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El Valor Asks "How Much Prairie is in Illinois?"

Midewin's Interpretive Specialist Pat Thrasher uses the "Web of Life" to explain ecosystem interconnectivity.

As the summer comes to a close at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, so do its summer programs. One of the most memorable summer highlights since the program began in 2001 is the El Valor Science & Technology Summer Camp for inner-city children.

The camp is one of many community programs hosted by El Valor, a non-profit multicultural center serving urban families in the Pilsen-Little Village neighborhood of Chicago. During two 4-week camp sessions students learn to take a hands-on approach to science, technology, environmental learning and stewardship.

Acceptance into the program is based on a 300-word essay. With only 35 spots available, the essays must show research, commitment, passion and truth. The essay questions change yearly, according to Rolando Madrid, director of School Age programs at El Valor. This year hopeful campers researched and wrote essays on "Why Illinois is a prairie state," and "How much prairie is in Illinois?" Madrid feels that by making acceptance based on an essay, no one can feel ruled out.

"I don't believe in filtering out kids from the beginning, that's why we accept kids from all levels, then during the course of the summer kids all end up at the same level," Madrid said. "I like to call it evidence of kids rising to the occasion."

In the El Valor Science and Technology camp, "kids learn a lot, and have a good time" and El Valor wouldn't have it any other way. With a nearly perfect attendance rate and 100 people on the waiting list for the next program, students age 10 to 13 years take advantage of the opportunity.

Not only are they given the chance to have active roles in restoration, but they learn to take pride and value in the outdoors.

"It opens the doors to future opportunities," said Midewin's Interpretive Specialist Pat Thrasher. "This partnership brings together the Chicago Academy of Sciences, El Valor and the Forest Service to provide opportunities for inner-city young people to gain skills and confidence in science and computer technology, in a way we think enhances skills and makes them better students."

Campers participate in many educational activities, including visits to nature museums, creating and testing rockets and bug catchers, and designing their own websites. The culmination of the El Valor program is a two-day trip to Midewin, where students put their summer learning to the test in a variety of activities.

Once the students got off the bus they were determined to make the most of their adventure with nature. Not only did they participate in games such as "The Web of Life" where the main lesson is about the value of all the pieces of an ecosystem, but they were able to do prairie scavenger hunts, pond studies, and bird watching. Their overnight campout was hosted at Will County's nearby Hickory Creek Environmental Learning Center.

Through a cost-share agreement with El Valor, the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is achieving its mission to reach out to urban audiences and help them connect with the Forest Service and the natural environment.

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Wayne Land Swap Promotes Local Growth

New Straitsville Mayor Dave Brown (left) signs the closing documents for the Wayne NF and New Straitsville land exchange as Good Builders' Property Manager, Vern Barrel; President Steve Good; and the Wayne's Regina Martin look on.

A cooperative agreement involving the Wayne National Forest, The Nature Conservancy, the Village of New Straitsville and a private land owner will allow the Perry County village to grow while at the same time protecting wetland and forest in the Wayne NF.

According to the terms of a real estate exchange, recently signed by all parties, the Forest Service will transfer 105 acres of land within the Village of New Straitsville to a local builder in exchange for three parcels of land totaling approximately 95 acres—including a 14-acre wetland that is rare for this part of Ohio.

New Straitsville Mayor Dave Brown called the swap, "A new beginning for New Straitsville," he went on to say, "a positive move like this could start the village on a new path to economic growth" Developer Steve Good of Good Builders, Inc., expects to start immediate work on the land preparing for the future construction of approximately 70 quality-built, affordable homes.

"This land transfer is a great win-win for everyone," said Congressman David L. Hobson (R-Springfield), who represents Perry County. "This public-private partnership has proved once again what can be achieved when diverse organizations work together in a constructive way. This project will preserve an environmentally sensitive wetland and provide the people of New Straitsville additional opportunities for community and economic growth."

