



FALL 2022

NEWSLETTER

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

A FEW UPDATES

As often happens, the “busy-ness” of life wreaks havoc with the best of plans and intentions. Our last “quarterly” newsletter came out in June as our summer edition. The fall edition should have been out in September, but here we are in December and winter is definitely in the air.

Apologies to all, but yes, we’ve been very busy! We hired a new Education Director — Donna Spaeth (see page 2). Donna hit the ground running full speed as we hosted teachers from six schools for a fall workshop and subsequently provided outdoor learning opportunities at the Fertile Sand Hills for over 250 participants in September and October.

Up to 12 adult participants showed up once a week during June and July for a Pilates class led by instructor Amanda Lien. We hope to do more wellness classes in the future.

We’ve also been busy with site management projects. Identifying and controlling invasive weed species is best done as a preventative action. We took control measures against crown vetch, leafy spurge, and spotted knapweed with hopes of keeping them all from taking hold in the native plant communities of the Fertile Sand Hills.



Laura Bell leading fall teacher workshop

We also continued with education and control of invasive common buckthorn, but unfortunately that is a MUCH larger problem with widespread buckthorn along the Sand Hill River and in the Duckstad Woods. We are trying to keep it from spreading into the oak savanna and dry sand prairie areas of the Fertile Sand Hills.

Trail mowing continued through the summer with a final major mowing in late fall to prepare the trails for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. The Sandhills Snowcruisers also mowed the snowmobile trails through the Fertile Sand Hills and maintained signage.

Upwards of 40-50 Haunted Trails volunteers were very busy setting up and delivering scares aplenty every Saturday night in October.

ABOUT

The AELC, also known locally as “The Nature Center” is located in the 640 acre wilderness area located just west of Fertile. It includes the Fertile Sandhills, a Visitor’s Center with a meeting room, kitchen and restroom facilities including showers, in addition to a primitive campground.

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A FEW UPDATES CONTINUED...

Over 1,100 people went through the Haunted Trails over the five weekends in October. This significant fundraiser for the AELC provides support for youth programs and public recreation opportunities at the Fertile Sand Hills.

A late developing site improvement is construction of an expansion for the maintenance shed. Concrete work has been completed with construction scheduled soon. This will address the current leaky roof and provide extra space for equipment and education program supplies.

An expansion of the Nature Center is also in the works with \$144,000 approved by Polk County from Federal funds. The main goal is for accessibility

improvements, in particular bathroom upgrades. More storage for education program supplies and ski and snowshoe equipment will also be achieved.



Accessibility improvements is the focus of AELC's upcoming 2nd Annual Giving Hearts Day Campaign. Inclusiveness and providing access for all to outdoor experiences is a challenge.

Parking, site and trail slope access, interactive interpretive displays, program delivery, safety, comfort, and more all need to be taken into account to strive to best accommodate a range of abilities. A little extra effort to be inclusive can make a big difference in the lives of many.

NEW FACES



Welcome Donna Spaeth - The New Education Director

With her husband, Dale and their two children, they raise beef cattle and farm near Waubun. She has long worked as a field botanist monitoring plants in the prairies around Fertile. She enjoys sharing the wonders of nature with others, especially children. An active outdoors woman, she likes hiking, skiing, fishing and kayaking. She's excited to join the AELC team and quoting John Muir "...to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness" of which the Fertile Sandhills is blessed.



Welcome Annalee Jones - New Board Member

Annalee joined the AELC Board at the recent November Board meeting. Annalee has a passion for the outdoors that was instilled as a child. She has been very involved with the horseback community, currently on the North Dakota Appaloosa Horse Club board and involved as an Equine Therapeutic Volunteer for 17 years. She lives in rural Fertile and is the Polk County Deputy Director of Property Records. She notes she has interests in environmental education, recreation, stewardship, fundraising, and getting people (especially kids) involved in the outdoors in any way possible.

FUN IN THE FALL



JACK-O-LANTERN WALK

The Jack-o-Lantern walk was held October 20-21. We had a great turnout, enjoyed the beautiful fall weather with plenty of natural enhancements like coyotes in the distance and an owl or two telling us a story. The walk around the “campground loop” is a short walk for the little ones and an easy stroll while pushing a stroller and yet it can also accommodate a vehicle for those unable to walk the trail. This has become an annual favorite, and being a free will donation, it is available to any and all who want to attend.



