

Making Ripples

Mt. Kessler's Newest Attraction

by Amanda Bancroft

People of all ages and ability levels can now have fun learning at the (relatively) new Kessler Mountain Outdoor Classroom and Nature Center in the old Smokehouse building off of Hwy 62/MLK Blvd. Its mission is “to grow the next generation of conservationists through research, outreach and education.” Enjoy the hiking trails with interpretive signs, picnic areas, and gazebo, or learn indoors with exhibits on forestry, geology, entomology, wildlife biology, botany, and more. A work in progress, the center is becoming a place for K-PhD students as well as members of the general public to immerse themselves in nature.

Fourth graders from Butterfield Trail Elementary School were the first students to benefit from the outdoor classroom in the fall of 2015. According to the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust website, they “spent a half-day at the classroom learning about ecosystems, citizen science, plant and animal adaptations, and erosion through interactive activities.” Then they went on a nature hike, dressed up as bees or flowers to learn about pollination, and built mountains to understand wind and water erosion.

Since then, many groups of students from various schools have visited and enjoyed Frank Sharp's famous pizza, with a covered outdoor salad bar complete with toppings. Last spring, 140 5th grade students from McNair Middle School spent the day learning about Kessler's unique geology. And last fall, every 3rd grade student in Fayetteville Schools visited! New editions to the indoor displays are being added, and the Kessler trails are still being adjusted to meet new demands and public interest while protecting sensitive ecosystems.

Mt. Kessler itself is a gem in Fayetteville, attracting university students, tourists, and locals of all ages. The nature center and outdoor classroom provide a lens into the hidden worlds of streams and skies, roaming wildlife and deep-down rocks. The very systems which support our communities, like water and soil, often seem remote and set apart from human society, but this project brings people closer to understanding the interdependent web of life.

Students may find future careers here. Volunteers will find a fun place to volunteer with kids. Gardeners will enjoy the native plant and rain gardens. Master naturalists can accumulate hours for certification by either attending a presentation or volunteering. Educators will breathe a sigh of relief that they have another, much closer, option for environmental science field trips.

These field trips continue to be a success thanks to Fayetteville Public Schools, Fayetteville Natural Heritage Association, Boston Mountain Solid Waste District, Mt. Kessler Greenways, Arkansas Native Plant Society, the National Park Service, the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust

and countless volunteers doing everything from administrative work to native planting and trail maintenance. If you'd like to visit or get involved as a volunteer, contact sbarrow@nwalandtrust.org or check out their website at NVALandTrust.org.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.