According to Forest Supervisor Mary Reddan, "This is the way we like to work with our communities. All parties to this deal are winners. The Village of New Straitsville has land for expansion and economic growth, and the Wayne National Forest has gained a 14-acre wetland it could not otherwise have acquired. The wetland, known locally as Tansky's Marsh, provides a great wildlife-viewing site for the public; and the other acreage adds a unique wildlife habitat, as well as recreation and consolidation opportunities. It also increases the management efficiency of the Forest," Reddan added.

The Nature Conservancy assisted in the land exchange by purchasing the 46-acre tract that includes the wetland from a local lumber company and holding it for more than a year, protecting the property against a sale to another buyer until the Forest Service could win approval of the project. The Appalachian forests of southeastern Ohio are part of the most diverse forests in North America and represent an important part of Ohio's rich biological heritage.

"This agreement represents the spirit of cooperation we need to successfully protect habitat in Ohio," said Rich Shank, director of the Conservancy's Ohio Chapter. "Economic sustainability is an important part of The Nature Conservancy's conservation philosophy. We can't safeguard these forests for future generations without protecting the economic viability of the communities within the forest."

As part of the provisions of the agreement the Forest Service will transfer 105 acres of Wayne National Forest land located within the municipal limits of New Straitsville to Good Builders, Inc., of Logan. This land was purchased more than 60 years ago when the Forest was new and is believed to be beneficial to New Straitsville development.

In exchange, the Forest Services will receive three parcels that comprise the 95.56 acres. One tract contains a unique, fourteen acre wetland that has access on two sides by public roads; another tract is bordered by existing National Forest land on three sides in the popular Dorr Run Off Road Vehicle Area; and the third tract is forested land that borders the Forest on two sides near the Paine's Crossing Special Interest Area.

All the property involved is located within the Athens Ranger District of the Wayne National Forest.

White Mountain and Friends Combat NNIS

On September 20, more than 20 volunteers from Outward Bound gathered at the White Mountain National Forest's Evans Notch Visitor Center in Bethel, Maine. Their mission on this year's National Public Lands Day was to combat two tenacious invasive plants: Japanese barberry (Berberis thunbergii) and burning bush (Euonymus alatus).

Outward Bound volunteers helped the Forest Service combat invasive plants.

These plants—both native to Asia—were originally brought to North America in the 19th century as ornamentals and planted as hedges, in landscaping, and along highways for their vibrant fall foliage. Having escaped from cultivation, mainly by birds and animals, these non-native species are now overwhelming and replacing the native flora.

Not only do they compromise native plant diversity, but they also cause loss of habitat and food for wildlife, while altering soil structure and chemistry, fire regimes, and plant succession.

For more than three hours, volunteers braved rain, humidity and poison ivy to dig, pull, and bag over 60 70-gallon bags of branches, leaves, and roots from the 10-acre Visitor Center. Dunkin' Donuts, Shaw's Supermarkets, and Subway donated food and beverages for the hard-working crew, and a local retailer provided work gloves.

The coordinated efforts of volunteers and local businesses embody the true spirit of National Public Lands Day, which brings thousands of volunteers together throughout America to refurbish and restore our public places.

The nationwide endeavor serves to maintain the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps, whose mission in the 1930s was to preserve and protect America's natural heritage. Nearly 80,000 volunteers at 500 sites were expected to contribute to an estimated eight million dollars worth of improvements across the United States this year.

Forest in Every Classroom on the Green Mountain NF

Vermont teachers in the Winter Ecology Workshop of A Forest For Every Classroom training visit a timber sale as part of their forest stewardship experience.

Back when the Forest Service was handing out "Million for the Millennium" Grants (round 1 and 2), a proposal for "A Forest for Every Classroom" was put forward to work with teacher development in Vermont transferring knowledge about balanced forest stewardship and public land.

A partnership made up of three partners with managed forests: the Green Mountain National Forest, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, and Shelburne Farms plus the National Wildlife Federation, created a year-long program targeted to teachers in school districts directly around the National Forest and National Park.

However, the Green Mountain NF didn't receive the Million for the Millennium Grant in either of the years we applied. After being rejected the second year, we looked around for another source of funds, and were fortunate to find the Ittleson Foundation. The Foundation not only funded the program for three years, but asked the partners to use the third year to develop resources for distributing the program to others in the Forest Service and Park Service if it was successful.

