



# Prairie Islander

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

## Beyond Brick & Mortar: Building the Future of Education with Open Walls & Open Minds

Jerry Culp and Ashton Nunn

In 2023, we applied for - and received - a grant from the IDNR to construct an indoor-outdoor classroom in the lower level of the Rock Springs Nature Center. This project will focus on increasing our programming space at the Nature Center by constructing additional indoor and outdoor learning facilities and structures. With this addition, we'll be able to provide a more accessible and inclusive environment, and cultivate opportunities for more participants to learn about natural resources that will help foster stewardship and interest in conservation in our young learners and the general public.

We here at the Macon County Conservation District are constantly making updates to our facilities and programs to keep up with trends that accommodate the needs of our community. The Nature Center was originally built in 1989 and is now over 30 years old. Over the years, the Nature



Center has hosted thousands of programs and events, and has gone through many changes to meet the needs of our staff and visitors. The proposed plan for this project is to construct an indoor-outdoor learning center that will provide a seamless connection between indoor and outdoor spaces, which will immerse its users and participants in an outdoor environment that will encourage conservation education.

The proposed plan is to start the architectural and engineering for the project this winter and have it completed and ready to bid in early spring. The bidding

process is scheduled to be completed by late spring of 2025 and contractors on board by the first part of spring. The construction phase of the project is estimated to take 9-12 months, with final closeout of the project happening in late spring or early summer of 2025.

We're very excited to bring this to the Macon County area, as not many other facilities in this part of Illinois have something of this scale. With this new classroom, we'll be able to accommodate larger class sizes and multiple classes for field trips and programs. It's our hope that by having this new space, we'll be able to bring even more children to our programs and start what will hopefully be a life-long love of nature. It would be great to see area youngsters use this facility, continue their love of nature through education in the field of natural resources, and maybe even return to the District as future conservationists to work in the place where it all started.



# TRADING TRACTORS FOR TADPOLES

Phil Julius

During the summer of 2023, we took on the task of constructing three wetlands at two District locations. Fort Daniel Conservation Area, located east of Mt. Zion, is where one of the wetlands was constructed, and the other two at Friends Creek Conservation Area, located in the northern portion of Macon County near Cisco. This is one of the largest earthmoving projects the District has done in-house; every member of the Operations staff had a role in this construction project. The District has some heavy earthmoving equipment, but a project of this scale required the rental of a dozer and a site haul truck to be able to move the large quantity of soil required to build the retaining dams and basins.

This project was a joint effort with the City of Decatur to help filter runoff from farm fields in the Lake Decatur Watershed. The two District locations were selected due to their high level of runoff from adjacent agricultural production fields. The wetlands will filter nitrates and phosphates, as well as other micronutrients, from the runoff. The new wetlands will also act as a trap for silt particles floating in the water and prevent them from reaching Lake Decatur.

Not only are these wetlands a benefit for the clean water of Lake Decatur, they will add a great habitat for many animals that live on these District sites. Insects, frogs, salamanders, snakes, turtles, birds, and deer are just a few animals that will use these new wetlands. We plan to plant some wetland vegetation this spring to add diversity to the habitat. Future plans are being made to build a trail system that will allow hikers to get an up-close and personal view of the wetlands and the wildlife that use them.

One nice feature to these wetlands is that they have a control structure built into them. This will allow District staff to manage the water level throughout the year. The wetlands can also be drained to dig out sediment and perform other maintenance needs. The new wetlands are a great feature added to these locations, and will help filter water entering Lake Decatur for many years to come.



Fort Daniel before construction



Fort Daniel during construction



Briefs



Join staff at Rock Springs Nature Center for a summer packed with fun, educational activities for ages 1-15.

Five camp options will be available this summer:

- **Mini Camp:** Ages 1-5 explore Rock Springs Conservation Area with their adult buddies in these 1 hour-long camps. \$8/child each camp.
- **Earth Adventures:** Ages 6-12 hike, swim, canoe, and discover the world around them in this full-day, week-long nature camp with optional Before and After Child Care. \$140/camper each week.
- **Adventure Club:** Ages 5-12 join in on Earth Adventures camp on Tuesday mornings. \$20/camper each day.
- **History Camp:** Ages 6-12 become history explorers in this half-day camp on Thursday mornings. \$20/camper each day.
- **X-treme Camp:** Ages 10-15 gear up for adventurous fun. \$35/camper for in-county camp days, \$60/camper for out-of-county camp days.

