment available first-come, first-served. Skis and snowshoes are available for rent and welcome for use on any Conservation Area trail when 4 or more inches of snow covers the ground.

NEW HOMESCHOOL PROGRAMS

We are excited to offer new programs for local homeschoolers! These programs will take place once a month and feature a different nature or history topic. Each session will be two hours long and feature discussion, activities, crafts, and outdoor exploration to support your homeschool curriculum. Winter themes include Animals in Winter, Winter Weather, and Plants in Winter. See page 5, or visit our website for more details. We can't wait to connect with you!



Take Your Pick

Below you'll find activities offered at multiple times or locations. Register online before the last full weekday prior to the program. Programs held at Rock Springs Conservation Area unless otherwise noted:

TRIP TO STARVED ROCK FOR EAGLE VIEWING

Saturdays, January 21, 28, & February 4, 9am-4pm

Take a trip to this popular state park to look for wintering eagles, check out the visitor's center, and visit the lock and dam museum. Bring a lunch or purchase one from the restaurant at Starved Rock. Be prepared to go outside. \$30/person. Register online by January 20, 27, and February 3. Min/Max: 5/12.



MAPLE SYRUP PROGRAMS

Saturday, February 18, 11am, 12pm, & 1pm

Discover how sap becomes syrup, why spring is the best time of year to harvest sap, and how people used sap throughout history. Registrants will get to sample real maple syrup. Free. Register online by February 17. Min/Max: 5/30.

..... **Special Events**

GEMINID METEOR SHOWER

Saturday, December 10, 9-11pm
Friends Creek Conservation Area

Join us at Friends Creek Conservation Area to view the strongest meteor shower of the year. These meteors originate near the constellation Gemini and are usually bright and colorful. We will have hot chocolate available. Wear warm clothing and bring a lawn chair and blanket if you like. Free. Register online by December 9. Min/Max: 5/50.



CHRISTMAS TEA

Sunday, December 4, 1-4pm

Stop by the Governor Oglesby Mansion to enjoy a traditional Christmas afternoon tea. Experience this historic Victorian home all decked out for the holidays. Refreshments will be served. \$2/person. No reservations necessary. Located at 421 W. William Street in Decatur, IL.





Happenings

Events located at Rock Springs Conservation Area and open to all ages unless otherwise indicated. Register online by noon at MaconCountyConservation.org, unless otherwise noted.



Macon County Conservation District

Hours

OFFICES OPEN

Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm

NATURE CENTER OPEN

Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm

Saturday, 9am-5pm

Sunday, 1-5pm

TRAILS OPEN

Daily, 7am to sunset

Holidays & Closings

OFFICES & NATURE CENTER CLOSED

Saturday, December 24, Christmas Eve

Sunday, December 25, Christmas Day

Sunday, January 1, New Year's Day

NATURE CENTER OPEN, OFFICES CLOSED

Monday, December 26, Christmas Eve (observed)

Tuesday, December 27, Christmas Day (observed)

Monday, January 2, New Year's Day (observed)

Monday, January 16, MLK Day

Monday, February 20, Presidents' Day

Music

The following programs are free and open to the public at Rock Springs Nature Center.

DULCIMER CLUB

Saturdays, 10am-12pm

December 10

January 7 & 21

February 4 & 18

ACOUSTIC MUSIC JAM

Sundays, 2-4pm

December 11, January 8, & February 12

Art

NORTH GALLERY ARTISTS

Barn Colony Artists

November & December

Discover works in watercolor, pastels, oil, and mixed media depicting subjects from nature to portraits by talented artists in our community.

Decatur Camera Club

January & February

Enjoy a wide variety of photography, including scenes of trees, birds, landscapes, and more from talented local photographers.

SOUTH GALLERY ARTISTS

Decatur Camera Club Photography Contest

November & December

View winning entries from the Decatur Camera Club's My Macon County Photo Contest.

Melody Arnold

January & February

Experience the beauty of nature with local photographer and outdoor education specialist Melody Arnold.



