



Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

~ Summer 2020 Newsletter ~

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

In this Issue:

Your thoughts please...

AELC Survey

The Agassiz ELC Board is seeking input from members and the community at large to help shape future plans and activities to be offered by the Agassiz ELC. The AELC strives to provide quality education and outdoor experiences for local and regional audiences, be an asset to the Fertile community, and develop partnerships to ensure a sustainable future. Please take a moment to respond to a short online survey. Your ideas and input are sincerely appreciated. Please reply by Aug. 23rd. Thank you . Survey link [HERE](https://www.aelfertile.org) or available at [aelfertile.org](https://www.aelfertile.org) website.

Page 2...AELC Projects & Activities; Covid-19 status.

Pages 3-4...AELC Education Director's Updates and pictorial sampler of nature at the Fertile Sand Hills.

Page 5...Citizen science opportunities through iNaturalist.

Page 6...Sand Hill River recreation options with hydrograph guidance

Page 7...Accessibility considerations and fundraising challenge to help upgrade Nature Center technology.

Page 8...Membership Matters, Volunteer Opportunities, and Wish List.

Comments or story suggestions welcome, please contact:

Wayne Goeken, AELC Newsletter Editor
wgoekenmn@gmail.com

Story Stroll

Duckstad Woods and the restored prairie are both great places to take a stroll with the family. Even better when the kids have a great book to read along the way! AELC partnered with the Fertile Public Library on two story strolls this summer.

The first, in June, featured the book "Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs: As Retold by Mo Willems." This stroll took you through the cool shady woods of Duckstad Woods, which is just a short walk from anywhere in Fertile – you can hop on the trail at the sports complex.



The second stroll took strollers around the sunny restored prairie west of the Nature Center and through the pages of Alison Murray's "Dino Duckling" (yes, the summer's theme

was dinosaurs!). In late July the prairie is abuzz with butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies and a great place to see (and smell) gorgeous wildflowers like bergamot, purple prairie clover and black-eyed Susans.

We received great feedback from those who participated in the stroll and we hope to do more of these in the future!



Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

Board of Directors

Wayne Goeken, Erskine *Chair
Craig Engelstad, Fertile *Vice-Chair
Daniel Wilkens, Fertile *Treasurer
Laurie Fairchild, Faith *Secretary
Nicole Bernd, Gentilly
Stacy Erickson, Beltrami
Wendell Johnson, Crookston
Anders Macy, Fertile
Danielle Spiten, Thief River Falls
Stanton Wang, Fertile

Staff/Support

Brent Silvis, Education Program Director
Lisa Liden, Administrative Support

The mission of the Agassiz ELC is to foster a greater understanding 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.

Contact

Agassiz Environmental Learning Center
PO Box 388, Fertile, MN 56540
Email: agassizelcfertile@gmail.com
Web: <https://aelcfertile.org/>
Phone: 218-945-3136

Agassiz ELC Projects and Activities...

At the July Agassiz ELC board meeting a motion was approved to purchase a shipping container for storage of materials and supplies for the Haunted Trails fundraising event. AELC Board members coordinated site prep and delivery of the container shown below now sitting next to the maintenance shed. Appreciation to Stacy Erickson and family for prompt clean up of the area where the container now sits. Next step is to clear all the Haunted Trails materials out of the maintenance shed so the shed can be better utilized for education program supplies and as a workspace.



Plans are in the works to build an extension on the other side the shed to be used for storage of kayaks and a kayak trailer to make it easier to access and clean kayaks when they are returned. It will also provide shelter to keep firewood dry for AELC programs and campground use. Stay tuned for call for help with materials and labor on this building project to keep costs down and provide even more public service offerings provided by AELC operations.

*...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 (1912-1985) American Writer

Corvid-19 Status:

The Fertile Nature Center bathrooms are open for public use. They are cleaned daily, but please take necessary precautions, including wearing a face mask to help protect you and others.

The Fertile Sand Hills trails are open with trail fees waived to provide the public with opportunity for physical and mental well being. Kayak rentals have resumed on a limited basis subject to adequate water levels.

Education Director Updates

By Brent Silvis, AELC Education Director

It remains pretty quiet around the nature center and the Fertile Sand Hills. The trails are open, with the city staff and AELC Board members keeping them mowed and cleared of tree limbs that have come down during our summer storms. We continue to waive trail fees to urge everybody outside during this time of social distancing and we do see a steady flow of visitors on the trails.

The campground has reopened and we've had a few overnight and weekend visitors. Our primitive sites are a great place to unwind or take kids for their first camping experience! Give me a call if you have any questions (218-945-3129).

The city staff and AELC directors have been working to expand storage capacity at the Nature Center Maintenance Shed. The additional space will provide storage for Haunted Trails materials, room for storing education equipment and materials, workspace and allow us to streamline our kayak rental operation a bit.

In late June I attended a three-day professional development workshop in Savage, MN provided by the Jeffers Foundation. The Jeffers Foundation was established to provide free programs supporting outdoor educators. It was a very valuable experience and included curricula aligned with Minnesota academic standards and instruction on outdoor classroom management techniques. Thanks Jeffers Foundation!

By the time this newsletter goes out we should have received an update from the state on how the 2020-21 school year will be affected by the pandemic. With so much of our environmental education programming conducted with area schools, I am waiting to assess how to adapt our programming to this health crisis.

