

Eagle Scout Projects Supporting the IMA Program

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Author's Note: This article was intended for publication in spring 2020. The pandemic shut down park activities for several months, which later opened with restrictions. This article provides insight for planning an IMA-based scout project for when the workday(s) can occur safely.

The last two Eagle Scout projects benefiting Royal Lake Park were absolutely stellar! Both projects supported the volunteer-based [Invasive Management Area \(IMA\) program](#), which is operated by the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA). The first one was performed by Ben Siebert of Troop 698 on October 5, 2019. Before Ben selected IMA for his project, he volunteered for an untold number of workdays including a summer assisting co-site leader, MaryAnne Boyer. During that summer session, they primarily pulled large patches of [multiflora rose](#) (*Rosa multiflora*) from areas next to Royal Lake's main looping trail. After Ben asked about leading an IMA workday for his Eagle Scout project, he, his father, and I visited several potential sites that needed work but had little to no previous IMA activity. Ben selected a section near the Royal Lake Park entrance at Dundalk Street, a strategic area that had horrible infestations of multiflora rose with some [Amur honeysuckle](#) (*Lonicera maackii*), [Bradford or Callery pear](#) (*Pyrus calleryana*), [winged burning bush](#) (*Euonymus alatus*), [privet](#) (*Ligustrum* sp.), and [Japanese stiltgrass](#) (*Microstegium vimineum*). This work is close to and supports two earlier Eagle Scout projects based in habitat restoration.



Figure 1. This eastern box turtle, tucked into its shell, is one of the critters found during Ben's workday. Normally, wildlife is left alone. Since this one was in the middle of the site and risked becoming trampled, everyone had a chance to look at it before moving it a short distance outside of the work zone. It is one of many animals benefiting from the habitat restoration. Photo by MaryAnne Boyer.

On the day of the event, Ben, his father, and I remained on site the entire time while scout volunteers and their families rotated throughout the session. Ben led his Eagle Scout project so well that his group cleared out all of the targets within the delineated site and were able to start pulling more invasive weeds from adjoining parkland! The eight-hour marathon workday resulted in clearing invasive weeds filling 41 bags. Due to the thorns and cabling roots, rose can be a difficult target to eradicate, which makes these bag numbers all the more impressive. These bags, containing rose seeds that could otherwise last in the soil for 20 years, were later sent to the incinerator. Removing so much rose opened the site for future volunteers to have better access during the springtime [garlic mustard](#) (*Alliaria petiolata*) pulls. Ben's efforts helped restore habitat for critters like the box turtle, American toad, and pileated woodpecker encountered on this day.

Michael Volkman of Troop 1346 headed the second Eagle Scout project. After touring several sites with his father and me, Michael chose an area near Royal Lake's spillway that was especially infested with Amur honeysuckle and [Autumn olive](#) (*Elaeagnus umbellata*), with lesser amounts of [porcelain-berry](#) (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*), [English ivy](#) (*Hedera helix*), [oriental bittersweet](#) (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), [Himalayan blackberry](#) (*Rubus armeniacus*), Italian arum (*Arum italicum*), Bradford pear, garlic mustard, multiflora rose, and winged burning bush. The sunny exposure here caused the Amur honeysuckles and olives to produce copious amounts of berries, so eliminating these giant seed factories helped both the immediate parcel and the surrounding areas to which the seeds would have spread. Michael's March 15, 2020, workday occurred when concerns about the pandemic began but right before the closures. Still, this job was executed with safety as a top priority and included social distancing, plenty of hand sanitizer, and steps to keep refreshments clean. Michael adapted well to these last-minute challenges and the workday resulted in a whopping 120 bags of weeds, many additional bundles of tied branches, and zero cases of

COVID-19. Michael's project also involved a public service message about properly disposing of yard waste instead of "dumping it in the woods" where it smothers native flora, spreads any invasive plant seeds and fragments that may take root, and transfers excessive landscaping chemicals and nutrients to natural areas.

IMA projects are excellent for scout merit badges because they require labor, thought, planning, education, and personal growth. Furthermore, the ability to work is already held by the IMA site leader, to whom the FCPA granted permission to pull specific weeds and toil in sensitive habitats (e.g., near streams). Normally, digging and ripping out plants is illegal in parks, so the scouts learn the park rules and understand that their special endeavor is under the site leader's umbrella permit. After the project's completion, scouts know that they cannot go tearing through parkland without receiving further permission from the park service or other landowner; even parents alone are never allowed to give children permission to disturb wildlife, plants, or soil on parkland. Whereas IMA projects require a general frame and conformance to the program rules, each site is different with unique challenges to solve. Before approaching me to lead an IMA-based project, the candidate should have at least three workdays under his or her belt so they realize what is involved and are capable of running a session. Then, if the scout likes the IMA option, send an e-mail to me at greg@grsykes.com, indicating you would like a project and stating deadlines to complete it. ***Always cc at least one parent or guardian in your communications with me!*** Again, this work is conducted under permits granted to me so I must be present throughout the workday. In addition to recruiting volunteers and bringing refreshments, the scout must know basic habitat restoration concepts, how to use the tools, how to minimize soil disturbance and erosion, what the target invasive species look like, and ways to distinguish those weeds from native plants. The scouts completing IMA-based projects have a tremendous sense of accomplishment. Though not required, most returned for additional workdays even after leaving the scouts. Now is the time for scouts to start planning projects and seeing if IMA will be a good fit for them when the time comes. See you in the field!

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