Minnesota Master Naturalist Program
10th ANNIVERSARY 2005–2015

Celebrating volunteers who work to preserve and enhance Minnesota’s natural resources

2,112 VOLUNTEERS

395,446 VOLUNTEER HOURS

3.4 million ACRES IMPACTED
Everyday advocates for Minnesota’s natural environment

While there are many scientists and specialists studying environmental problems that face our planet, the size of the task is truly formidable. Ordinary people, however, make significant contributions toward improving and protecting our natural environment.

In Minnesota, everyday citizens gain in-depth understanding of nature and have access to professionals in environmental science through the Minnesota Master Naturalist program.

“I had a renewed focus for my love of nature and learned of places where I could experience first-hand the natural world.”

The Minnesota Master Naturalist program was created in 2005 with a five-year grant from the National Science Foundation. It is a collaborative effort of University of Minnesota Extension and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

The program benefits the state of Minnesota through direct environmental service and by educating Minnesota’s citizens about its natural resources. Master Naturalists are trained to be stewards of our natural environment and to teach these skills to others.

Master Naturalists volunteer with science-based projects such as monitoring monarch butterfly larvae, managing invasive species, bird banding and evaluating stream ecology. These citizen scientists engage in real-world field work that helps University of Minnesota Extension researchers and Department of Natural Resources professionals assess changes in natural habitats and environments.

Hikers, bird watchers, phenologists and wildflower lovers enjoy being Master Naturalist volunteers. Staff from nature centers, environmental organizations, state parks and wildlife refuges are trained as Minnesota Master Naturalist instructors. These local instructors teach the initial volunteer training course as well as lead continuing education initiatives for Master Naturalist volunteers.

The Minnesota Master Naturalist program allows volunteers across the state to engage in locally based natural resource projects with like-minded volunteers to make our state a better place to live, work and play.
10 years of benchmarks

2005  Received $1.7M grant over 5 years from National Science Foundation for program startup

2005  First Big Woods, Big Rivers course, Fort Snelling State Park, St. Paul

2006  First Prairies & Potholes course, Upper Sioux Agency State Park, Granite Falls

2007  MN Monthly magazine January issue, “MN Favorites” list: “75 things that make our state great.” Recognized by Minnesota Public Radio as one of the cool things in our state.


2008  First North Woods, Great Lakes course, EPA lab, Duluth

2008  First annual conference, Camp Courage, Maple Lake. Brought together volunteers, staff and instructors to learn together and meet advanced training requirements for the year.

2010  Award for Outstanding Program Support Materials, Alliance of Natural Resource Outreach and Service Programs, & Minnesota Natural Resource Extension Professionals

2010  Bronze Award for Educational Materials: Short Publication, for the Linnaeus List series, Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals

2010  Teamwork Award, Minnesota Association of Extension Educators

2010  Received Bertha Lewis Environmental Trust: Unsolicited funding for programming in and around Martin County


2011  Offered freshman seminar at U of M to expose students to Minnesota’s natural and cultural history

2012  100th course: Big Woods, Big Rivers, City of North St. Paul. The city sponsored local residents in exchange for their volunteer service in natural resource management.

2012  License agreement with Pennsylvania Master Naturalists to use our educational materials

2012  Program of the Year, Alliance of Natural Resource Outreach and Service Programs (only one is awarded each year by the national association)

2012  Finalist for Environmental Education Award, Minnesota Environmental Initiative

2014  Reported over 50,000 service hours in one calendar year

2015  176 biome courses taught. Our reach expands across the state.
Minnesota Master Naturalists help students study the forest

Pam and Michael Pagelkopf completed the Minnesota Master Naturalist Big Woods, Big Rivers program in 2007. Inspired by their love of the outdoors and a belief that today’s youth are the future stewards of the earth, they looked for volunteer opportunities that would support student learning in the outdoors.

The Minnesota DNR’s School Forest program put out a call for portable field desks for schools enrolled in the program. In addition to a clipboard writing surface, the field desk serves as a container in which the student can transport study materials to the field.

The Pagelkopfs deliver the field desks directly to students representing the school forest sites.

“For us, the gift in return is the opportunity to interact with the students and feel their enthusiasm and excitement about their forest and the activities they participate in. The teachers are happy to have a new tool to make learning in the forest a little bit easier,” said Pam.

“We leave each school forest site knowing that the volunteer project we chose is supporting student learning in the outdoors.

“The wonderful notes of appreciation that we've received from the students and staff have brought smiles to my face and sometimes tears to my eyes. With the intention of giving, I sometimes feel I’m on the receiving end.”