Online registration opens April 1. Find more information and register at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org).

**CAMPGROUND:**

The campground at Friends Creek Conservation Area will be opening for the season on May 3. The campground welcomes RV and tent camping, and includes flush toilets, showers, and a dump station. Daily fees are \$25 for 30 amp service, and \$30 for 50 amp service. A large, group campsite is also available for \$25 per night for up to 25 people, and \$1 per night for each additional person up to 60 people. New to the campground are three, non-electric tent camping spots for \$20 per day. For more information, visit [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org). All campground reservations are taken online.

The picnic pavilions at Rock Springs, Friends Creek, Fort Daniel, and Griswold are also open for the season. Reserve a pavilion for \$35/day to host your own outdoor party or event at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org).



**Preschool Peepers**

**RADIANT RAINBOWS**

Sunday, March 17, 2pm

What are rainbows and how do they form? Learn about this beautiful natural phenomenon, make a colorful craft, and go outside in search of nature's colors. Free. Register online by March 15. Min/Max: 5/20.

**APRIL SHOWERS**

Sunday, April 21, 2pm

Learn why spring rain is so important to the environment and look for the wildflowers it helps to grow. We will make a cloud in a jar, read a story, and head outside. Free. Register online by April 19. Min/Max: 5/20.

**SIGNS OF SPRING**

Sunday, May 19, 2pm

Why is everything outside green, when it was gray and brown only a few weeks ago? Learn about the changing seasons, make a craft, and go outside to see what's happening in nature. Free. Register online by May 17. Min/Max: 5/20.



# Happenings

Events located at Rock Springs Conservation Area and open to all ages unless otherwise indicated. Register online by noon at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://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

Sunday, March 31, Easter

### NATURE CENTER OPEN, OFFICES CLOSED

Friday, March 29, Good Friday

Monday, May 27, Memorial Day

## Open Houses

### BETHEL SCHOOL

Saturday, May 4, 1-4pm

See what going to school was like in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century at the historic one-room schoolhouse located at Friends Creek Conservation Area. 13734 Friends Creek Park Rd., Cisco, IL. Free.

### GOVERNOR OGLESBY MANSION

Sundays, April 28 and May 26, 2-4pm

Tour the restored home of Illinois Governor Richard J. Oglesby. Encounter the lives of its family members and explore their late 1800s lifestyle. \$2/person. Members are free. 421 W. William Street, Decatur, IL.



## Connect with Us

Follow us on social media!  
[MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org)



## Ground Squirrels Vintage Base Ball Games



Join us for the national pastime: base ball! Cheer for your home team, the Rock Springs Ground Squirrels, in a game of vintage base ball played with authentic 1858 rules. To see their complete schedule, go to [Facebook.com/GroundSquirrels](https://www.facebook.com/GroundSquirrels)

Saturday, March 16, 12pm

Swansea, IL – Away game Goodwill Match at the Belleville/Swansea Moose Lodge 1221

Saturday, April 20, 12pm

Home game against the McLean County Prairie Chickens

Saturday, May 18, 12pm

Home game against the Champaign Clippers

## Meetings

### MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD MEETINGS

Third Wednesday of each month, 5:30pm

March 27, April 17, & May 15

### DECATUR AUDUBON SOCIETY MEETINGS

Connect with Decatur Audubon on Facebook

### ROCK SPRINGS QUILTERS

Wednesdays, 9-11am





Events located at Rock Springs Conservation Area and open to all ages unless otherwise indicated. Register online by noon at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org), unless otherwise noted.

## Music

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

### DULCIMER CLUB

Saturdays, 10am-12pm

March 2, 16, & 30

April 13 & 27

May 11 & 25

### ACOUSTIC JAM SESSION

Sunday, May 12, 2-4pm



## Art

### NORTH GALLERY ARTISTS

Katherine Unruh

March & April

Encounter animals and wild landscapes captured in the form of paintings and drawings by this local artist.

