



Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

~ Summer 2021 Newsletter ~

Mission: "To foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature"

In this Issue:

It continues to be a very busy time as the AELC did manage to provide some spring school programs and has been involved in planning and implementation of a variety of activities to encourage public interest and advance AELC's mission. We hope you enjoy the following updates. Enjoy!

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Note: The last newsletter that came out in early March was the "Winter" edition. We seem to be "off" by a season thus we are labeling this as our "Summer" edition. So, no, you didn't miss the "Spring" edition, we are just making this adjustment ...and besides, with our record breaking heat of late, it's SUMMER! Enjoy!

Comments or story suggestions welcome, please contact:
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Nature Center Open & Available

May 28th marked a significant day in the evolving "opening back up" to more activities that can be done as Covid-19 restrictions have been further reduced. Thanks to a good response by the public to getting vaccinated in Minnesota, this "opening up" is possible.

While caution is certainly still advised, outdoor activities are especially encouraged. Hiking the trails at the Fertile Sand Hills continues to be a safe wellness opportunity—trail fees continue to be waived as encouragement for people to get out and enjoy the changing seasons.



The Nature Center is also now open to public use. We will be working on recruiting volunteers to assist with opening the Center for more public use. The bathroom end of the building will continue to remain open for public use even if the main part of the Nature Center building is closed when staff or volunteers are not available to keep it open.

Rental of the Nature Center space is also again available for public use. It has been a popular space for family reunions, graduation events, birthday parties, organizational meetings, and other uses. Rental rate is \$65 per day which includes use of the kitchen area.

Normal coronavirus precautions will still be in effect. If not vaccinated, people are asked to continue to wear a facemask when inside the building and maintain six feet distances. Hand sanitizers will be available and regular hand washing is encouraged as a normal preventive measure.

For rental of the AELC Nature Center and/or campground reservations, contact Lisa Liden at the Fertile Community Center, 218-945-3136.

Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

AELC Board of Directors

Craig Engelstad, Fertile *Chair
Daniel Wilkens, Fertile *Treasurer
Stacy Erickson, Fertile *Secretary
Laura Bell, East Grand Forks
Nicole Bernd, Gentilly
Kirsten Fagerlund, Crookston
Stacy Erickson, Beltrami
Laurie Fairchild, Faith
Wendell Johnson, Crookston
Brian Torkelson, Crookston

Staff/Support

Wayne Goeken, Executive Director
Lisa Liden, Administrative Support

The mission of the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center is to foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature.

The Agassiz ELC provides quality hands-on learning opportunities in the unique Fertile Sand Hills to promote stewardship of natural resources for present and future generations.

The Agassiz ELC shall not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, creed, gender, gender expression, age, national origin, disability, marital status, sexual orientation, or military status, in any of its activities or operations.

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...everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow cycles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace.
May Sarton (19112-1985) American writer

A nature lover is a person, who when treed by a bear, enjoys the view. *Anonymous*

Agassiz ELC Board and Staff Changes

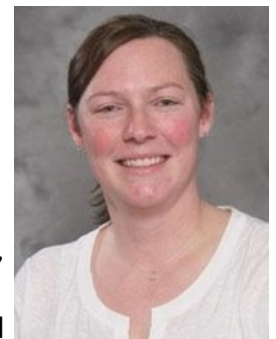
Staffing was a key topic at the March 2021 AELC Board meeting. As school programming is expected to continue to be limited in the foreseeable future due to Covid-19, it was discussed that addressing administrative and fundraising needs might be a higher priority at this time with the goal of developing sustainable funding to hire a full-time educator with benefits to be able to retain a qualified professional.

As Wayne Goeken has been carrying out many of the needed operational tasks of the AELC in the absence of regular staffing, it was discussed that he be considered to serve as Executive Director. The Board concurred and deferred details to the Executive Committee as regards hiring and compensation.

At the March 29 meeting of the Executive Committee, Wayne was offered the position which he accepted whereupon he resigned as Chair of the AELC Board to avoid conflict of interest. Vice-Chair Craig Engelstad assumed the role as Chair with the Vice-Chair position being open at this time.

