



The Trailblazer

Newsletter of the Elkhart County Indiana Master Naturalists

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Spring 2022

Spring Quarterly Meeting Elkhart County IMN Alumni Club

The spring meeting was held Thursday, April 14, at the Elkhart Conservation Club. Our guest speaker was the DNR's Urban Biologist for the northern part of the state, Jessica Merklings. She explained what an urban biologist does and does not do. (See article on p. 4)

The next **IMN class** is scheduled for Thursday evenings from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. starting May 26 and continuing through July 21. We will start advertising it in the spring. The ECIMNA Board has approved four \$50 scholarships to be available to prospective students. So far only one application for the scholarship has been received. Encourage your friends to sign up for the class!

Delicious Dandelions

By Susan Zook

Krista Daniels presented a fascinating program on dandelions at Ox Bow Haus on April 18. Most of us know Krista as a steering committee member of our ECIMN group; she's also an interpretive naturalist and a great fan of dandelions.

The dandelion came to our country as a non-native species. It was brought here intentionally as a food source and for its medicinal qualities. Undoubtedly, it also arrived unintentionally, as its seeds stick to just about anything. As early as 1672, there were records showing dandelions were well-established. People made space for it in their gardens. They cultivated it as a medicinal plant and vegetable.

Dandelions adapt amazingly well and are often the first thing to grow in disturbed areas. Each flower can produce 200 seeds. The seeds have parachutes on them as well as tiny barbs that help establish them when they land. They start putting roots down as soon as they get a little moisture and develop both a long taproot and side roots. Their leaves grow close and flat to the ground, allowing them to survive grazing animals, being stepped on, and wind. The leaves' rosette shape captures water and funnels it to the base of the plant. Their hollow stem is stronger than a solid one, allowing it to bend in the wind.



Dandelions serve as an important food source for early bees and butterflies because they are one of the first flowers to bloom in the spring. They are also full of nutrients for humans, including vitamins A, B, C, and K, and minerals calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, and phosphorous. In the past, people ate dandelion greens to cure scurvy, which was caused by a lack of vitamin C. Dandelions also lower cholesterol, are rich in antioxidants, can fight bacteria, promote the flow of bile and are good for liver health. Dandelion root tea works great as a detox.



Krista treated us to some of her very tasty homemade dandelion jelly and we also sampled dandelion root tea. She also shared additional recipes with us. I left with a whole new respect for this intriguing and valuable plant.

Volunteer Opportunities

Friday April 29, from 4:30 – 7:30 p.m. is the Arbor Day celebration in Goshen. Many jobs are available: set-up, tear down, registering visitors, helping with tree climbing, and more. Contact Melanie Helmuth to volunteer, melaniehertzler@gmail.com



We need volunteers to man the IMN informational booth on Saturday, **June 25**, at the **Master Gardeners Tour**. We are sharing the booth with the SWCD. If you can help out, contact Carole Mitchell, bluebirdhill201@hotmail.com

Melanie has been in contact with Annie at the **Elkhart Environmental Center (EEC)** and they have planned a work day for us on **Saturday May 14** in the morning. For the more able-bodied people, there will be honeysuckle and/or dames rocket removal to do. For the people not as able to bend/lift all morning, they suggested having some volunteers clean the new interpretive signs, just going around with soap/water and a rag, which would be some walking. They say they will continue to brainstorm more physically-easy activities for anyone who wants to work but has mobility challenges. Lunch will be provided, so we need to know how many people are coming. If you didn't sign the sign-up sheet at the April meeting, contact Melanie, melaniehertzler@gmail.com



Check your email for more **volunteer opportunities**. Sometimes those emails get filtered to junk folders because they have multiple recipients.

How Being an IMN Led to a New Job Opportunity

By Melanie Helmuth

My favorite place to spend time growing up was halfway up the tulip tree in my backyard. It had the best view, as it overlooked our sheep pasture as well as the corn fields surrounding our house. It had perfectly positioned branches to climb and settle myself in for a long sit. I felt at home in that tree.

Fast forward to 2020. We were in lockdown, and had much more time to explore the outdoors. I was working on the grounds crew in a local school system at the time, and while I enjoyed working outside all day, I was more interested in learning more about environmental stewardship rather than mowing lawns. I had heard about the Indiana Master Naturalist class, and was hoping to take the class for a fun outdoor experience. While I knew I would learn about different areas of the natural environment, I didn't know how strongly the class would amplify my passion of working for our local environment. After I finished the class, I searched for every opportunity I could find to be an environmental steward. In January of 2021, I joined the Goshen City Shade Tree Board, a group that works towards the goal of 45% tree canopy in the city by the year 2045. Through that Board, I also joined the Trees For Goshen Board, which works towards the same goal, but works more with private homeowners within the city rather than public property. Being a part of these Boards, I began learning even more about tree health, tree IDing, and the many benefits of trees in an urban area.

A few months ago, I saw there was an Urban Forestry Assistant position with the Environmental Resilience department in the City of Goshen, and decided to apply. To my delight, I was offered the job, and I have been there ever since. Every day I learn more about our urban tree canopy, and what it takes to keep it healthy and thriving. I truly enjoy working with and helping to educate the community about trees and their importance in our lives and in our ecosystem. This job is so perfect for me, but I may not have even applied for it if I hadn't taken that first leap into learning more about the natural world in Northern Indiana through Indiana Master Naturalist.