Celestino Ruffini

May & June

Artist Celestino Ruffini uses many mediums to capture the beauty of nature, including coal, paint, pen, and wood.



### SOUTH GALLERY ARTISTS

Jane Koenig

March & April

View the beauty of nature just outside your backdoor as captured by local photographer Jane P. Koenig.



Danny Pratt

May & June

Enjoy photography of wildlife and landscapes from local photographer Danny Pratt.

## 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. \$8/child. Online registration required. Min/Max: 4/12.

### I CAN SENSE: NATURE SOUNDS

Tuesday, March 5 & Thursday, March 7, 9:30-10:30am

Listen carefully to explore the different sounds that nature makes.

### I CAN SENSE: NATURE SHAPES

Tuesday, March 19 & Thursday, March 21, 9:30-10:30am

Use your sense of sight to discover the many unique shapes in nature.

### I CAN SENSE: NATURE COLORS

Tuesday, April 2 & Thursday, April 4, 9:30-10:30am

Look carefully and spot all the different colors that can occur in nature.

### I CAN SENSE: NATURE SMELLS

Tuesday, April 16 & Thursday, April 18, 9:30-10:30am

Put your sniffer to the test as we explore the curious smells that happen in nature.

### MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES & STAFF

Nina Bendsen, President

David Castor, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President

Mark Allen, Treasurer

Gussie Reed, Secretary

Michael Sams, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President

Jerry Culp, Executive Director

Philip Julius, Director of Operations

Alysia Callison, Director of Program Services

Pam Smith, Director of Finance & H.R.

### Contact Us

Macon County Conservation District • 217-423-7708

[mccd@MaconCountyConservation.org](mailto:mccd@MaconCountyConservation.org)

[MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org)



# Happenings

Events located at Rock Springs Conservation Area and open to all ages unless otherwise indicated. Register online by noon at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org), unless otherwise noted.

## March

### OWL PROWL

Friends Creek Conservation Area  
Saturday, March 2, 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. \$5/person. Register online by March 1. Min/Max: 5/30.

### WOMEN IN CONSERVATION AND FORESTRY

Saturday, March 9, 10am

For Women's History Month, learn about some of the women who have shaped the fields of conservation and forestry, and how you can help continue their legacies. Free. No registration required.



### MARY LINCOLN: TAKING LEAVE

Decatur Public Library,  
130 N. Franklin St., Decatur, IL 62523  
Saturday, March 9, 2pm

Guest presenter Pam Brown will portray Mary Lincoln as she moves out of the White House weeks after her husband's assassination and reflects upon their lives. The program is co-sponsored by the Friends of Lincoln Trail Homestead State Park and the Macon County Conservation District. Free. No registration required.

### VAN TRIP TO CITY MUSEUM

Sunday, March 10, 9am-6pm

Join us on a trip to the City Museum in downtown St. Louis. This eccentric museum features exhibits made out of repurposed architectural and industrial objects, caves, slides, and tunnels, and is fun for kids and kids-at-heart. \$30/person covers transportation. Admission is on your own. Bring a lunch or purchase one at a restaurant nearby. Register online by March 8. Min/Max: 5/10.



### MAKE RECYCLED PAPER FOR GLOBAL RECYCLING DAY

Saturday, March 16, 2pm

Learn about the benefits of recycling as we take paper scraps and give them new life. You will discover how to do this process at home, and make some pieces of paper to take with you. Free. Register online by March 15. Min/Max: 5/20.



## April

### FIRE AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

Saturday, April 6, 10am

Fire has always been a natural part of the landscape, but settlers snuffed out this natural process to protect their farms and homes. Modern natural area management practices reintroduce fire to the landscape as a way to create healthier and more diverse habitats. Learn how the Macon County Conservation District uses fire at our sites, and what the benefits are. Free. No registration required.



### FARMING IN THE 1800s AT HOMESTEAD PRAIRIE FARM

Sunday, April 7, 2pm

Join us to learn about what kind of animals and crops were raised at Homestead Prairie Farm in the 1800s. Was it a typical Macon County or Illinois farm for its era? Learn how it changed over time and what sources we used to discover its early history. Free. No registration required.

