



Prairie Islander

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

District Project Updates

By Jerry Culp

With the busy summer and fall seasons behind us, we're turning our focus to several exciting new projects that will benefit both our community and local ecosystems. Here's a look into three of our biggest projects.



Indoor-Outdoor Classroom

A new Indoor-Outdoor Classroom is being constructed in the lower level of the Rock Springs Nature Center thanks to funding from the Park and Recreational Facility Construction Act, or PARC Grant, through the State of Illinois. It will feature:

- Adaptive Classroom Space: With a glass wall that will open to the outside and cohesive flooring that translates from the outside in, the new space will be adaptive and functional for a variety of purposes.
- Water Play Feature: A new, interactive water play feature will be installed near the footbridge, inviting children (and kids at heart) to engage with nature and water in a new way.
- Catering Kitchen and Outdoor Grill: The new space will offer opportunities for new programs, like garden-to-table exploration, as well as rental space for events such as corporate retreats, family reunions, weddings, birthday parties, and more.

Pothole Prairie Restoration

The Pothole Prairie Restoration project will allow us to install and

maintain a unique ecosystem on acreage recently required at Fort Daniel Conservation Area. A pothole prairie is a habitat characterized by many small, shallow wetlands surrounded by prairie. This project features:

- Native Plant Restoration: Reintroducing native flora will promote biodiversity, improve soil health, and provide crucial habitat for local wildlife.
- Community Engagement: Enhanced trails and access points connecting to Fort Daniel will create new opportunities for nature programs, volunteer activities, and community events, fostering a stronger connection to the land.
- Interpretive Signage: Educational signs will inform visitors about local ecosystems, the history of the prairie, and ongoing conservation efforts.

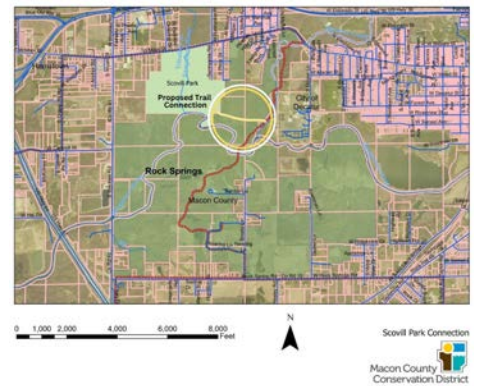
Scovill Bike Trail Connection

The Scovill Bike Trail Connection project aims to enhance trail connectivity and accessibility for cyclists and pedestrians by bridging the gap between the Rock-Springs Fairview Bike Trail and the Decatur Park District's newly upgraded trail system at Scovill Park West:

- Trail Expansion: This connection will allow movement between the Rock Springs-Fairview Bike Trail and Scovill Park West, adding approx. 1 mile to the approx. 23 miles of accessible bike trail throughout Macon County.
- Trail Enhancements: New signage and pavement improvements will enhance the user experience, making it easier to access and enjoy Rock Springs Conservation Area.

- Community Involvement: We encourage residents to explore these new connections and engage in a more active lifestyle, deepening their connection to the environment.

We're excited to see these projects come to life and look forward to the positive impact they'll have on the District, our community, and Macon County.



Director's Desk

At the heart of our organization lies a mission to foster community engagement, promote environmental stewardship, and enhance educational opportunities. Our recent initiatives align with our mission and reflect our commitment to creating a vibrant, sustainable community.

We continue to demonstrate our commitment to preserving our local ecosystems and cultural heritage, and we invite community members to take an active role in enjoying the Conservation Areas in Macon County and living their best lives.

Jerry Culp,
Executive Director



Takeaways from the 2024 ANCA Annual Summit

Taylor Buley

Working at a Nature Center and for a Conservation District allows for myriad opportunities. There are many conferences and summits out there for staff to explore and to help expand their professional network. One organization that we connect with here at Macon County Conservation District is the Association of Nature Center Administrators, or ANCA. ANCA is a non-profit professional organization that is dedicated to leaders in the nature and environmental learning profession. Their mission is to promote and support the best leadership and management practices, and ANCA serves more than 700 members across North America. They are an inclusive, welcoming, and supportive community designed to enhance professionalism and provide a support system to progressive management.