HAUNTED TRAIL

The Haunted Trail was a HUGE success this year! Every Saturday in October, those who dare pay \$10 to walk a half mile in the woods, after dark, and have an array of unknown ghosts, goblins, monsters and more jump out at them for a frightful bit of fun. We had 1,100 people come through to be scared while supporting our mission. We had a lot of help from the Fertile Girl Scouts as they provided manpower for the concession stand and they provided plenty of actors. We had approximately 50 different volunteers who contributed to our 5 weeks of “fun” in some way. We had visitors from Bemidji, Park Rapids, Detroit Lakes, Fargo, Hillsboro, Grand Forks, Roseau, and many places in between. Most notable were the foreign exchange students from Paris, France and the other from Denmark! This was our second largest year and we are excited for the future as we have a lot of younger volunteers who are growing and developing into strong leaders and supporters for the AELC. We hope to continue working with them for many years to come! Maybe you would consider joining us next year to help with set up or clean up, selling tickets or concessions, or even donning a costume and scaring for a cause?!





NO CHILD LEFT INSIDE



As part of a MnDNR No Child Left Inside grant, nearly 250 elementary students engaged in on-site AELC programs in September and October. Students from the six schools of Ada-Borup, Climax-Shelly, Crookston, Goodridge, Mahnomen, and Norman County East learned about food webs, animal adaptations, camouflage, and biomes while hiking and exploring the Fertile Sand Hills.

Improved attention spans, less behavior issues, and physical fitness benefits are just some of the positive outcomes of engaging kids in outdoor activities.

The MnDNR recognizes these benefits and provides funding to promote outdoor education and recreation through its No Child Left Inside program.

Connecting kids to the outdoors is a combination of education and recreation provided in a safe, inclusive, fun manner that encourages kids to feel comfortable being outdoors. Students will return in January and February for winter activities including snowshoeing, skiing, and winter survival skills.



Post-Secondary Partnerships

As part of the AELC's 30 Year Anniversary Celebration in 2022, a BioBlitz was hosted in June, where everyone was encouraged to take photos of "anything living" in the Fertile Sand Hills during the month to document the site's biodiversity. Over the 30 day June period of record, 463 observations were made and posted using the iNaturalist app, with a total of 203 different species identified. As plants are the easiest to take photos of, they dominated the count with 137 species identified, 68% of the total. Insects followed with 33 species and fungi at 14 species.

One of the identified plants which gained attention was the woolly milkweed. Apparently, it is not a common native plant in Minnesota, with it classified as threatened or endangered in neighboring states. Minnesota Wildflower website creator, Katy Chayka, took a trip up to the Fertile Sand Hills to see it.

The AELC was then contacted by Grace Villmow, a South Dakota State University graduate student working on a monarch butterfly research project to discern which milkweed species are of particular benefit to monarch butterflies. Of the 19 milkweed species in her research trials, the woolly milkweed was the one that she was lacking plants or seeds for. Seeds have been collected from several plants from the Fertile Sand Hills and will be incorporated into the SDSU monarch research project in 2023.

Another collaboration underway is with NDSU Geology Professor Dr. Kenneth Lepper and NDSU students who are collecting soil samples from the Fertile Sand Hills for dating of when the sand



Heath Hotzler, NDSU Media, 2022

dunes were formed. This in turn can be used to tell when water levels declined in Glacial Lake Agassiz to assess climate records. The dating method is called optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating. This age data will help determine when the dune fields were active and migrating over the landscape from climate influences such as prolonged drought.

Ongoing collaboration has been occurring for many years with the University of Minnesota Crookston with past field trips by the Biology Department and more recent site management assistance through the UMN Crookston Natural Resources Department. Dr. Matt Simmons' classes have helped with removal of creeping juniper and encroaching trees to promote open sand areas which is the habitat needed for several of the more unique and rare species such as Indian Rice Grass found in the Fertile Sand Hills. The UMC Natural Resources Club has also assisted with buckthorn control near the AELC Nature Center.





Did you know that archery hunting can help maintain the ecosystems at the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center? Maintaining a healthy deer population is part of that management.

According to the DNR website, "Maintaining high quality deer habitat will help sustain a healthy deer herd and also provide exceptional habitat for a host of other species. High concentrations of deer and other large plant-eating animals can retard forest regeneration, change plant species composition and cause significant crop depredation."

Too large of a deer population can lead to easier spread of chronic wasting disease, introduce new diseases into the deer population, and winter starvation when the

population is too large for the habitat to support. We need all parts of the ecosystem working together to keep it in balance.

Keeping the deer population numbers in check helps preserve the unique features that the AELC offers. Our members are permitted to hunt deer in the Sand Hills using bows during regular archery season (mid-September through the end of the year). Permits can be purchased at Aaron's Grocery, 109 Albert Ave. Fertile, MN 56540.

All DNR regulations related to hunting on public land apply while hunting in the Sand Hill Recreation Area. Tree stands must be removed at the end of the season. Any left behind will be removed and will be forfeited.

The AELC is located in a Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) surveillance zone; sampling is voluntary until sampling goals are reached. CWD has been found in captive deer in these areas or in wild deer in an adjacent area or state. The DNR is gathering information in these permit areas to determine if CWD is in wild deer. Deer feeding bans are in place.