Our vision was simple: if today's students are to become responsible environmental decision makers, they must possess an understanding of the ecosystems within which they live and real-world problem-solving skills to practice citizenship within their communities.

The Forest had three goals: (1) to cultivate an understanding of place (forests); (2) to enhance teacher practices; and (3) to develop citizenship skills and the fundamental tools of democracy.

We were successful in training 32 teachers. At the present time, we are planning for the fourth and fifth year of teacher training, co-hosting a second Sense of Place Conference in spring 2004, and are strengthening the partnership with both Vermont and New Hampshire State Natural Resource Agencies, and several key partners.

Local Man Aims to Preserve Area History

Midewin volunteer John Reddy is working to bring local history back to the community.

The land that now serves as the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie has more history to it than meets the eye.

In 1940 before World War II, the U.S. Army commissioned two ammunition plants to be built near Joliet and Wilmington in northeastern Illinois. During the construction, employment peaked at 17,500 people.

In 1941, the Kankakee Ordnance Works and the Elwood Ordnance Plant were up and running prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. These were only two of 77 plants built nationwide between 1940 and 1942.

The Elwood Ordnance Plant and the Kankakee Ordnance Works—at their peak—employed a total of nearly 22,000 people. The Kankakee Ordnance works manufactured Acid TNT, DNT, Tetryl, and lead azide along with other chemicals necessary to make explosive products. The Elwood Ordnance Plant used the products to make munitions, artillery shells, bombs and landmines.

On June 5, 1942, there was an explosion at the Group 2 site of the Elwood plant where detonators were assembled. Forty-eight civilian workers were killed in the worst accident to ever occur at the site. Local residents still remember the tragedy.

After the war ended in August 1945, the plants were consolidated into the Joliet Army Ammunition plant. Today, due to the Illinois Land Conservation Act, 19,000 acres of the former JAAP now comprise the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

Midewin volunteer and former Joliet Army Ammunition Plant worker John Reddy felt that the history of the JAAP needed to be told before it was too late.

After talking with Midewin Interpretive Specialist Pat Thrasher, Reddy was given the okay to proceed with creating a tour. Reddy felt it was important to incorporate the history of the plant along with the stories of people who worked at the plant.

He understood that permission from the Army would be needed to access the plant's lands for a tour, and didn't mind making the contacts to achieve this mission. Reddy wanted to help preserve a piece of Wilmington and Midewin history for as long as possible before the plant is demolished to make way for industrial development.

Reddy's dream came true in 2002 when the Ghosts of the Ammunition Plant tour became one of the most popular tours at Midewin. This year the tour has been offered since May and the success is still running high.

Reddy is confident even though the public cannot view some areas, such as the hospital, the mess hall, staff housing and offices due to public safety concerns, that people will still continue taking the tour until the plant sites available for viewing have completely vanished.

Reddy has been a volunteer at Midewin since it was first established. He has a strong personal connection to the land and is determined to continue helping Midewin in any way he can.

Reddy became a volunteer because he knew volunteers were needed for Midewin to make progress. He felt he wanted to make a difference in the Midewin community, whether it be working on history tours, bird tours or bike tours.

"Midewin is a place I found I fit in," Reddy said.

"They sold me on the dream that the land here will be forever green, it will be a marvel," he explained. "We'll have the critters, we'll someday have bison and elk, and I guess I got hooked on the dream because I'm an outdoors person. It's a compromise that at least one part of the land out here will be untouched from landfills, and I understand."

Indiana Karst Conservancy Honored

On September 13, Kelle Reynolds—the wildlife biologist and karst coordinator for the Hoosier National Forest—presented a 2003 Director-Senior, Youth and Volunteer Programs Exemplary and Outstanding Volunteer Service Award to the Indiana Karst Conservancy for their volunteer work on the Hoosier NF.