In early September, two of our staff were able to attend the 2024 Annual Summit hosted by ANCA at Lichterman Nature Center in Memphis, Tennessee. The annual ANCA summit is a professional opportunity for leaders of nature centers, outdoor schools,

and related organizations. It focuses on leadership and management practices for the unique careers that exist in these professions, but there are sessions for everyone. At this Summit, staff attended sessions on animal care, collaborative leadership, fundraising, program planning, and more. One thing that makes this conference so unique is that instead of sessions with a lecturer, every session is discussion-based and interactive. This way, everyone has an opportunity to share, ask questions, and ensure they are getting beneficial information out of the conference. They also encourage participants to create and facilitate their own sessions at the tail-end of the week, adding an extra layer of participation and engagement.

It is always exciting to attend new conferences, network with other professionals in similar fields, and learn about new ideas, methods, and resources. We hope to attend this conference again in the future, and will keep our ears to the ground as we search for other professional development opportunities for our staff!



Briefs

FOR THE LOVE OF BATS

Maddie Bemisderfer

Did you know that bats are some of the most important species in the world? Without them, pollination, reforestation, and pest control would cost countries around the world millions of dollars more in resources. These freaky creatures, ranging in size from a bumblebee that weighs as much as a penny to a small fox with a 6-foot wingspan, benefit humans more than we realize.



Though humans depend on bats for balancing nature, we also carry more misconceptions about them than truth. When we hear about bats, we usually think of vampires—the blood-sucking, garlic-hating, mythological horror icons that spread fear throughout global traditions, literature, and popular culture. The first literature on vampire-like creatures was published in the 1840s, and a few decades later, Bram Stoker published his famous *Dracula*.

Since Count Dracula graced the scene in the 1890s, films, books, cartoons, video games, and comics have all taken turns interpreting the fanged figure. Many may recognize famous bats by watching Count von Count on Sesame Street, reading The Batman DC comics, or even eating “Count Chocula” cereal. Since the 1920s, over 80 different vampire films have been made!

While each of these popular culture references create humor or horror for the intended audience, they also

create devastation for bat populations. Many still believe that bats are the largest culprit for carrying rabies and damaging crops for farmers. However, those are myths largely accredited to mass mythological portrayal...even if it is lighthearted. More bats are killed by human fear and invention than the current devastating fungal disease, white nose syndrome.

What can we do? Learn more about bats and how to protect them by visiting the Bat Conservation International website or stopping by the Rock Springs Nature Center to see the new bat exhibit in the north hallway. Together, we can prevent bat extinction (and still enjoy watching Batman movies).

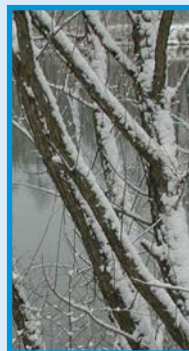
ANNOUNCING THE NEWEST (AND FLUFFIEST) MEMBER OF OUR TEAM

We are excited to introduce the newest addition to our staff here at Rock Springs Nature Center, Basil Oregon! He is a two-year-old domesticated rabbit and is happily making his home here with us. Basil comes to us with a wealth of experience in eating hay, pellets, and lettuce. He was found as a stray and taken in by Macon County Animal Control. We are lucky to have him on our team of Animal Ambassadors. We look forward to being able to include him in our educational programs for many years to come!



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 11, 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 9.

WINTER TREE ID

Wednesday, January 8, 10am-12pm

With all the leaves gone, how can you know what kind of tree you’re looking at? Learn how to identify trees during the trickiest time of year through activities and outdoor exploration. Register online by January 6.

NOCTURNAL ANIMALS

Wednesday, February 12, 6:30-8:30pm

Venture into the woods after dark to learn how nocturnal animals have adapted to the dark and cold. Dress warmly and wear sturdy shoes. Register online by February 10.

Happenings

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

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

Tuesday, December 24, Christmas Eve

Wednesday, December 25, Christmas Day

Wednesday, January 1, New Year's Day

NATURE CENTER OPEN, OFFICES CLOSED

Monday, January 20, MLK Day

Monday, February 17, Presidents' Day



Special Events

CHRISTMAS TEA

Sunday, December 1, 1-4pm

Stop by the Governor Oglesby Mansion to enjoy a traditional Christmas afternoon tea. Experience this historic Victorian home beautifully decorated by the Decatur Garden Club. Refreshments will be served. \$5/adult and \$2/child. No reservations necessary. Located at 421 W. William Street in Decatur, IL.