“When the first delivery of field desks was done in 2010, I never dreamed that I would still be doing it 812 field desks later,” said Michael. “I have walked in outdoor classrooms that tried to draw me into being a student again. I hear the sparkle of nature in the voices of students as they share their outdoor classroom experience. It has been good and it has opened my eyes to what the forest can do for learning. I hope the need for field desks continues and that next year I can build and deliver to more School Forest sites.”

“For us, the gift in return is the chance to interact with the students and feel their enthusiasm and excitement about their forest . . .”

The Pagelkopfs originally committed to purchase materials and build 300 field desks over a three year period. As of 2016, they will have built and delivered 812 field desks to 30 Minnesota School Forest sites and driven over 4,000 miles to do so.
Home, home on the biome

Master Naturalists complete a 40-hour, hands-on course in natural history, environmental interpretation, and conservation stewardship. The program offers three courses that focus, in-depth, on Minnesota’s major biomes*.

Big Woods, Big Rivers

The Big Woods, Big Rivers biome course covers the science and natural history behind Minnesota’s deciduous forest and Tallgrass Aspen Parklands. This biome stretches like a sash across Minnesota from the southeastern corner to the northwestern tip.

Since 2005, the Minnesota Master Naturalist program has facilitated 81 Big Woods, Big Rivers courses. These courses have reached over 1,200 people and have been taught in 20 of Minnesota’s 87 counties.

Prairies and Potholes

The Prairie Parkland Province biome was historically composed of tallgrass prairie. It covers just over 16 million acres stretching from southwestern to northwestern Minnesota. In the northern portion, glacial kettles have filled with water and form the “potholes” that dot the landscape.

Prairies and Potholes was piloted in 2006 at Upper Sioux Agency State Park; 12 people participated. Nine years later, there have been a total of 38 trainings in 17 counties reaching 416 participants.

North Woods, Great Lakes

In 2008, the program introduced its third and final biome course, North Woods, Great Lakes. The course covers the science and natural history of the arrowhead region of Minnesota and explores the Laurentian Mixed (coniferous) Forest. It is the largest biome in the state, covering approximately 23 million acres in northeastern Minnesota.

Since 2008, 53 courses have been offered in 13 counties and have involved 674 participants.

* bi·ome: noun: a regional ecosystem characterized by the plant, animal, and microbial communities that developed under specific soil and climate conditions.
Wisdom and memories shared by the class of 2005

Measuring the impact of a program as diverse and widespread in its scope and reach as Master Naturalists can be difficult. Extension educator and Master Naturalist program director Amy Rager asked the following questions of a few of the graduates of the very first Big Woods, Big Rivers course taught in 2005:

What has it meant to you to be a Minnesota Master Naturalist? How has it changed your thinking or behavior? What is your favorite memory of being a Master Naturalist?

Their answers provide insight into the unquantifiable life-changing aspects of being in nature, the positive change that impacts the state of Minnesota, and the joy experienced by people doing something meaningful and long-lasting.

Deb Lewis wrote that the program gave her “multiple opportunities to connect with amazingly talented and like-minded individuals, many of whom have become my very good friends. I have a great sense of pride that I am a part of this wonderful program. It is a huge learning experience.”

Bruce Gravelle says, “I see myself slowing down more when I am outside and observing more of what is going on around me. This program has given me a place to volunteer doing something that I enjoy.”

Russ Edmonds wrote from Indiana: “Going through the class gave me more confidence in public speaking and in handling larger groups of people. I routinely take groups of 10 to 12 middle school students to sample invertebrates in a local stream as part of the Hoosier Riverwatch program.”

Even though Russ left Minnesota for Indiana six years ago, he said Master Naturalists motivated him to continue volunteering. He comes back to Minnesota on vacation and volunteers at Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory: “It’s nice to see the program has continued to produce more trained volunteers.”

David Schmidt answered Amy’s request while on vacation with his wife Sara in Texas. “We wanted to visit Texas as it was one of the states you patterned our Master Naturalist program after,” he wrote. “Becoming a Master Naturalist volunteer is what really got me going. What I’m now involved in is because of the confidence I gained taking that first class. Not only have I been a Master Naturalist volunteer for 10 years, but I hit my 10 year anniversary with the Park Service last fall as well.”

David admits, “I’m much more of a conservationist now. That’s part maturity, awareness and education—some of which came with Master Naturalist training.”