Wayne's primary role is to develop fundraising and partnership alliances to secure additional financing to support AELC operations. He will also continue to assist and lead efforts related to site management, programming, and marketing including newsletter production and Facebook presence.

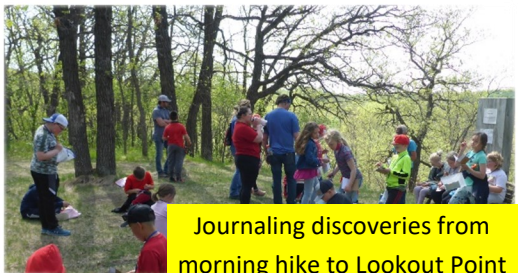
Laura Bell was approved as a new Board member at the March AELC Board meeting. Laura will provide experience in both programming and site management. Laura is UMC Natural Resources Lab Manager, maintains and coordinates UMC's Natural History Area, and is an instructor for MN Master Naturalist. She is also involved with Monarch Watch and the Monarch Larva Monitoring Program. Laura is from Climax and now lives in East Grand Forks with her husband and two kids. Welcome Laura!



Spring School Site Visits

As most schools were still sorting out blended learning between remote and in-school sessions this spring, several schools reached out to the AELC to explore what might be possible for an AELC site visit.

With AELC's emphasis on outdoor experiential learning, it was not a problem to keep school groups outdoors, the safest environment for learning—and the most fun! We were able to try out the new "Discovery Kits" with kids especially liking the magnifying glasses and nature journals.



Journaling discoveries from morning hike to Lookout Point

Goodridge has been bringing their 2nd grade class to the AELC for onsite visits for over a decade. This year both 2nd and 3rd grade classes came since the 3rd grade missed out on the field trip last year due to Covid. Thanks to Goodridge 2nd grade teacher Lois Anderson for making this memorable experience possible for the students.



Afternoon exploration of Death Valley 1 including cool tiger moth find

Taylor Gunufson, Fertile-Beltrami graduate and now Ada-Borup Kindergarten teacher led the effort to bring 32 Ada-Borup students for a fun morning of activities at the AELC. AELC volunteers Gay Webster, Laura Pierson, and Wendell Johnson assisted Wayne Goeken as each led a group of 8 students and Ada-Borup teachers and aides on a Scavenger Hunt and prairie seed collection and planting activity.



Kids helping prairie via collecting and planting seeds. Thanks to Kaste Seed for providing "starter" seed bags!



Crookston Cathedral 4th and 5th graders enjoying Death Valley 1 "sand time."



Fertile-Beltrami 4th and 5th grade classes once again launched their River of Dreams from the Nature Center deck on their quest to reach Hudson Bay.



AELC Community Programs

As public programs become possible, development and delivery of community programs will be in the works. An emphasis will be on outdoor programs including scheduled guided hikes throughout the summer to feature different trails and the progression of blooming plants throughout the season.

How to Find a Bird ~ Friday, June 11 at 10:30 a.m. A Fertile Library Tales and Trails program for children will be presented at the Hanson Free Stage at the Polk County Fairgrounds in Fertile by the Agassiz ELC. Learn to look for birds in different habitats and listen for bird songs to help locate and identify them. A **story stroll** featuring the “How to Find a Bird” book will also be installed at the AELC for all to enjoy from June 10th-20th.

Sand Hills Hike...Blooms & Butterflies ~ Sat., June 12 ~10:00 a.m.

Join a guided hike led by Wayne Goeken to oak savanna and woodland habitats of the Fertile Sand Hills. Lavender trumpet-shaped large-flowered beardtongue and purple spiderwort will be in full bloom along with lots of other prairie flowers. Many butterflies expected also. Meet at parking area and trailhead at top of hill west of the Nature Center. Approx. 1.4 mile hike—moderate hills, easily back by noon.



Large-flowered beardtongue

Monarch Butterflies by Laura Bell ~ Sunday, June 27 at 1:30 p.m.