GEMINID METEOR SHOWER

Friends Creek Conservation Area

Friday, December 13, 9-11pm

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. \$3/person. Register online by December 12. Min/Max: 5/50.



MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES & STAFF

David Castor, President

Gussie Reed, 1st Vice President

Mark Allen, Treasurer

Michael Sams, Secretary

Karen Schneller, 2nd Vice President

Jerry Culp, Executive Director

Philip Julius, Director of Operations

Alysia Callison, Director of Program Services

Nicky Besser, Director of Finance & H.R.

Contact Us

Macon County Conservation District • 217-423-7708
mccd@MaconCountyConservation.org
MaconCountyConservation.org

Connect with Us

Follow us on social media!
MaconCountyConservation.org



Meetings

MACON COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD MEETINGS

Third Wednesday of each month, 5:30pm

December 18, January 15, and February 19

DECATUR AREA 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 at MaconCountyConservation.org by noon, unless otherwise noted.

Music

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

DULCIMER CLUB

Saturdays, 10am-12pm

December 7 & 21

January 4 & 18

February 1 & 15

ACOUSTIC MUSIC JAM

Sundays, 2-4pm

December 8, January 12, & February 9



Art

NORTH GALLERY

November/December

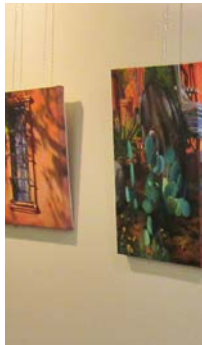
Barn Colony Artists

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

January/February

Decatur Camera Club

Experience the beauty of photography through the eyes of talented local photographers from the Decatur Camera Club.



SOUTH GALLERY

November/December

Ronie Verbena

Talented local photographer Ronie Verbena has traveled all over Illinois, capturing photos of plants and animal life in every habitat from prairies to swamps.



January/February

Wonders of Series: Griswold

In this series we will bring to you the wonders of each of our Conservation Areas, starting with Griswold Conservation Area.

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. Fee is \$8/child. Register online by noon the day before camp. Min/Max: 4/12.

COZY SWEATERS

Tuesday, December 3,
9:30am

Thursday, December 5,
9:30am

Wear your favorite sweater and find out how animals stay warm in the winter. Dress for a short excursion outside.



WHO'S THAT IN THE ICE?

Tuesday, January 7,
9:30am

Thursday, January 9,
9:30am

Discover the frozen world of ice age animals through stories, a craft, and outdoor exploration. Dress for a short excursion outside.



STICKY SYRUP

Tuesday, February 4,
9:30am

Thursday, February 6,
9:30am

Learn where sweet, sugary syrup comes from and try a taste.



Does your high school student need volunteer hours? Ask us about our youth volunteer opportunities! Email our Volunteer Coordinator, Jenny Garver, at JGarver@MaconCountyConservation.org

Happenings

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

December

BIRDS AND BEANS

Saturday, December 7, 10am

Gather 'round the Window on Wildlife at Rock Springs Nature Center to see what bird species are passing through. A naturalist will be on hand to help identify the birds we see. Coffee will be available, so bring your besties! \$3/person. Register online by December 6. Min/Max: 5/20.

ADULT CRAFT: SEED BOMBS

Sunday, December 8, 2pm

Early December is the best time to plant natives! Get next year's garden started early as you create your own colorful seed bomb using native prairie seeds, then take it home and toss it wherever you'd like to see some flowers next spring. \$5/person. Register online by December 6. Min/Max: 5/20.



WINTER ANIMAL ADAPTATIONS

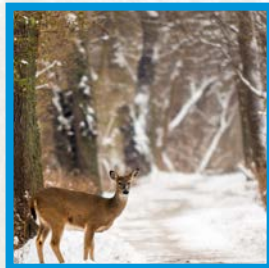
Saturday, December 14, 2pm

How do animals survive the cold weather that winter brings? Learn about some of the unique adaptations they have to survive, then go on a leisurely hike to find some. \$2/person. Register online by December 13. Min/Max: 5/30.

PRESCHOOL PEEPERS: DASHING DEER

Sunday, December 15, 2pm

Discover what makes our state mammal special. We will do a fuzzy deer craft, read a book, and go outside to look for deer. \$2/child. Register online by December 13. Min/Max: 5/20.