“Being a Minnesota Master Naturalist,” said Kathy Smith, “has meant making connections with the naturalist community here, both volunteer and professional. Being in the first class felt like the start of something really good. Amy and the staff have done a tremendous job with Minnesota Master Naturalists.”
Expanding outreach

Over the last 10 years, Master Naturalist volunteers, students and instructors have reached out to at least one person in almost every county in Minnesota.

Advanced Training
Realizing a need for continuing education, the Minnesota Master Naturalist program began to offer advanced courses to its volunteers in 2008. These courses provide Master Naturalists and the public with opportunities to participate in a recreational activity and learn about a new natural resource topic. Topics build on the biome curriculum.

We have offered 170 advanced trainings in the past seven years including:
- Monarch Larvae Monitoring
- Phenology Volunteer Training
- Bird Banding
- Spiders workshop
- Stream Ecology

Instructor Training
The Minnesota Master Naturalist program began offering instructor training in 2009. Since then, we have educated 156 volunteers in 16 counties to teach biome courses and advanced topics. Many of our instructors have ties with nature centers or government agencies that offer (or plan to offer) Master Naturalist courses.

Instructor training takes place all over Minnesota, and we expand our reach every year. Volunteer instructors help us to offer many more courses than we would be able to otherwise.

Gathering Partners
The Minnesota Master Naturalist program has hosted an annual conference since 2008. Eight conferences, offered throughout the state, have attracted nearly 800 Master Naturalists.

In 2015, the conference changed its name to “Gathering Partners” when the University of Minnesota Extension Forestry team, the Minnesota Forestry Association, and the Phenology Network partnered with the Master Naturalist program to help facilitate the conference.

Master Naturalists socialize with others dedicated to stewardship of Minnesota’s natural resources at the conference. They also participate in workshops that count toward required continuing education.

Invasive Blitz started in 2013 as a part of a Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) grant with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. The advanced training educates Master Naturalists and the public on how to identify and eradicate invasive species.

Since 2013, Master Naturalists have held 11 Invasive Blitz trainings, which attracted nearly 140 participants.

Participants who complete the training volunteer at local organizations to organize community “blitz” events and may adopt an area to monitor and eliminate invasive species.

National Public Lands Day is a national day of service observed annually on the fourth weekend of September. The Minnesota Master Naturalist program coordinates at least 10 volunteer sites around the state.

Since 2012, 29 National Public Lands Day sites have attracted more than 500 volunteers in 12 counties.

On September 26, 2015, Master Naturalists hosted 13 sites and 319 volunteers who worked a total of 1,677 hours, which amounted to $41,640 worth of labor.

Projects include invasive species removal, bud capping and pollinator garden restoration.
How we do what we do

The success of the Minnesota Master Naturalist program relies on the work and dedication of its volunteers.

However, nothing could be done without the administrative and teaching skills of University of Minnesota Extension educators and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources staff who write the curriculum, recruit volunteers and train instructors, organize the annual conference and other big events throughout the state, and connect Master Naturalists with the research and resources of U of M faculty and natural resource professionals.

Rob Blair, Extension specialist, wrote the initial grant that got the program up and running. Rob specializes in avian ecology, urban ecology, land use, citizen science and teacher professional development.

Amy Rager, Extension educator in fish, wildlife and conservation education (FWCE), is based at the Extension regional office in Morris, Minnesota. She specializes in program design, volunteer management and prairie plants.

Andrea Lorek Strauss, Extension educator in FWCE, is based at the Extension regional office Rochester, Minnesota. She specializes in program design, development and evaluation and Minnesota natural history.

Julie Larson and Lynette Lothert provide administrative support for the team. They are based at the Extension regional office in Morris.

Stephan Carlson, Extension educator in FWCE, coordinates advanced training and road trips.

Dawn Flinn, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Education Coordinator, specializes in educational program development and project management.

John Loegering is an Extension specialist focusing on wildlife and birds.

Karen Oberhauser, Extension specialist in fisheries, wildlife and conservation biology, is known for her international work with monarch butterflies, citizen science and teacher education.

The Master Naturalist team thanks all of the many students, volunteers and nature enthusiasts who have helped them grow the Minnesota Master Naturalist program over the past 10+ years.

With your help and support, we look forward to continuing the stewardship of Minnesota’s natural resources for many more years to come.

Find out more at: minnesotamasternaturalist.org
and extension.umn.edu
Find us on Facebook, Flickr, Instagram & Twitter

The Minnesota Master Naturalist Program is a joint effort of University of Minnesota Extension and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

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