



MINNESOTA NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

Organization Highlight: Prairie Ecology Bus Center

By Jessie Hendrix

The Prairie Ecology Bus Center is in southwestern Minnesota, almost on the Iowa border. It is a very rural area with only 14 people per square mile. Almost all of the land is farmland. The little pockets of surviving natural areas are critical to our mission - "A vehicle for understanding and appreciating the natural wonders in our own backyards." The "own backyards," part is important since many people look at all the fields and assume there aren't any natural areas. While the expansive prairies are definitely a thing of the past there are many smaller areas that have been preserved. We travel many miles every year to introduce people to the natural areas in their county.



We drive many of those miles in the Ecology Bus. The most unique aspect of our programs is this moving science laboratory. It is a coach bus with 32 seats, a lab counter, tv monitors, a sound system, and yes, a bathroom. With the bus we are able to pick students up from their schools and drive them to a nearby natural site. This opens many program opportunities up for schools and we are only limited by where we can fit a bus. We use natural sites within a 20 minute drive of the school and encourage students to bring their families out to show them what they have learned. Many students have never been to the natural sites we visit with them.

When it isn't "bus season," we offer birthday parties, naturalist (community education) programs, summer day camp, garden club, afterschool programs, in-school assembly programs, and an aquatic invasive species workshop for middle school students.

With so many of our programs being offsite, we are challenged with growing our onsite programs. The town we are based in only has a population of 1, 600 people and we can't expect all of them to come to every program! Our location includes a small county park, but it is not well kept currently and doesn't draw many visitors. We are working on building a base of young families with a Nature Tots program and growing local awareness of our big events, like the Prairie Winds Kite Fly. At the kite fly there are huge show kites (ones shaped like kittens and dragons!) flying near small homemade kites the families are flying. Four-thousand people attended last year, we just need to make sure they know it is PEBC holding the event.

We are very excited to get the Prairie Planetarium out and available to schools and community education programs. It will be amazing to teach night sky programs at noon in the middle of the school gym. The Prairie Planetarium will be the only portable planetarium in SW Minnesota and should be a good new source of revenue. Mission control is now counting down the days until the first program launches.

We may have a small and remote location, but our variety of programs reach many people every year. When people think "nature," they don't often think of southwest Minnesota. We are changing that perception.