

Getting Closer to Nature



Rose Sullivan

Anne Martin, left, of Marion County assists student Paul Howe during a recent Master Naturalist class.



Rose Sullivan

Certified Master Naturalists Lynn and John Mugaas check owl boxes.

By Rose Sullivan

While some people volunteer at bake sales or manning phones, Lynn and John Mugaas of Lewisburg get to go wild. These certified Master Naturalists monitor owl nest boxes as part of their volunteer work with West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, carrying ladders deep into the Cranberry Backcountry and hopefully coming face to face with the bright yellow eyes of a northern saw-whet owl. They have also captured dragonflies for the DNR's Odonata Survey and worked on habitat restoration with The Nature Conservancy. Although the Mugaas' have been interested in the natural world most of their lives, the DNR's new Master Natu-

ralist Program has given them a new interest in the state's natural history and a chance to participate in the conservation of its resources. As the first trainee certified as a Master Naturalist, Lynn had accumulated sufficient volunteer hours before she even completed the coursework.

The West Virginia Master Naturalist Program trains interested people in the fundamentals of natural history and nature interpretation and teaching, and instills in them an appreciation of the importance of responsible environmental stewardship. It also provides a cadre of well-qualified volunteers to assist government agencies, schools, and non-government organizations concerned with research, outdoor recreation

"Having the opportunity to do work in nature puts me in the happiest of all places"

-John Mugaas, certified Master Naturalist



development, and environmental education and protection.

Development of the program began in 2003 when personnel from the DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program and State Parks and Tourism were brainstorming about possible nature education programs at state parks. Research indicated that Texas, Florida and other states had successfully developed volunteer training called Master Naturalist programs so a proposal was developed to initiate such a program in West Virginia.

The original, informal planning group soon evolved into a state advisory committee which now includes the DNR, the WVU Cooperative Extension Agency and Davis and Elkins College.

The West Virginia Master Naturalist Program officially began in April, 2004 with a group of 20 students taking classes during a weekend at Hawks Nest State Park. The classes highlighted West Virginia botany, geology, ecology and ornithology. The students were, and continue to be, as varied as the classes themselves: young, old, single, married, novice and skilled.

Since that first session, most of the original students have become certified West Virginia Master Naturalists and the rest are among the more than 200 students at various locations around the state working towards certification. The certification process includes classwork and volunteer hours (*see box on next page*).

Certified Master Naturalist volunteers are working on projects as diverse as designing wildlife coloring books to leading nature walks and workshops. "Volunteer work can be as varied as one's imagination," says



Sam Norris, instructor and DNR biologist, leads a field exercise with the Pocahontas Master Naturalists.

Rose Sullivan, program coordinator. "Participants are encouraged to draw on individual strengths and interests."

Dan Greene, Greenbrier County, has taught Master Naturalist classes as well as creating a video that is used to introduce people to the program. Janice Hofman, Wood County, is working on a wildlife coloring book as well as doing environmental outreach. Phyllis Mingo, Putnam County, has been involved in public outreach for the DNR and the late Marilyn Aikman worked on an interpretive trail at Canaan Valley State Park.

Other volunteer projects include leading nature walks and conducting water quality workshops for children (Karen Toothman, Preston County) and present-

ing educational programs at state parks (Rachel LaFon, Greenbrier County).

John Fichtner of Jackson County, who created a wood carving of the Master Naturalist logo as a gift to the program says, "this is one of the best educational programs that I have ever been through. The instructors were well qualified and enthusiastic and made it a tremendously enjoyable experience. The classes have been very helpful to me as a teacher."



Learning bird calls at Hawks Nest State Park.



Jim Fregonara



Trout lily

Using microscopes and hand lenses, Master Naturalist students discover an unseen world of insect life.

"Nature has always been called the great healer. I believe she is in trouble now and it is our turn to help heal her. Becoming part of the Master Naturalist Program, plain and simple, gives me hope for the future."

-Janice Hofman, certified Master Naturalist

Other certified Master Naturalists, such as Mary Dawson of Pocahontas County and Anne Martin of Marion County, have used their volunteer time to start chapters of their own. The formation of local chapters was encouraged to make the classes more affordable and accessible. Most chapters have adopted an eight-hour Saturday format.

Currently there are several chap-

ters state-wide created by volunteers including Gilmer County (Sheila Ables and Bill Church), Oglebay (Penny Miller), Kanawha Valley (Jim Waggy) and Canaan Valley Area (Andrea Dalton). A chapter in Monongalia County is coordinated by the WVU Cooperative Extension Agency (Bill Grafton). Interest in starting chapters in the Eastern Panhandle and in Greenbrier, Jack-

son, Fayette, Upshur and Barbour counties is growing.

"Many who are in the program, too many to list, have started their volunteer work before finishing classes," says Sullivan. "West Virginia owes a great deal of thanks to these volunteers for all of the work they are doing to promote environmental stewardship and appreciation of the state's natural resources. They are the ones responsible for making this a successful program."

Rose Sullivan is state coordinator for the Master Naturalist program.

For more information about the West Virginia Master Naturalist Program visit the DNR website at <http://www.wvdnr.gov/wvmn/index.shtm>, call 304-637-0245 or email rosesullivan@wvdnr.gov.

The Fine Print...

To become a certified West Virginia Master Naturalist, applicants must complete 64 hours of classroom and field training (48 hours of core classes and 16 hours of electives) and perform 30 hours of volunteer work. To maintain certification, 8 hours of advanced training and 16 hours of volunteer time are required each year. The program is for adults (16 years and older). Classes cover a wide range of topics such as ecology, birds, wildflowers, insects, nature interpretation, fossils, and mushrooms, and are taught by experts in these fields. To maintain a quality class experience, classes are limited to 20 students. Cost for the class-work varies by chapter.