Hunters can request a kit online or, in most instances, visit a local wildlife office to pick one up. Kits, which are provided on a first-come, first-served basis, should be requested before your hunt. The kit and testing are free. Test results will be available online. www.dnr.state.mn.us/cwd/cwd-kits.html

Why Feeding Deer in Winter is Harmful

Resource: www.dnr.state.mn.us/wildlife/research/health/feeding/deer.html

The AELC is located in Polk County which is one of the Minnesota counties with a deer feeding and attractants ban in effect. This additionally effects people who feed birds and other small mammals. The DNR says, "People who feed birds or small mammals must do so in a manner that prevents deer access. Place the food at least six feet above ground level."

Noble Intentions; Deadly Results

It's not uncommon for wintering deer to eat themselves to death despite having reserves of fat. Supplemental feeding can result in enterotoxaemia, a fatal disease commonly called grain overload. While providing piles of corn, hay or other feed can be a feel-good act, it often results in bad consequences: disease, auto accidents, habitat loss and animal behavior changes.

Disease

Supplemental feeding can closely congregate animals that would otherwise feed apart on natural foods. Tight concentrations of deer and elk, for example, dramatically increase the odds that an infected animal will spread chronic wasting disease, bovine tuberculosis or brucellosis via nose-to-nose contact as it eats feed contaminated by another animal's disease-carrying saliva or inhaling bacteria or prions left behind.

Auto Accidents

Supplemental feeding often draws animals away from their natural feeding and bedding areas to locations where they create traffic accidents.

Habitat and Crop Loss

High concentrations of deer and other large plant-eating animals can retard forest regeneration, change plant species composition and cause significant crop depredation.

Behavior Changes

Supplemental feeding can make wild animals less fearful of humans, delay winter migration and even result in starvation if animals have not migrated to wintering areas and feeding ceases.

Big Problems Start with Small Handouts

Feeding deer makes them less wild, more vulnerable to disease and subject to population increases above what the available natural habitat can support.

More is Not Merrier

Deer that congregate in unnaturally high numbers tend to damage privately owned crops, vegetable gardens and ornamental plants. They also retard new forest growth by eating the buds of young trees.



LOOKING AHEAD -- February Fun!



MARK YOUR CALENDARS! *Winterfest and Giving Hearts Day are coming!*

On February 5th, we will host **Winterfest** and are planning an educational and fun day for our members and guests. We have already booked the horse drawn rides from Point Paradise Stables and we hope for favorable weather. We will have ski tours and several other fun activities to introduce the community to some of our many winter recreational offerings along with educational stations.

On February 9th, we will be participating in our second **Giving Hearts Day**. We hope as you prepare for any end of the year giving that you would consider AELC as a recipient. We are looking for donors to be “the match” for GHD. Matching funds help us increase donations on the day of fundraising, but must be planned as early as reasonably possible. Fundraising is a key part of what we do, as education is not a profitable endeavor, but it is crucial to a functional, healthy society. While we do charge schools and groups for field trips, the rates must remain affordable for them to be able to continue to attend and yet staff costs and supplies continue to go up. Because of this, we need to work harder than ever to keep our program running. This year, with our focus on accessibility and inclusion, we are still in the planning stages of our Giving Hearts Day fundraising and trying to prioritize specific projects and needs and adjust for what is realistic this coming year. We have many ideas and considerations to sort through. If you would like to help in the planning of this up and coming fundraising effort or to make a donation towards our matching funds, please reach out to us. Stacy Erickson is heading up the fundraising effort this year. Every little bit of help is more valuable than you can imagine!

RENEW OR BECOME A NEW MEMBER

*Your contribution helps fulfill the mission of the AELC,
to foster a greater awareness of the interrelationships between humans and nature.*

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS INCLUDE:

- Support youth education/outdoor recreation programs and site management to advance the mission of the AELC
- Tax-deductible membership contribution
- Free use of cross-country ski equipment and snowshoes — use of all trails
- Reduced fee for kayak rental (\$6/day)
- Free or reduced admission to AELC programs
- Printed version of exclusive AELC newsletter & annual recognition in our newsletter



AELC ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP FORM

___ \$20 - Student/Senior/Military

___ \$250 - Patron

___ \$30 - Individual

___ \$ 500+ - Benefactor

___ \$40 - Family

___ \$2,500 - Lifetime

___ \$100 - Centurion

___ \$ _____ - Other

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Email Address _____

Please mail this form and payment to AELC at PO Box 388 Fertile, MN 56540 or join online at www.aelcfertile.org or drop off at the Fertile City Office. A receipt acknowledging your tax deductible donation will be sent with a heartfelt THANK YOU!!

Agassiz Environmental Learning Center is a 501(c)(3)non-profit educational organization. Contributions are tax-deductible.



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