Program outside the Fertile Nature Center. Laura is involved with Monarch Watch and the Monarch Larva Monitoring Program and will share current information on the status of monarch butterflies, their life cycles, and tips for helping monarchs and pollinators in general. Laura is Lab Services Coordinator for the Ag and Natural Resources Dept. at the University of Minnesota Crookston campus and an Agassiz ELC Board member.



Other potential programs in the works:

- **Benefits of Bats** including identifying species found in the Fertile area with an audio echolocator!
- **iNaturalist Bioblitz**—help document flora and fauna of the Fertile Sand Hills.
- **Wild Mushroom Foray** being planned for Fertile Sand Hills for late August with assistance of Paul Bunyan Mushroom Club.

Watch for program announcements on Facebook and in the local/regional media. We especially want to keep AELC members informed—any member that we have an email for will receive direct email notices; so members, make sure we have your current email. Thanks!

Recent Activities

3D Archery Shoot ~ April 17-18

Over 50 archers participated in this spring event hosted by the Fertile Community Conservation Club at the



AELC Fertile Sand Hills site.

The fall shoot will be August 14-15th.

Pasque Flower Hike ~ April 3rd

Death Valley 1 was the featured destination for a guided hike to view



the early blooming pasque flowers. Nearly 40 people enjoyed the hike on a warm spring day.

Crack the Code Nature Walk ~ May

Kids enjoyed decoding riddles via a nature walk with coded clues on signs along the Sand



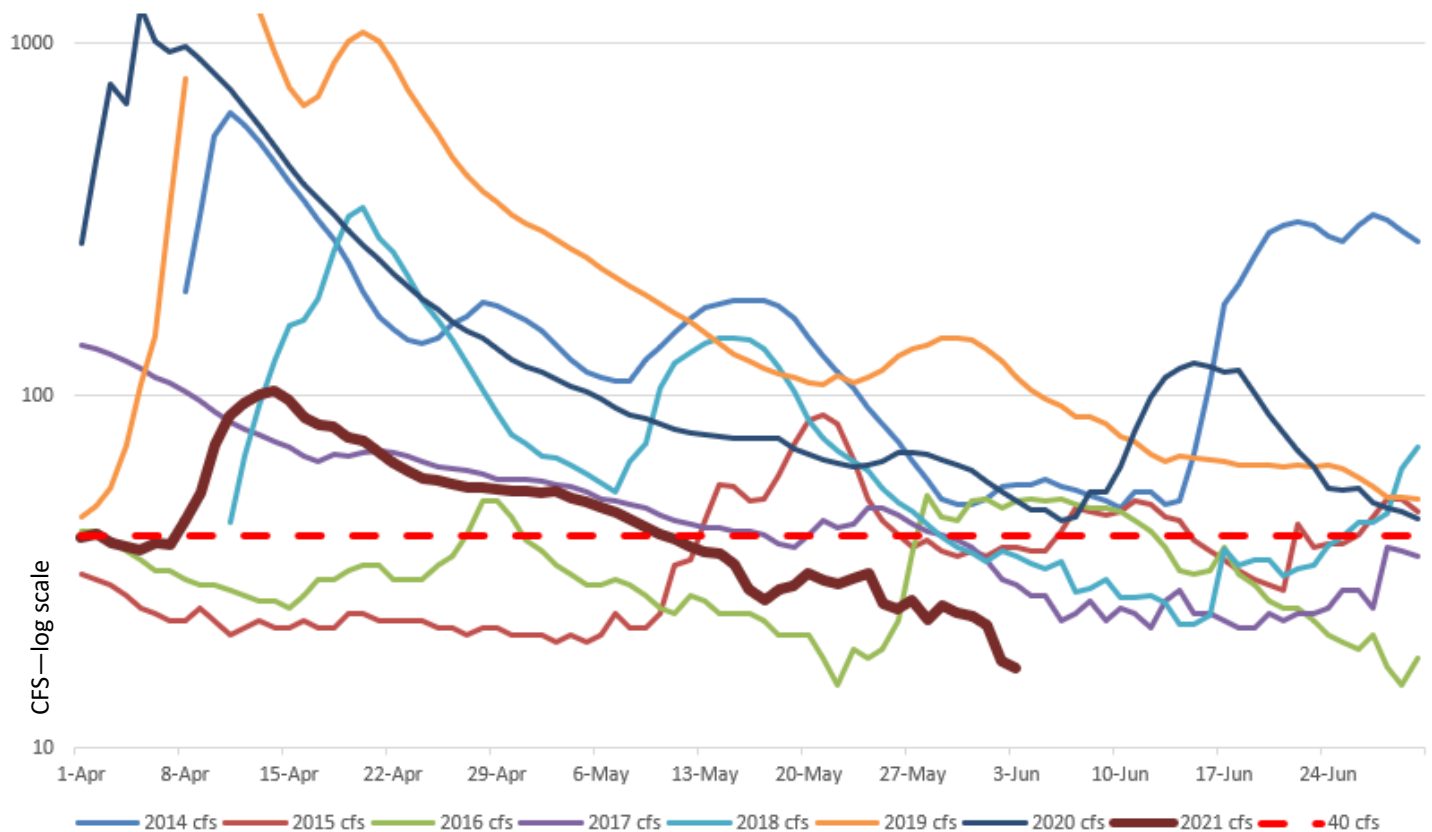
Hill River Trail. Fertile-Beltrami Early Childhood Initiative provided support with the AELC coordinating the installation.

