



MINNESOTA NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

Organization Highlight: Minneapolis Parks

By Sara Swenson



If you aren't familiar with the naturalists who work at the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, you may be like many of the park users in Minneapolis. But we're working to change that, one stroke of a snake's scales, one game of "Camouflage," and one handful of dirt at a time!

The Environmental Education Department of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) includes the Kroening Interpretive Center in North Mississippi Regional Park, abuzz with field trips and day camps; the peaceful trails of the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden; the fruit- and vegetable-filled J.D. Rivers Children's Garden; ambassadors for clean water like the Aquatic Invasive Species inspectors that serve our beloved Minneapolis lakes; and, flitting between all manner of green spaces throughout the city (and one rather packed animal care, storage, and office space), the MPRB Neighborhood Naturalists.

Our Neighborhood Naturalist program was started in 1999 with the mission to provide nature programming to Minneapolis kids all year round, right in their own backyards. Today, we have five year-round and up to ten seasonal Neighborhood Naturalists working with the program coordinator to do just that at the city's 49 recreation centers and several additional neighborhood park spaces. We help serve the community members who live near these parks by providing nature-based activities to go along with all the other great offerings already happening there. We bring seasonal outdoor fun to recreation center preschool classes, after-school programs, summer camps, neighborhood events, city festivals, or anyone just hanging out at the park who might not necessarily have sought out an up-close and personal encounter with a cockroach or a trip out on the water in a canoe.

Being a mobile naturalist means finding creative opportunities to showcase nature no matter where you are, even in a one square block city park. It means you have to find room in your car to tote around rat cages, turtle tanks, fire tins, or fort-worthy branches. We are constantly setting up and breaking down our own "interpretive centers" — but we also don't have to wait for nature-lovers to come to us. Instead, we get to find them! We have deep-rooted resources to build upon, with a park system that has been growing for over 130 years and has been named the best park system in the country by the nonprofit Trust for Public Land six years in a row (2013-18). We get to meet our neighbors where they are, build relationships with them week after week, become a part of their community, and help them discover the outdoors in a way they perhaps never have before in their local urban park. Maybe give them that first taste they need to want to seek out nature in other places too with their families and friends.

One big recent change to the Minneapolis Parks' Neighborhood Naturalist program is the departure of longtime Environmental Education Lead Jamie McBride, who began a new position with the Minnesota DNR last September. We are pleased to have Gretchen Engstrom, most recently of Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center, joining us as our new Environmental Education Lead! We look forward to improving and growing our program under her leadership. In her first four months on the job, she has been focused on meeting colleagues and partners, learning new procedures and systems, and getting to know the wide variety of programming offered by MPRB Environmental Education staff all over the city.

The Environmental Education department as a whole is also looking forward to the implementation of new neighborhood park master plans throughout the city over the next 17 years. Many plans call for new natural areas to be added, such as prairies, woodlands, and bee lawns, as well as nature play spaces, which will all be excellent new resources for the Neighborhood Naturalist program!

If you're interested in joining us, we post Minneapolis Parks Environmental Education job opportunities on [Seek](#) and the [MPRB website](#)!