The group received the award for their work in gating the entrances to the Gardner Kaolinite Mine system. The mine system was a safety hazard that posed a significant potential for injury to Forest visitors. The mine, which operated from 1875 to 1891, was once a significant source of kaolinite, which was used in the manufacture of porcelain, white ware, and high quality paper. Over the years the mine had deteriorated to the point that its entrances and tunnels were unstable and dangerous. Despite warning signs posted at each entrance, cavers and other Forest visitors continued to enter the mine system.

The mine entrances were surveyed to determine which bat species were using the mine system. Indiana bats, a federally endangered species, were not found but several other bat species were using the caves. The Forest decided to gate the entrances to allow access by bats and other cave-dwelling species while eliminating human access.

The Hoosier NF has developed an outstanding relationship with the Indiana Karst Conservancy, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and conservation of Indiana's unique cave and karst features. The Conservancy has worked with various agencies over the past several years to construct gates at caves and dangerous mine entrances.

The group agreed to install the gates if the forest would reimburse them for the supplies. Twenty-seven individuals from the Conservancy and two Forest Service employees constructed and installed one gate, three culvert/grate closures, and one frame/expanded metal closure device in the fall of 2001 and spring of 2002.

To put it simply, it was back-breaking work. The culverts and grates weighed an average of 300 pounds each and had to be carried through the woods and down steep slopes to the mine entrances. A total of 280-person hours were needed to construct the closures.

The work days were beneficial for the Hoosier, the Conservancy, and Forest visitors. Five dangerous sites were eliminated, ensuring a safer environment for visitors. In addition, habitat for subterranean species was protected, new skills were learned by people in both organizations, and the relationship between the Hoosier and the Conservancy was strengthened.

The Hoosier nominated the Conservancy for the Director's Volunteer award for the cave gating work they completed and also to recognize the work that they do year-round for the Forest.

Volunteers Build Another Mile on the Ozark Trail

Volunteers pause for a group photo September 27.

On September 27, almost 60 people came together and worked on the North Karkaghne section of the Ozark Trail on the Potosi/Fredtown Ranger District of Mark Twain National Forest.

REI employees, Gateway Off-road Cyclists, and the Outings Club from Washington University combined to build nearly a full mile of new trail. The Boy Scouts cleared and trimmed another mile of trail.

John Roth, selected as the Forest Service's Volunteers National Award Winner for 2003, and Potosi/Fredericktown Ranger District personnel organized the work day.

The Ozark Trail was started in 1977 to traverse Missouri from the St. Louis area south to Arkansas. It connects to the Ozark Highlands Trail in Arkansas for more than 700 trail miles.

To date, approximately 350 of the 500 Missouri miles have been completed. The Ozark Highlands Trail in Arkansas has approximately 200 miles completed. All segments are available to hikers and many sections accommodate mountain bikers and equestrian use. Motorized trail use by ATVs and motorcycles is prohibited.

The non-profit Ozark Trail Association, dedicated to developing, maintaining, preserving, promoting and protecting the rugged, natural beauty of the Ozark Trail, has planned several work outings this fall on other sections of the trail.

"I, Too, Am America" Vols Recognized

Volunteers gather during the Shawnee's annual "I, Too, Am America" day camp.

In addition to the lessons about southern Illinois presented to the kids, the partnerships that made Camp "I, Too, Am America" so successful—or even possible—the last two years on the Shawnee National Forest were honored during an awards ceremony on the last day of the day camp at Miller Grove.

Those presented with awards were for the Conservation Education camp included Paul McKnight – University of Illinois Extension; Ron Duncan – University of Illinois Extension; Pedro Delgado – Illinois Coalition for Community Service; Merle Wilson – Illinois Coalition for Community Service; Jackie Eddleman – Illinois Coalition for Community Service; Bill Blackman – Illinois Coalition for Community Service; Donna Raynolds – Southern Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone; Vickie Devenport – John A. Logan Community College; and Mary McCorvie – Shawnee NF.

Shawnee National Forest Supervisor Allen Nicholas distributed the awards while surrounded by a sea of children. Nicholas asked the campers what they liked the best about the program. One student immediately shouted, "I liked Sand Cave," another yelled, "I liked the digging," and still another—rather loudly—shared "I liked the hike to the bluff."