### VAN TRIP TO SIU ECLIPSE DAY

Monday, April 8, 7:30am-6pm

Venture to Carbondale's Southern Illinois University to experience Eclipse Day at Saluki Stadium. Activities include eclipse-viewing, experts on-hand to interpret the eclipse, a documentary, and more. Eclipse viewing glasses will be provided by SIU. \$60/person covers admission, transportation, and parking. Register online by April 5. Min/Max: 5/10.



Events located at Rock Springs Conservation Area and open to all ages unless otherwise indicated. Register online by noon at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org), unless otherwise noted.

## 2024 SOLAR ECLIPSE PARTY

Monday, April 8, 12-3:30pm

Join our naturalists to learn about eclipses, look at the sun through our telescope, and view the solar eclipse with an estimated 97% coverage. Eclipse-viewing glasses provided. Refreshments will be served, and crafts will be available for children. Free. No registration required.



## NATURE EXPLORATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: SKYVIEW AND LOSS OF THE NIGHT

Saturday, April 13, 7:30pm

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has ushered in many technological advancements, and the field of nature exploration is no exception! Discover two popular apps for night sky exploration – SkyView and Loss of the Night – then go outside and put them to the test. \$3/person. Register online by April 12. Min/Max: 5/20.

## GOING BATTY

Saturday, April 20, 7pm

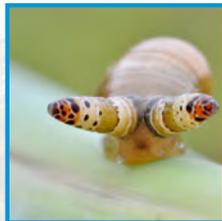
International Bat Appreciation Day is April 17, and we want to celebrate it with you! Join us on April 20 to learn about native bat species, what they do in the winter, and what makes them special. Then, go outside and try to find some. \$5/person. Register online by April 19. Min/Max: 5/30.

May

## THE DARK SIDE OF NATURE

Saturday, May 4, 7-8:30pm

It's Star Wars Day, and we're turning to the dark side to learn about the not-so-pretty side of nature, from mind-controlling parasites to cannibalistic tadpoles. Start indoors with a naturalist-led presentation, then head outside for a walk in the dark. Costumes are welcome. Ages 18+. \$5/person. Register online by May 3. Min/Max: 5/30.



## NATURE JOURNALING

Sunday, May 5, 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. \$5/person. Register online by May 2. Min/Max: 5/20.

## SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETIVE HIKE

Saturday, May 11, 2pm

Join a naturalist and a former ASL interpreting student to explore a nature trail and learn a few basic plant and animal signs. Free. Register online by May 10. Min/Max: 5/20.



## WOODLAND WILDFLOWER WALK

Sand Creek Conservation Area

Sunday, May 12, 2pm

Visit Sand Creek Conservation Area to explore nature and hunt for spring wildflowers. Free. Register online by May 10. Min/Max: 5/30.

## STARTING A LIFE LIST: REPTILES

Saturday, May 25, 2pm

A 'life list' is a list of all species that someone has observed in the wild. Wildlife observers keep these lists as a sort of lifelong challenge, with an ultimate goal of seeing as many species as possible firsthand. Join a naturalist to start your own life list and see how many species of reptiles you can find at Rock Springs, then take your list with you and keep it growing! \$3/person. Register online by May 24. Min/Max: 5/30.

## CREEK WALK

Friends Creek Conservation Area

Sunday, May 26, 2pm

Venture to Friends Creek Conservation Area to see nature from a different perspective. Wear sturdy shoes that can get wet, as we will be walking along and in the creek. Staff will provide nets for anyone who would like to try their hand at catching critters in the creek. \$3/person. Register online by May 24. Min/Max: 5/30.



Return Service Requested



## Why Choose MCCD Summer Camps?

### Camp Highlights

- OUTDOOR ADVENTURES**  
Nature hikes, canoeing, and outdoor games.
- CREATIVE ARTS**  
Arts, crafts, and creative activities.
- FIELD TRIPS**  
Trips to area museums and other educational venues.
- HISTORY & CULTURE**  
Visits to local historical sites and experiencing history through hands-on activities.