Sand Hill River Status

2021 is shaping up to be a rough year for kayaking the Sand Hill River in the Fertile area. Our limited snow and resultant spring runoff along with dry conditions throughout the spring has left the Sand Hill River with very low water levels and tough kayaking.

Paddlers in the Fertile area are fortunate to have a river [gaging station](#) just downstream of Fertile that provides near real-time information online for river flow and stage or height. When flow drops to around 40 cubic feet per second (cfs), paddlers will begin scraping bottom and hitting rocks. The graph below shows flow in the Fertile area for the past 8 years. The current flow for 2021 (heavier dark red line) is the lowest it has been over this period of early June. The straight line across at 40 cfs illustrates the times that the Sand Hill has dropped below this 40 cfs threshold over this period. This graph goes out to the end of June—generally flow further diminishes as the summer progresses, but often there is a fall bump in September and last year as example, peak flow was in August. Patience—it’s a fun river to paddle—get on it when you can!

Sand Hill River Flow at Fertile Gage Site (cfs)



Kayak Rentals ~ The AELC will be renting kayaks out this year, but flow needs to be above 30-40 cfs, otherwise the kayaks take too much of a beating. We’ve patched up our fleet so they’re ready to go when river levels allow. The AELC also looks forward to providing on-water programs to introduce paddlers to basic kayaking and tours of the Sand Hill River. Watch for updates on the AELC and Sand Hill River Kayaking Facebook pages regarding updates on programs and rentals.

Irrigation Options ~ When is it too dry to irrigate? The criteria for discontinuing irrigation on the Sand Hill River is based on the flow at the USGS gaging station at Climax. When it drops below 9.9 cfs for 120 hours, irrigation is suspended with resumption of irrigation when flow exceeds the 9.9 cfs threshold for 72 hours. As of June 6th, 2021, the Sand Hill River was at 25 cfs at Climax.

Site Management

Site management of the Fertile Sand Hills is a challenging balancing act to provide enjoyable public recreation opportunities, while doing so in a sustainable manner that best protects and preserves the very unique and fragile landscapes of the Fertile Sand Hills. Protection of this exceptional area was a key tenet of the City's purchase of the property as a 1976 Bicentennial Project and grant funds were provided based on the promise of stewardship of this rare resource.

The City of Fertile owns the 640 acre Fertile Sand Hill site and the Nature Center building and is responsible for maintenance and improvements to the buildings and grounds. In fulfillment of its mission "to foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature," the Agassiz ELC provides programs and services to school groups and the general public which feature the diverse ecosystems of the City's Fertile Sand Hills site.

Keeping the trails, signs, building, campsites, and all in condition for enjoyable public use is no small undertaking. A good working partnership between the City and AELC plus assistance from many volunteers helps make this all possible. The public's respect for this unique area and site use guidelines is sincerely appreciated.