January

ALL ABOUT EAGLES

Sunday, January 5, 2pm

What makes the bald eagle so interesting? Learn the natural history and cultural significance of these birds, and find out the best place in Macon County to look for them. Note: no live birds will be present. All registrants will be entered to win two seats on an upcoming eagle viewing trip and must be present to win. \$2/person. Register online by January 3. Min/Max: 5/30.



ADULT CRAFT: MAKE A TERRARIUM

Saturday, January 11, 10am

Add a little green back into your home with a small terrarium. All supplies provided. \$10/person. Register online by January 9. Min/Max: 5/20.



PRESCHOOL PEEPERS: BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Sunday, January 19, 2pm

Learn about migration and some of the birds that live in central Illinois year-round. Then, create a pinecone bird feeder to hang outside the Nature Center. \$2/child. Register online by January 17. Min/Max: 5/20.

WINTER TREE ID

Sunday, January 26, 2pm

Uncover the secrets to identifying trees in the middle of winter on a guided walk through the forest. Dress for the weather. \$2/person. Register online by January 24. Min/Max: 5/20.





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

February

MEET OUR EDUCATION ANIMALS

Sunday, February 2, 2pm

A variety of education animals call Rock Springs Nature Center home, including snakes, turtles, frogs, and more. Learn about their wild counterparts, discover the day-to-day lives of our animals, and help staff with an animal feeding. \$5/person. Register online by January 31. Min/Max: 5/20.



WINTER RACCOON CANDY CANE HUNT

Saturday, February 8, 10am

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. \$2/person. Register online by February 7. Min/Max: 5/30.

PRESCHOOL PEEPERS: HOOTING OWLS

Sunday, February 16, 2pm

Learn about these nocturnal animals and hear some of the sounds they make, create a feathery craft, and go outside to explore their habitat. \$2/child. Register online by February 14. Min/Max: 5/20.

OWL PROWL

Sand Creek Conservation Area
Saturday, February 22, 8pm

Discuss what makes owls special while we walk in search of some. Dress for the weather. Meet at Sand Creek Conservation Area. \$5/person. Register online by February 21. Min/Max: 5/20.



FUN AND PASTIMES IN EARLY DECATUR

Sunday, February 23, 2pm

The early days of Decatur were not all filled with work. From homemade fun to traveling entertainers, holiday celebrations, and community events, we will learn how early Decatur citizens enjoyed their leisure time from the 1820s to the 1870s. Free. No registration required.

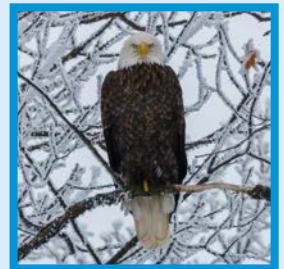
Take Your Pick

Below you'll find activities offered at multiple times or locations. 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.

TRIP TO STARVED ROCK FOR EAGLE VIEWING

Saturdays, January 18, 25, & February 1, 9am-6pm

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 17, 24, and January 31. Min/Max: 5/10.



MAPLE SYRUP PROGRAMS

Saturday, February 15, 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. \$3/person. Register online by February 14. Min/Max: 5/30.



ROCK SPRINGS
NATURE CENTER
Your Adventure in the Outdoors

Adult Craft: Seed Bombs

Sunday, December 8, 2pm

Early December is the best time to plant natives! Get next year's garden started early as you create your own colorful seed bomb using native prairie plant seeds, then take it home and toss it wherever you'd like to see some flowers next spring.
\$5/person, registration required.

MaconCountyConservation.org



Macon County
Conservation District



ROCK SPRINGS
NATURE CENTER
Your Adventure in the Outdoors

Maple Syrup Programs

Saturday, February 15: 11 am, 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 taste real maple syrup.
\$3/person. Register online by noon February 14.

MaconCountyConservation.org

Macon County
Conservation District

nature sustains us, let's return the favor

Your Year End Donation Makes a Difference

BE A PARTNER IN GIVING



MaconCountyConservationFoundation.org

MAKE AN IMPACT



For trail conditions, visit MaconCountyConservation.org

Macon County
Conservation District



Built by Nature, Crafted by Us: Here's the Story Behind the New Timber Frame Pavilion at Friends Creek Conservation Area

Ashton Nunn

For the past several months, there has been a project that we have kept quiet about while our staff worked hard to complete it. We sat down with Friends Creek Site Superintendent, Andy Murphy, to learn all the details about this newest structure at the Friends Creek Conservation Area group camp site.