Meetings

MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD MEETINGS

Third Wednesday of each month, 5:30pm

December 21, January 18, and February 15

DECATUR AUDUBON SOCIETY MEETINGS

At Rock Springs Nature Center, 2pm

Saturday, December 3

Sunday, January 15

Sunday, February 19

ROCK SPRINGS QUILTERS

Wednesdays, 9-11am



Connect with Us

Follow us on social media!

MaconCountyConservation.org





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Winter Activity Kits

There's much to explore in winter! Sprinkle some one-on-one family time into your season, whenever it fits your schedule, with fun nature-themed kits designed for children ages 6-12. These pre-packaged kits contain activities, games, and crafts exploring each monthly theme. Kits will need to be picked up from Rock Springs Nature Center during the timeframe specified in registration. Allow 3 to 7 days for us to process your kit order. We will call you when the kit is ready for pick-up. Each kit includes materials for one participant. \$8/kit. Maximum of 25 kits available for each theme.

DECEMBER KIT: ROCKS AND MINERALS

Pick-Up December 1 through December 23

Learn the difference between rocks and minerals with this hands-on geology kit. Register online by December 20.

JANUARY KIT: MOON AND STARS

Pick-Up January 4 through January 31

Explore the night sky and learn about the creatures that come out after dark. Register online by January 27.



FEBRUARY KIT: NIGHT OWLS

Pick-Up February 1 through February 28

Explore the secret lives of owls through activities and crafts. Register online by February 24.

Homeschool Programs

Homeschool children ages 5-15 can join a naturalist and explore nature and history topics through discussion, hands-on activities, crafts, and games. Homeschool students will spend time indoors and outdoors, investigating concepts and engaging with nature. \$15/child. Register online by date specified.

ANIMALS IN WINTER

Wednesday, December 14, 10am-12pm

Uncover animal activity in winter through discussion and activities indoors, then venture outside to look for tracks and other evidence that many animals remain active through the colder months. Register online by December 12.

WINTER WEATHER

Wednesday, January 11, 10am-12pm

What are the different types of winter precipitation and how is snow made? Find out through hands-on activities and outdoor exploration. Register online by January 9.

PLANTS IN WINTER

Wednesday, February 8, 10am-12pm

Discover where maple syrup comes from and how it's made, then learn how plants adapt to winter and how to identify trees without leaves. Register online by February 6.

Mini Camps

Children ages 1 through 5 will explore nature with an adult companion through crafts, activities, songs, and stories. These camps are a great stepping stone for little ones to spend time with other children and have the comfort of a loved one nearby. 2022 fee is \$6/child; the fee will increase to \$8/child for 2023 camps. Register online by noon the day before camp. Min/Max: 4/12.

PAJAMA PARTY

Tuesday, December 20, 9:30-10:30am

Wednesday, December 21, 9:30-10:30am

Discover what animals do during the cold months. Join in the fun by wearing your favorite pajamas, which keep us warm just like an animal's fur!

WEATHER OR NOT: CLOUDS

Wednesday, January 18, 9:30-10:30am

Thursday, January 19, 9:30-10:30am

Imaginations will run wild as we look up into the sky and learn about clouds.

WEATHER OR NOT: SNOW

Tuesday, February 7, 9:30-10:30am

Wednesday, February 8, 9:30-10:30am

We will use our senses to investigate snow.



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December

THE MAGIC STUMP DOCUMENTARY FILM SHOWING

Saturday, December 3, 2pm

Join the Decatur Audubon Society and Chicago filmmaker Bob Dolgan for a showing of the new documentary, *The Magic Stump*. *The Magic Stump* tells the story of an Illinois tree stump that has attracted a phenomenal variety of wintering raptors through the years, including two rare prairie falcons. The goal of this film is to draw attention to the raptors that winter in our agricultural landscape. Refreshments will be provided. Free. No registration required.



NASA AND THE SPACE LAUNCH SYSTEM

Saturday, December 17, 10am

Guest speaker Scott Tashakkor, the flight software lead at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama, will be joining us to discuss NASA, rocket launches, and some basic space concepts. Scott is a Decatur, IL native and a graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and has written, tested, and lead development of the flight software utilized by NASA's Space Launch System. Free. No registration required.