Following are some quick notes on current site management activities & issues

Trail Mowing ~ The City of Fertile Maintenance Crew plans to do most of the trail mowing this summer--for both the hiking and horse trails. Also considering plans to mow the mountain bike trails that served as snowshoe trails, including the snowshoe trail to Scout Tower—a great shaded hike in the summer.

Horse Trail ~ The snowmobile trail that passes through the Fertile Sand Hills site is the designated horse trail. This trail will be mowed this summer to accommodate horse riders. The horse staging area is in the open field across the Nature Center Road to the south, adjacent to the snowmobile/horse trail.

Invasive Species ~ Be on the lookout for and report any [spotted knapweed](#), [crown vetch](#), and [leafy spurge](#)...also [buckthorn](#) out in the Sand Hills where so far it has not invaded.

Bluebird box Monitoring ~ Currently, of our 10 boxes, five are being used by tree swallows, two by wrens, one bluebird, and 2 are empty. Four bluebird eggs shown.



MnDNR Burn Plans ~ A prescribed burn that was planned for but unable to be done last year is still being considered for this year due to dry conditions. The primary area being burned is DNR property but it adjoins an area of the City's Fertile Sand Hills just south of the City Lagoons that will benefit from a burn as well.

Coverboards ~ If you're wandering about the Sand Hills and you come across some 2"x2" pieces of plywood, please leave them in place (maybe a quick peek underneath, but please don't move them). Sixteen of these coverboards were placed in different habitats around the Sand Hills to serve as attractants to reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals. These will provide a better opportunity to see what "critters" are found in the Fertile Sand Hills.



Northern Prairie Skink shown here is likely to use the coverboards

Herpetologist Carol Hall of the MnDNR Biological Survey commented that "Bullsnakes, Plains Hog-nosed Snakes, and Smooth Greensnakes could be present at the Fertile Sand Hills. We have only a few Bullsnake records from NW MN and it would be great to increase our knowledge of their distribution there." So, if you do see any critters under these coverboards, please let us know of your findings—and take photos if at all possible. Thanks for your citizen science contribution!



Smooth Greensnake

Membership Matters....Sincere appreciation to our new and renewing members shown below. Member support is critically important to help the Agassiz ELC achieve its mission and provide education and recreation opportunities to youth and adult users of the Agassiz ELC and Fertile Sand Hills. Thank You!

- George & Susan Ackre
- Don & JoAnn Andringa
- Robert & Lynda Backman
- Dave & Elaine Bertils
- Brian & Julie Clarke
- Bruce & Pam Columbus
- Eric & Joan Ellegaard
- Alex & Kelsey Engelstad
- Trey & Corene Everett
- Fertile Community Conservation Club
- Ed Lavelle & Krista Fisher
- Jerry & Cathy Forgit
- Wayne Goeken
- Thomas & Vivian Hall
- Dorothy & Bill Harstad
- Randy & Tana Hultgren
- Mario & Jean LaPlante
- Natty & Lori Messick
- Havilah Benton & Nick Noah
- Dean & Sandy Rasmussen
- Cheryl Reitmeier
- Barb & Chuck Schulstad
- Samantha & Eric Stock
- Arlys Killen-Thompson
- Terry & Sue Wolfe
- Mavis Werner

~ **THANK YOU** ~

Agassiz ELC Endowment Fund

Through the generosity of a bequest from the Kay Ann Erickson estate, a permanent endowment fund has been established for the Agassiz ELC to provide for long term support and financial stability for AELC operations.

An advisory committee has been established to provide oversight of the endowment fund. An Investment Manager from Bremer Bank in Crookston coordinates Fund investment as per an adopted Investment Policy Statement.

In pursuit of its mission, the Agassiz ELC provides hands-on engaging education activities for all ages and abilities; emphasizes protection of the rare ecosystems found at the Fertile Sand Hills; and provides a safe space for mental and physical wellness through a variety of recreational opportunities.

Donations in any amount to the endowment will help fulfill AELC's mission and ensure the Fertile Sand Hills are sustainably enjoyed by present and future generations. Gifts can be given in many forms including cash, bequests in wills, IRA rollovers, and appreciated securities. Thank you for your consideration.



