

## **Making Ripples**

### **Become a Naturalist-in-Training!**

by Amanda Bancroft

Space is filling up fast in this year's Northwest Arkansas Master Naturalist class, but there are still seats available! The program runs annually during the spring semester and gives trainees a foundational knowledge they can hone through advanced training for a lifetime. It's open to adults of all ages (including college students, who can get credit through NWACC) and most training events are family-friendly.

As a Naturalist-in-Training (or NiTs, as they're fondly called), you can choose a minimum of 40 hours from over 90 hours of expert training provided. NiTs learn about a wide range of topics, including geology, mycology, ornithology, ichthyology, herpetology, botany, mammalogy, entomology, astronomy, environmental interpretation, and information about local habitats like prairies and watersheds. Training is held half indoors and half outdoors, at fun places like Hobbs State Park Visitor's Center, Ozark Natural Science Center, and Chesney Prairie. You might choose to learn about the history of how the Ozarks formed and why we have the kinds of species we have here. Or you might spend an evening learning how to call a barred owl and count frogs like spring peepers.

There are Master Naturalist programs or similar programs hosted by sponsoring non-profit organizations or universities in almost all fifty states. In Arkansas, hundreds of naturalists "working to keep Arkansas in its natural state" have been trained since 2006. In 2012 alone, 16,309 volunteer hours were logged (excluding travel time) valued at \$343,000. Their mission is "to develop a corps of well-informed volunteers to provide education, outreach, and service dedicated to the beneficial management of natural resources and natural areas within their communities." There are several chapters throughout the state which operate their own training and volunteer opportunities while sharing one main website and collaborating on various events and a monthly nature-themed photo contest.

Classes begin on Saturday, February 21<sup>st</sup> and continue through May 16<sup>th</sup>. To register, submit a completed application along with \$165 (\$130 for materials and tuition, plus \$30 annual membership fee). Insurance is covered in these fees, in case of an accident in the field. Books provided to students in the course include titles such as: *Trees of Arkansas*, *Sibley Field Guide to Birds*, and guides on wildflowers, invasive plants, and enjoyable reads like *Bringing Nature Home* and *A Sand County Almanac*. Students also receive a magnetic nametag and t-shirt upon graduation. The annual requirements to become a Certified Master Naturalist are 40 volunteer hours, doing activities such as educating children about pollinators, building trails, monitoring nest boxes, performing administrative tasks or a variety of other options, and 8 advanced training hours offered regularly on wide-ranging topics. To learn more, view the calendar of events, and

apply to become a 2015 NiT, visit their new website at  
Wordpress.ArkansasMasterNaturalists.org, or contact [nwamnContact@mn4Arkansas.org](mailto:nwamnContact@mn4Arkansas.org) (479)  
301-2760. Happy trails!

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