PRESCHOOL PEEPERS: PINE TREES

Sunday, December 18, 2pm

What is a pine tree and where can you find them? We will learn this and more as we read a story, go on a walk to look for pine trees, and make art with pine needles. Free. Register online by December 16. Min/Max: 5/30.



January

FULL MOON HIKE

Saturday, January 7, 9pm

Take a short walk along the Rock Springs-Fairview Bike Trail to view the forest illuminated by our only natural satellite, then see the full moon 50x larger through our telescope. Dress for the weather. \$3/person. Register online by January 6. Min/Max: 5/30.

ANIMAL SIGNS GUIDED WALK

Sand Creek Conservation Area

Saturday, January 14, 2pm

When the forest is quiet and the air is cold, how can we know that animals are present? Become a nature explorer as we search for signs of animal life on a leisurely walk through Sand Creek Conservation Area. Free. Register online by January 13. Min/Max: 5/30.



PRESCHOOL PEEPERS: FEED THE BIRDS

Sunday, January 15, 2pm

Young children are invited to learn about our overwintering birds, take a hike, and then make a peanut butter or Crisco pinecone bird feeder to hang outside for the birds. Free. Register online by January 13. Min/Max: 5/30.

WINTER RACCOON CANDY CANE HUNT

Sunday, January 22, 2pm

The Winter Raccoon has been up to some mischief! Learn some fun raccoon facts with a naturalist, then go on a hike to find some of the goodies the Winter Raccoon has hidden throughout the forest. Free. Register online by January 20. Min/Max: 5/30.

WINTER NATURE JOURNALING

Sunday, January 29, 2pm

Join a naturalist to learn journaling techniques and how to document your findings, then head outside to put those skills to work. Nature journaling can benefit everyone regardless of age or artistic ability. We will supply a small journal and pencil to get you started. We will be going outside, so dress accordingly. \$10/person. Register online by January 27. Min/Max: 5/20.



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February

INTRO TO DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY FOR WILDLIFE AND NATURE

Wednesdays, February 1, 8, 22, and Tuesday, February 14, 6-8pm

Join Joe Norton of the Decatur Camera Club for this four-week photography workshop. Participants will learn how to use their cameras, how to plan for the best photographic results in the outdoors, and get hands-on instruction. Some cameras will be available for use if you don't have your own. This workshop is geared towards beginner and intermediate photographers, but photographers of all skill levels are welcome to join. Come to one or come to all four. More information including an in-depth description is available online. Free. Register online by the day prior to class. Min/Max: 1/30.



FLOWER POT SNOWMAN CRAFT FOR ADULTS

Sunday, February 5, 2pm

Paint and build a snowman out of small, terracotta flower pots. All supplies provided, and your snowman is yours to take home at the end of the program. \$5/person. Register online by February 3. Min/Max: 5/20.

OWL PROWL

Friends Creek Conservation Area
Saturday, February 11, 8pm

Learn about these forest-dwelling, nocturnal predators. Discuss what makes owls special while we walk in search of some. Dress for the weather. Meet at the big pavilion at Friends Creek Conservation Area. \$3/person. Register online by February 10. Min/Max: 5/30.



PRESCHOOL PEEPERS: SAFE AND WARM

Sunday, February 19, 2pm

How do animals stay warm in the winter? Discover the world of fur and feathers as we explore warmth through a craft, stories, and a snack. Bring your favorite blanket or stuffed animal if you like! Free. Register online by February 17. Min/Max: 5/30.

EDWARDS TRACE: THE TRAIL TO ILLINOIS' EARLY YEARS

Saturday, February 25, 2pm

Join us for a journey along one of our state's first routes which connected Southern and Central Illinois. Traveled by Native Americans, soldiers, priests, trappers, and settlers, it was largely forgotten until recent scholarship rediscovered its importance. Guest speaker Anna Sielaff is a Central Illinois native and University of Illinois graduate student. Free. No registration required.

SNAKE AND TURTLE SHOW

Sunday, February 26, 2pm

Meet, feel, and learn about our education animals and their natural history. We have several species to show you! \$3/person. Register online by February 24. Min/Max: 5/30.

MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES & STAFF

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