WHAT IS THIS STRUCTURE WE ARE STANDING BY CALLED?

This is a King Post Pavilion. The top of the main bents are shaped to look like the king chess piece.

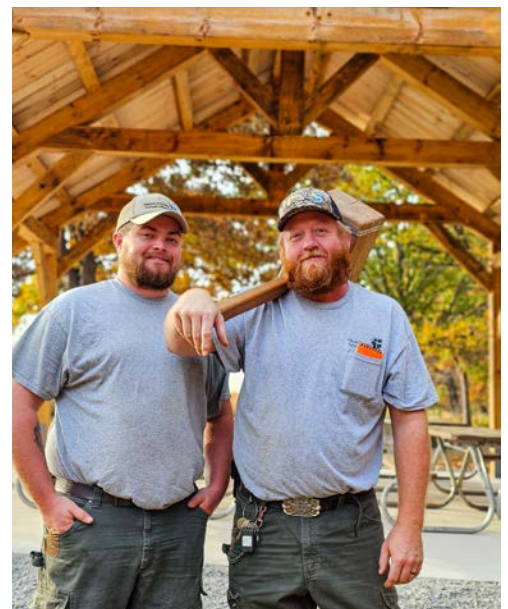
YOU MENTIONED THE TERM "BENTS"; CARE TO TALK A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT THOSE?

Yeah, those are the three main support pieces on the mends and in the middle. Each one weighs about 1,800 pounds and they're what holds all this up.



WOW! 1,800 POUNDS? HOW DO YOU MOVE SOMETHING LIKE THAT NOT ONLY ONCE BUT THREE TIMES?

With a combination of a couple of big pieces of machinery and the help of the whole Operations department. I couldn't have done this project without them. My site technician, Ethan (Spain), was my right-hand man during this whole project. He put in a lot of hours with me in the shop to get the pieces measured, cut, and treated.



District Project Updates continued



THAT'S REALLY IMPRESSIVE! LET'S TALK A LITTLE ABOUT WHERE YOU LEARNED TO DO ALL THIS. THERE WAS A CLASS YOU ATTENDED, CORRECT?

Yes, a few of us from our department went to a Timber Framing Class down in Nashville, Tennessee. We learned a lot from it. I also have been woodworking since I was in high school, so I've got about 26 years under my belt.

I KNOW THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT THE WOOD THIS PAVILION IS MADE FROM. LET'S TALK ABOUT THAT.

Yeah, all the wood except the pegs is from District property. There were some white pines at our Sand Creek Conservation Area that needed to be removed, but the wood was still good. The District has a new sawmill there at Sand Creek, so the trees were felled there and then milled on-site. Then, we hauled them out here to Friends Creek and started cutting and whittling them down here in our shop until all the pieces were ready to be put together. Everything but the metal roof and pegs was made in-house. We budgeted \$4,000 for the entire project, and we were able to come in just under that, so being able to make almost all the materials in-house helped us make this a low-cost project.

THAT MUST HAVE TAKEN A LONG TIME!

It has; we started working on this back at the end of May and just finished up here in the third week of October.

IT MUST BE GREAT TO SEE THIS PROJECT FINALLY FINISHED.

It is, it's not just a plan on paper anymore.

I HAVE TO ASK ABOUT THIS IMPRESSIVE-LOOKING Mallet THAT'S SITTING OVER HERE. WHAT IS IT?

This is something called a persuader, but we've named it "Thor's Hammer". We also created this in-house. It weighs about 20 pounds, and we used it to hit the bent posts and the beams into place when we were assembling the structure.

THAT'S REMARKABLE! IS THERE ANYTHING YOU HOPE TO GAIN FROM THIS NEW STRUCTURE BEING PUT UP HERE? ANY FINAL REMARKS?

We would love to see more people come out to utilize this group camp site more often now that they will have this pavilion here. My final thoughts would be to encourage people to come out to check our Conservation Area and look into booking the group camp. Or just come out to enjoy the trails and stop by the pavilion to see it in person.

We would like to commend Andy for planning this project from start to finish. It really is an amazing and impressive structure to see in person. In using natural resources that are from our sites, it helps us stay true to our mission. We look forward to more staff-led projects like this in the future!

The building plans for this project were from Timber Frame HQ. Check out their website if you're looking to build a timber frame structure of your own!