Other individuals recognized for their contributions to the Heritage Program were: Marian Vaughn Reed – Natural Resource Conservation Service and Forest Service volunteer Olipa Sakala from Zambia

Reed spent countless hours hand-quilting the very first quilt made during the Shawnee's Underground Railroad Quilt Passport In Time project. Since that first quilt made back in 2001, three others have been completed and a fifth quilt started. The fifth quilt is being done as a Forest Service employee volunteer project entitled "The Lands Nobody Wanted." Marian helped to launch a new way of looking at forest interpretation-a kind of Stitch in Time.

Sakala volunteered to work with the Heritage Program through the Historic Black College and University Comprehensive Program. She spent her summer with the day camp digging in the dirt around the remains of Bedford and Abigail Miller's house foundations, and poking around the Pope County courthouse looking at probated Wills and grantee-grantor land records.

Underground Railroad Marker Dedicated

On September 21, an Underground Railroad historic marker was dedicated at the John Campbell Memorial Home in Ironton, Ohio. The marker was funded by the Ohio Bicentennial Commission and Proctor & Gamble, and was arranged through Forest Archaeologist Ann Cramer's involvement with the OBC's Underground Railroad Advisory Committee.

The UR research that the Wayne National Forest has been conducting for many years has connected John Campbell to Forestlands nearby. Campbell harbored runaway slaves who crossed the Ohio River near his home in Ironton, and directed their movements northward through the iron furnace towns to Pokepatch, a UR settlement located on the Ironton Ranger District.

From there, they would either travel or be transported further north to Lake Erie and their long-awaited goal of freedom.

Campbell has long been revered for his business entrepreneurship and the fact that he founded the town of Ironton, but his involvement in the UR is somewhat lesser known. The dedication of this historic marker will help to better educate the public about Campbell's important role in the Underground Railroad.

Anne Cramer (left) helps unveil an historic marker at the John Campbell home.

Students Help Inventory Invasive Species

A few years ago, a number of enterprising educators approached the Chippewa National Forest with the hope of tying together their summer alternative learning program with resource activities on the Forest. It took only a short time to connect the adventurous teens with the area lakes and some of our more exotic inhabitants.

This summer marks the third year of the cooperative agreement with the Cass Lake Area Learning Center and the Forest's fisheries program in tracking the non-native Rusty Crayfish. Not only are the students learning to handle the aggressive crustaceans, but they are learning a bit about research, statistics, and ecosystems from Fisheries Biologist Chantel Cook.

And as they learn about crayfish, they also are learning to work together as a team, and put some faces to the Forest Service logo they see so often around town.

Following their study of Rusty Crayfish, area students present their findings.

The students spend two weeks each summer setting traps on Cass Lake and four other connected lakes to determine how quickly the Rusty Crayfish are moving into the system. Last year, they found no Rusty crayfish on the lake chain, but in 2003, they found a small population of Rusty Crayfish. Not a huge number, but enough to cause concern that these Non-natives Invasive Species are slowly moving in.

Rusty crayfish are noticeably larger and more aggressive than the native species found here. They have a rusty patch on the sides of the bodies, and have black-tipped claws. The "Rusties" are a threat to native populations as they compete for food and habitat.

The students collect the Rusties and native crayfish from their traps, measure and weigh the individuals and release the native crayfish back to the lake. The Rusties are kept for sample specimens and for education programs.

Once the collecting is complete, the education effort goes full circle, with the student's presenting their results at a Norway Beach Visitor Center program. Visitors are often fascinated to see the various crayfish, and the crayfish stages. The students receive a very hands-on lesson in public speaking!

Each year, the search for Rusty Crayfish will expand and hopefully include more students. The students gain life skills, as well as hands-on connections to that thick science book in front of them, and a better understanding of the aquatic world around them. The Forest gains much needed information on the spread of a specific exotic, and perhaps, in the future, a source for qualified biologists or environmental educators to hire.

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