### 2024 Summer Camps

Our camps provide the perfect setting for fun, well-supervised opportunities for children to interact with nature. Campers don't just hear about nature, they go out and explore our planet. They'll wet their feet wading in a creek, touch a frog, or catch their first fish. For over 35 years, since 1982, children have enjoyed memorable camp experiences with us. Our experienced staff provide a safe, caring atmosphere with age appropriate activities for children ages 1-15.

- MINI CAMP ages 1-5
- ADVENTURE CLUB ages 5-12
- EARTH ADVENTURES ages 6-12
- HISTORY CAMP ages 6-12
- X-TREME CAMP ages 10-15

For trail conditions, visit [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org).



The Prairie Islander is a free quarterly publication. Call or email for additional copies. "Go Green" by reading it online or subscribing to our email newsletter at [MaconCountyConservation.org](http://MaconCountyConservation.org).

# Special Events



## **SANGAMON RIVER CLEANUP** Saturday, April 27, 10am-12pm Rock Springs Conservation Area

Help clear trash from the banks of the Sangamon River to make it a safer and more beautiful place for wildlife and people. Dress to get dirty and bring your own gloves. Bags will be provided. Come by yourself or bring the whole family. Organized groups should call 217-423-7708 in advance. Co-sponsored by the Community Environmental Council. Register and meet at the Rock Springs Information Shelter.



## **FESTIVAL OF SPRING** Saturday, April 27, 12-4pm

Celebrate Earth Day and welcome spring with an afternoon of outdoor family activities. Enjoy wagon rides, canoeing, a scavenger hunt, a live bird show from the Illinois Raptor Center, tours of Homestead Prairie Farm, and learn what other organizations are doing in our community to protect water and wildlife. Co-sponsored by Decatur Audubon Society. Canoeing \$3/person. All other activities are free. No registration required. Visit our website for more information.



## **ROCK SPRINGS RAMBLE 5K RUN/WALK** Saturday, May 18, 8am

The Macon County Conservation Foundation will be hosting their fourth annual Rock Springs Ramble this spring. This race features a 5K, a 1-mile Fun Run/Walk, and a Kid's Fun Run. It will begin and end at the main parking lot at the Rock Springs Conservation Area and utilize portions of the Rock Springs-Fairview Bike Trail. Registration is \$35/runner and \$10/child for the Kid's Fun Run. In addition to being a great opportunity to exercise and explore nature, participants will receive plenty of swag, including top finisher prizes. During the post-race lunch party, Door 4 Brewing Co. will be back again serving drinks, including mimosas. All event proceeds will benefit Macon County's natural areas and wildlife. You can register or donate at [RunSignup.com/RockSpringsRamble](https://RunSignup.com/RockSpringsRamble)



Macon County Conservation District  
3939 Nearing Lane | Decatur, IL 62521 | 217-423-7708  
[MaconCountyConservation.org](https://MaconCountyConservation.org)



# 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.



## TALL TREES

Wednesday, March 13, 10am-12pm

Learn the importance of trees in the ecosystem, discover some tree identification tips, and venture outside to see what you can find. Register online by March 11.



## SUN AND STARS

Wednesday, April 10, 10am-12pm

Discover what all the fuss is about the recent solar eclipse! View the sun through our telescope, learn about the moon, sun, and stars, and learn about orienteering. Register online by April 8.



## FOOD: NOW AND THEN

Wednesday, May 8, 10am-12pm

Getting a quick bite to eat wasn't as simple as driving through a fast-food restaurant in 1860! Learn how people sourced, stored, and prepared their food, then try your hand at making your own snack from scratch. Register online by May 6.

## Scouts

The Macon County Conservation District offers badge workshops for Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other scouting organizations. Workshops typically last 2-3 hours and cover a variety of nature- and wilderness-related badges. Cost is \$9/scout for a two-hour workshop and \$12/scout for three hours. Contact us at 217-423-7708 to schedule a workshop for your troop.

Macon County Conservation District  
3939 Nearing Lane | Decatur, IL 62521 | 217-423-7708  
MaconCountyConservation.org