One of my duties as an Urban Forestry Assistant is to prune trees in a way that helps the tree reach its healthiest structure - pruning dead limbs, pruning crossing limbs that may cause rubbing and breakage in time, and creating a single leader for the tree so it can be more structurally sound. This sometimes means climbing into trees. Below is a catalpa tree that I was pruning, specifically grooming it to be a climbing tree. Being up in that catalpa tree brought back a flood of wonderful memories of climbing as a child. And I felt at home in that tree.



Urban Biology

At the Elkhart County Indiana Master Naturalist Alumni Club quarterly meeting at the Elkhart Conservation Club our guest speaker was the DNR's Urban Biologist for the northern part of the state, Jessica Merklng. She explained what an urban biologist does and does not do.

Jessica works out of Columbia City and is primarily concerned with three metropolitan areas: Granger, South Bend, and Mishawaka; Elkhart and Goshen; and Ft. Wayne and New Haven. Her topic was "Living with Wildlife." Indiana is home to 897 species of which 712 species can be found in urban environments, and 64 of them are common in our backyards. This can cause human/wildlife conflicts. The purpose of the Urban Biologist is to provide information on how to deal with unwanted wildlife, how to help wildlife, and what to avoid doing to wildlife. They do NOT remove or relocate wildlife, but they can refer you to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator or the local animal control officer where you live.

Jessica outlined some common "myths" about urban wildlife: (1) Feeding wildlife is necessary. No, they do just fine scouting on their own. Feeding wildlife affects their nutrition (for better or worse, depending on what is fed) and reproductive activity. Animals living on "easy street" produce more offspring which can result in overpopulation of a given environment. (2) Fawns and fledglings need our help. No, in most cases the mother animal is nearby and if you leave the area, they will return. If you find a baby bird that has fallen from its nest, it is okay to return it to the nest. The story that your scent will keep the parent birds away is not true. If you witness the mother animal's death or if the mother doesn't return in 24 hours, then is when you should call a licensed rehabilitator. (3) Predators don't belong in urban areas. No, many predators have adapted to urban life, foxes, coyotes, and birds of prey, for example. They do what they always do—find a tasty dinner. You may not appreciate the hawk that hangs out at your birdfeeder, but it's normal behavior. If it bothers you to see your cute little songbirds become lunch, take down your feeder for several days. The songbirds will come back, and eventually so will the hawk. (4) All snakes are bad. No, very few are venomous and they almost always prefer to get away from you rather than confront you. If you corner one or try to pick one up, that's a different story, but for the most part, don't bother them and they won't bother you. They provide a valuable service by catching and eating rodents. (5) Misidentification. This isn't really a myth, but a problem. People think they see a mountain lion and the whole neighborhood gets excited and it turns out to be a feral cat that got really close to the trail cam and thus looked very large.

What can we do to promote healthy interaction with urban wildlife? Tolerate messiness. Butterflies and other insects overwinter in leaf litter. If you rake up all the leaves, they have no where to hide from the elements. A good way to keep geese out of your pond is to not mow the grass down to water's edge. A buffer of water plants or shrubs will discourage geese. Minimize turf grass and plant native species of flowers and shrubs instead. Create habitat rather than feeding wildlife. Check your home for openings where mice or other wildlife can enter and block these openings. Do not handle wildlife. Composting is good, but cover your compost so it doesn't attract raccoons or other wildlife. Provide structure in ponds for fish and amphibians. And supervise your pets! That's a really important one. Your pet may injure or kill wildlife or just the opposite—your pet could be injured or killed by wildlife, depending on the encounter.

Other suggestions to help wildlife include buying a hunting or fishing license, even if you don't hunt or fish. Money from the sale of these licenses is the major source of funding for the DNR. You can also donate to a conservation organization. You can work with your local government to share your concerns. For even more information go to www.wildlife.IN.gov

As more and more land is developed, the animals have two choices: adapt to increased human interaction or move to a more suitable location. Birds can fly, but many other animals can't move away because they are surrounded by miles of highway, stores, and parking lots. Urban sprawl has caused isolated populations that can no longer connect with others of their kind. Some are opportunistic and recognize trash bins as good places to dine, while others may just slowly die out. Enjoy viewing our local wild neighbors from a distance, and follow these guidelines to make sure both you and your local wildlife stay healthy.

IMNs at Work

Kathleen Nussbaum assisted park staff at Boot Lake Nature Preserve to install ten bluebird houses and five bat boxes last month. Thanks, Kathleen!



2022 Meetings

Thursday, July 14 at 6:30 p.m.
At Waterford Mennonite Church, in Goshen. John Jay Smith will lead a wildflower and wetland walk.

Thursday, October 13 at 6:30 p.m.
At the Scout Cabin in the Derksen Farm & Wetlands in Nappanee. Speaker and program TBD.

Thursday, November 10 at 6 p.m.
Annual Potluck and Awards at the Schrock Pavilion in Goshen.

Do you have any pictures or a story that you'd like to share with other Elkhart County IMNs? I edit the *Trailblazer*; I don't write it. It's YOUR newsletter—what would like to see in it?

Send your contributions to chapman_ej@yahoo.com for the next issue of the *Trailblazer*, which will be out in July right after our next meeting. (But don't wait—you'll forget! ☺)

I'm happy to help with smoothing things out, fixing misspellings, etc., but I need your input to have a truly creative and interesting newsletter.

If you don't save the Trailblazer but need to check the information for meetings, you can always find it on the SWCD website.

The picture on the masthead this month is of Fiddler's Pond in Goshen, sent by Marilyn Groves. Send me one of your trail pictures for the next issue!



The mission of the Indiana Master Naturalist program is to bring together natural resource specialists with adult learners to foster an understanding of Indiana's plants, water, soils and wildlife, and promote natural resource volunteer service within the State of Indiana.

