

## Getting To Know the Natural World

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Would you like to know more about the great outdoors? A number of people asked how they can learn about native plants, identify birds and other wildlife, and understand Royal Lake's ecology and human impact. Thank you for your interest! I am glad that you are using my short eco-articles as a springboard into a deeper understanding of our exciting natural world.

One of easiest ways to learn is by attending organized nature excursions and hikes. These activities are themed around different topics (e.g., birds of prey, tracking animals, seasonal wildflowers), designed for children, families, or adults, and led by an experienced staff member or volunteer. Excursions are given year-round and regularly take advantage of what a particular season has to offer. Depending on the group hosting the event, admission may range from free to a modest fee. Since commitment is only a few hours at a time, people are open to either seek more programs dealing with a similar subject matter or move to a different topic. Many of the programs available at various Fairfax County Nature Centers are listed in the *Parktakes* quarterly guide (<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/parktakes/>) under "Nature and Science."

Whether you simply like plants, want to know which species attract specific animals, or understand how certain plants fit into an ecosystem, the Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS) has activities for you! The Potowmack Chapter serves Northern Virginia (<http://www.vnps.org/chapters/potowmack/>) and collaborates with many other like-minded organizations in the area, such as The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, Smithsonian Institution, George Mason University (GMU), National Arboretum, Virginia Natural Heritage Program, and park authorities for Fairfax, Arlington, and other local governments. Either VNPS or its allies offer botanical nature walks, seminars, symposiums, and volunteer opportunities. Just like the above mentioned excursions, fees vary; multi-day events and credited coursework have higher tuitions. Once or twice a year, VNPS holds a native plant sale at Green Spring Gardens, and members receive a discount. Members also may attend extended field trips to different conservation sites around Virginia. The Northern Virginia Chapter's bimonthly newsletter, *Potowmack News*, packs fascinating articles about given native plant species, local plant communities, and event announcements. Previous issues are downloadable from their website.

Are you more interested in birds? Birders of all levels should check out Friends of Dyke Marsh (FODM, <http://www.fodm.org/>). Dyke Marsh, managed by the National Park Service, is a freshwater tidal wetland south of Alexandria. Whereas this park bestows a wealth of wonderful wetland treasures, FODM emphasizes bird watching and provides free, publicly-open avian identification tours every Sunday morning starting at 8:00 a.m.

People frequently associate the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia (ASNV, <http://www.audubonva.org/>) with birds; in fact, this and other conservation-based non-profit organizations present an array of educational opportunities. Additionally to field trips and nature walks, the ASNV has downloadable checklists so you can keep track of what you find! Furthermore, the ASNV supplies information on eco-friendly landscaping, how to participate in wildlife surveys, and links to other green websites. The Audubon At Home program enables concerned homeowners to turn their properties into environmentally welcoming oases through simple acts such as removing non-native invasive plants, choosing native plants for landscaping, conserving water, and reducing or eliminating synthetic lawn and garden chemicals.

Volunteering is a great way to get on-the-job training. During the Invasive Management Area (IMA) workdays which I host, volunteers learn about the ecological impacts of non-native invasives, the best way to eradicate the weeds, and to understand the strategies of habitat restoration. Naturally, we study any cool plants and animals found along the way, and often I offer nature walks at the session's end. To be notified about future workdays, send an e-mail to me requesting to be on the volunteer list. For information on other IMA sites, go to <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/invasive-management-area>. The *ResOURces* newsletter (now under <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/publications>) presents numerous

volunteer opportunities through the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA). Are you ready for long-term volunteer commitment towards helping the parks? Consider becoming a Virginia Master Naturalist (<http://www.virginiamasternaturalist.org/>). After completing the basic training, with topics ranging from botany to birds, weather to wetlands, and forests to fish, you receive eight hours of advanced instruction before working at least 40 hours on a Fairfax Chapter-approved project.

If you want to invest serious effort into learning about the environment or are considering a career change, take some biology courses at GMU, Northern Virginia Community College, or any other area colleges and universities. Introductory subjects, such as botany, zoology, and microbiology, build the foundation for higher level topics, including ecology, entomology, and fundamental genetics. Advanced undergraduate studies tackle field biology where students survey regional plants and animals. Graduate school becomes far more specialized, and in an ecological context, may address public policy, environmental modeling, and population genetics/molecular evolution.

Regardless of how many years you are in the field or what degrees you earn, one of the great joys about nature is that you will continuously discover something new. As you attend more wildlife walks, volunteer workdays, classes, and other eco-based events, you will learn to identify flora, fauna, and ecological features on your strolls around Royal Lake, not to mention those found around your own backyard! You will distinguish a healthy habitat from a sick one, young woodlands from old forest. You will also develop a greater appreciation for the land and find fun ways to apply your education, such as reducing the footprint we all leave on the world. Enjoy your knowledge quest!

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