

Come Play Outside Today!

By Meagan Keefe, Naturalist Instructor, LLCC

Over the past few weeks or so, I have been working on preparing for our first Minnesota Master Naturalist class here at Long Lake. The topic for lesson number one is – just what *is* a naturalist anyway? To get ready for this presentation, I've been rereading the books of some of my favorite naturalist writers, notes from a natural history interpretation class I helped teach at the U of M, and simply reflecting on my experience as a naturalist for the past ten years. And so here is my latest attempt at describing exactly what it is that we of the naturalist persuasion do.

I got into the naturalist profession in a round about way. I had grown up playing and doing things outside all the time. Some of my most cherished memories revolve around outdoor activities. From pheasant hunting with my dad and his family or fishing with my grandfathers to building tree and snow forts in the backyard or catching critters in the local pond, I spent quite a lot of my childhood outside. In college, I majored in biology and had several different career paths outlined. One way or another they fell through and I ended up the spring of my senior year not sure what to do with a major in biology. Browsing through the career resource center, I found a flyer for an environmental education internship and lo and behold a professional naturalist was born.

Most sources define a naturalist as a student of natural history, or in other words, someone who studies the environment, plants and animals around them. In many ways, this makes a good chunk of us amateur naturalists (I use the word amateur to mean one who is not a paid professional in the field). Your neighbor the hunter is a naturalist when he or she goes out to scout for game or spends an autumn day in a tree stand. The kids next door are naturalists when they take their nets down to the creek to see what they can catch. Your parents are naturalists when they keep track of all the different birds that come to visit their feeders. You are a naturalist when you share the wonders of a starry evening with a friend or loved one.

I happen to be one of a few people lucky enough to be a naturalist on a professional basis. In order to turn this passion into a career, I share my knowledge and teach others about the world around them on a daily basis. Working at a Residential Environmental Learning Center (RELC) like Long Lake offers me a wide audience. Any given day I might be teaching preschoolers and their parents from the local Head Start programs about animal tracks, some Rippleside students in the school forest or adults

and families on a birding hike. Most often though, I am teaching grade school students from down the road and across the state, all of whom are going to be future land owners and/or decision makers for our local and state natural resources, about this small yet wonderful patch of nature at Long Lake. Our class selection ranges from archery to skiing and from slogging through the bog to gazing at the night sky. If I'm not teaching, then I'm possibly out working on our trails, checking on our wildlife projects (we had a successful loon nest on a platform we built and placed on the lake this past summer), or developing new programs for our varied audience.

To sum it all up, being a naturalist means being a jack- or jill- of all trades who enjoys their time outdoors and sharing that experience with others. So back to that Master Naturalist class I mentioned at the beginning of the article. These classes, presented throughout the state, offer you an in-depth look at your local ecosystem and opportunities to get involved with nature programs and projects in your community. If you think that you might enjoy working and learning alongside a unique community of outdoor enthusiasts, then this class may be for you (scholarships are available if cost is a factor). The more voices speaking and hands we have working for our environment and resources, the brighter everyone's future will be.

To find out more about the Master Naturalist classes being offered at Long Lake Conservation Center, please visit our website at www.llcc.org and click on the link. To register, please call 800-450-5522 or email to info@llcc.org. The classes will begin on March 17 and end on April 23, 2009.



Photos Attached.