

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Some people give nature a passing glance and a smile, while others revel and roll in it! If you enjoy any or all of the following, you could be a naturalist and not know it: stars, trees, wildlife, flowers, rocks, fish, streams, mushrooms, soil, weather, trails, insects, birds, you get the idea. A naturalist does not need to know about everything, but they could be interested in many different topics or specialize in one area, such as birds. Being a naturalist in the Natural State might be a solitary pursuit, but if you want to be trained in various environmental science fields and volunteer (indoors or outdoors) to help nature, consider becoming a certified Master Naturalist.

In Northwest Arkansas, you can join the class of 2019 in any of 3 locations: Benton County, Eureka Springs, or Washington County. Training is held in the spring. Each week involves a different theme, whether it's wildflower identification, environmental interpretation or a wide variety of other possibilities. Class schedules and topics are posted to the website (below). Locations vary, because only part of each class is indoors – the remainder of class time is spent in the field. In fact, field trips are one of the best parts! Experience being taught by professionals in their area of study as they guide you through various habitats in our region.

Until graduation, you're a Naturalist-in-training (NIT) a lowly yet loved student of nature. After attending 40 hours of classes of your choice out of the 60 hours offered to you (geology, botany, astronomy, trail maintenance, stream testing, and much more) you become a Master Naturalist. If you continue on and complete 40 hours of volunteer work and 8 hours of advanced training within the following year after graduating, you become a Certified Master Naturalist. Yes there is a certificate, and you can collect the cute pins each year! Volunteerism is the heart of the program and one of the main reasons, besides education, that the organization exists. Arkansas master naturalists around the state in various chapters are always volunteering, whether they enjoy teaching children, building trails, counting birds, working in a native plant garden, or administrative work indoors, there are hundreds of ways to get involved. Advanced training is not actually "advanced," but refers to anything educational related to the environment that you do after graduating. Usually this involves attending a free lecture or presentation, but can be more detailed and active, as in the upcoming chainsaw class.

Annual membership dues are \$30, and the fee for training (which can be waived through a scholarship) is \$135. This includes an incredible collection of local flora and fauna field guides, a t-shirt, nametag, binder, food, and more. If there's a second person in your household interested in training, they can share your materials and the fee is reduced to \$80 plus the \$30 annual dues. For more information or to apply, visit wordpress.ArkansasMasterNaturalists.org and click "How Do I Join?" or email johnsonvicky55@yahoo.com.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist living in an off-grid tiny house on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer tips to those wanting to make a difference at www.MakeRipples.org.