



MINNESOTA NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION

Organization Highlight: Westwood Hills Nature Center

By Mary Burch Mattson



If you've never been to Westwood Hills on purpose, it's very possible you've driven past recently without realizing it. Just off 394 in St Louis Park, the city-run center is a 160-acre natural haven tucked along the edge of the west metro. There's a lot to see packed into one relatively small site, including Westwood Lake and the surrounding wetlands as well as trails through the maple-basswood forest, a small pine plantation, a restored prairie. The most popular trek for visitors is the Lake trail, a series of boardwalks and trails connecting the entire perimeter of the wetlands.

Our mission is to model and promote stewardship, sustainability, and a deeper ecological understanding through direct experience, using our resources to provide connecting places and enhance quality of life in our community.

Westwood is home to all of the classic urban wildlife such as turkeys, squirrels, white-tailed deer, and barred owls, all of which are visitor favorites and draw lots of public traffic to our trails. Through the use of trail cams we have also been able to observe the behavior of a few more elusive animals, including otters and flying squirrels.

Arguably the most popular piece of programming at Westwood is our puppet shows, put on in a beautiful theater constructed by one of our many fantastic volunteers. A secret access door hidden in the office allows even our more mature audiences to suspend their disbelief and enjoy performances by Raccoon and Co.



Both the puppets and the naturalists are looking forward to a major upgrade next year, with the completion of a new interpretive center building. This project has been in the works for several years and will be an incredible community resource, with separate classroom and programming spaces that will accommodate much larger groups of students while still leaving room for visitors. Highlights

include a new parking lot and a storm water management system to route runoff through a series of ponds, streams, and a bit of transplanted bog to be rescued from a construction site in northern Minnesota.



We will be open throughout this year of transition, so if you get a chance stop by and check out all the changes, especially if you've never visited before! While you're here make sure and explore the trails through the pines, and keep an eye open for local artist Chelsey Bahe's amazing works of natural art hidden along the way. You might recognize her name and unique style of artwork from stories on Kare 11 and WCCO; it's like always having an amazing scavenger hunt that magically appears on the trail.