Agassiz ELC Volunteer Opportunities

- Nature Center hosts. We look forward to the Nature Center being open to the public again, but we need volunteers to serve as hosts during open hours. Hosts can provide maps to visitors and tips on where to explore the wonders of the Fertile Sand Hills!
- Help improve AELC's social media presence by posting photos of your outings in the Fertile Sand Hills to the AELC Facebook page and your social media outlets. Also photos to document site conditions and phenology are useful.
- Office help for processing newsletter, membership mailings, and brochure folding.
- Site management assistance in watching for and documenting invasive species.
- Geocache Manager: document and maintain geocaches in the Fertile Sand Hills.
- And MORE...contact Wayne Goeken to help out. 218-280-0516 or wgoekenmn@gmail.com

WISH LIST

- ⇒ Personal Flotation Devices—esp. youth sizes
- ⇒ Chain saw
- ⇒ Rakes and shovels
- ⇒ Mosquito/tick repellent
- ⇒ Hand or garden tools
- ⇒ Plastic storage totes with lids

The Back Page...

More information on AELC Happenings and Fertile Sand Hills Natural Wonders!

Black Bear Visits Nature Center

Over Memorial Day weekend, a black bear made its presence known, “greeting” campers on their way to the Nature Center bathrooms as well as knocking down the bird feeders on the river deck and stripping one of the bluebird houses off its post.



Apparently not a bear-proof bird feeder

Signs have been posted alerting the public to the presence of bear and reminding people to keep campsites clean and keep any food, trash, or scent items in their vehicle.

Visit us at the Fair...The Agassiz ELC will have a booth at the Polk County Fair with information about happenings at the AELC and updates on blooming hotspots, recreation options, maps, brochures and MORE!

Following are some useful resources to enhance your outdoor explorations.

[iNaturalist](#) is a great app and online tool to help identify plants and animals and share your observations with naturalists and contribute to biodiversity science. The AELC has a project set up in iNaturalist so any observations you make while on-site get logged to our project and contributes to our awareness of site biodiversity.

Another app, [Plantsnap.com](#) allows you to take a picture of a plant with your phone and use the app to identify it.

[Merlin](#) is a free app through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that is considered to be the most advanced bird identification app available.

[USA National Phenology Network](#), is home of Nature’s Notebook where citizen scientists share observations and contribute to an understanding of changing patterns of nature.

Featured Flora...Large-flowered Beardtongue (*Penstemon Grandiflorus*)

One of the showiest of prairie flowers, up to 12 large 2-inch pale purple flowers on stems up to 3 feet. June bloom period.

Perennial, shallow roots—does not spread by rhizomes. Seed capsules up to 1/2 inch long contain many seeds. Difficult to maintain in gardens.

Native Americans treated toothache by chewing the root pulp and placing it in the cavity. The Navajo applied a wet dressing of pounded leaves to rattlesnake bites; they considered this an absolute antidote.

Source: *Wildflowers of the Tallgrass Prairie* by Sylvan Runkel and Dean Roosa



Featured Flora...Spiderwort (*Tradescantia occidentalis*)

Another showy, easy to identify flower found in the Fertile Sand Hills. Blue or purple flower clusters on 1-2 foot stems. Each flower is 1 inch or more across and has 3 oval petals and 6 golden stamens.

The flowers open in the morning and may wilt by noon on hot days. The wilted flower shrivels to a fluid jelly that trickles like a tear, accounting for several common names such as Job’s Tears, Widow’s Tears, and cow slobber.



Blooms June through August. “Spider” may refer to its mucilaginous sap, which strings out like a spider’s web when torn.

Considered an indicator species as some plants change color when exposed to air pollution or radioactive radiation.

Sources: *Wildflowers of the Tallgrass Prairie* by Sylvan Runkel and Dean Roosa; *Wildflowers of Minnesota* by Stan Tekiela.

The diversity of plants and animals found in the Fertile Sand Hills is truly remarkable with seasonal changes providing a unique experience to the observant eye on every outing. Shown here are just a few of the many blooms, butterflies, and insects you may see over the summer. Deer, birds, and yes, bear are also part of the wonderful “wild” of the Fertile Sand Hills. Enjoy!