It is my hope that, even if schools are not able to fully return to their traditional onsite instruction, AELC can continue to contribute to students'

Education Director Updates-Cont'd on Pg. 4

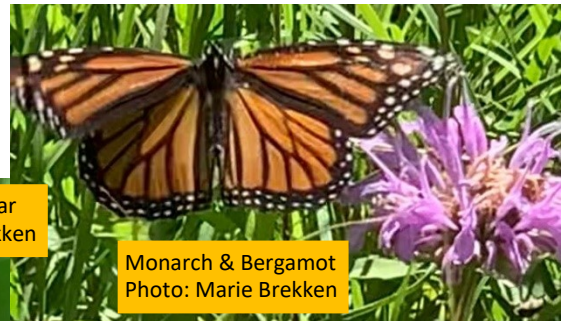
Blooms, Bees, Butterflies, Birds & Critters!

The progression of blooms is in full swing in the Fertile Sand Hills with the color purple being the predominate color of late. Pasque, penstemon and prairie smoke have gone to seed. Leadplant, silky prairie clover, bee balm and purple prairie clover are now leading the blooming prairie parade. Plus lots of pollinators—bees and butterflies, making the most of it all.

Cooler weather and less ticks makes this a prime time to explore the Fertile Sand Hills. Following are some of what you may find in your Sand Hills stroll...Enjoy!



Mushrooms on log
Photo: Brent Silvis



Monarch caterpillar
Photo: Marie Brekken

Monarch & Bergamot
Photo: Marie Brekken



Eastern Sand Tiger Beetle
Photo: Wayne Goeken



Evening Primrose
Photo: Marie Brekken



Chipmunk
Photo: Brent Silvis

Education Director Updates-Cont'd from Pg. 3

learning and appreciation of nature. I've reached out to area educators and invited them to have a conversation with me about how we might continue to partner in environmental education even if we are faced with a distance or "virtual" teaching arrangement this fall.

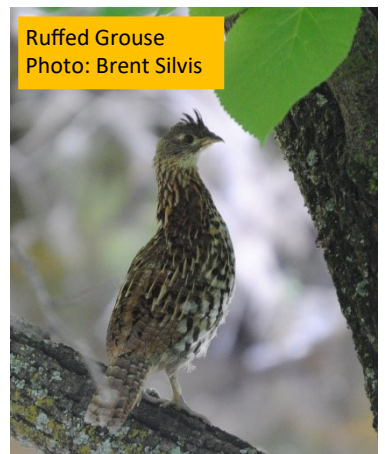
Implicit in this uncertainty regarding how coronavirus will continue to impact our lives is the uncertainty of both the roles and fate of nature centers during this health crisis. In many ways, nature centers are well-positioned to be part of the solution. The outdoor classroom entails much less risk of exposure to communicable diseases than the conventional classroom.

Creating self-directed outdoor educational activities and lessons can provide both the learning environment and physical activity our students will require in a home-based learning arrangement. As a bonus, environmental education fits perfectly with the direction of Minnesota academic standards towards inquiry-based education (more on that in the next newsletter). Nature also provides the recreation, relaxation and therapy we all need during these stressful times.

Ironically, some nature centers and environmental learning centers may not survive these challenging times which they are so uniquely positioned to help us overcome. The social and economic challenges of coronavirus have directly contributed to the permanent closing of Maplewood Nature Center, which has been a leader in environmental education programming in Minnesota for over forty years.

Other centers have not yet resumed programming, some have launched extensive and elaborate online learning resources, and some have cautiously begun to resume programming with many safety protocols. If coronavirus remains a significant part of our everyday lives, nature centers will need to focus on rethinking strategies for achieving their missions and remaining financially viable.

More Blooms, Bees, Butterflies, Birds & Critters!



You Can Be a Citizen Scientist! - iNaturalist

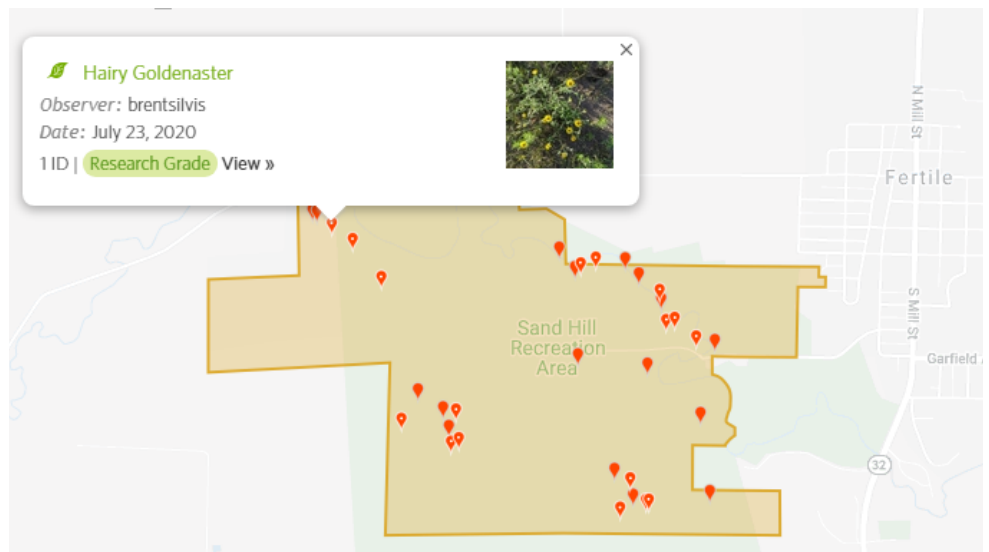
“Citizen Science” is just what it sounds like – citizens like you and me, doing science! What’s science? Science is partly a process by which we expand our understanding of the universe by asking questions, designing and conducting experiments, gathering data, interpreting results and developing conclusions. As citizen scientists, one of the easiest places to start is to jump right to collecting data.

What is iNaturalist? iNaturalist is a website and phone app which you can use to record your observations of plants, animals, insects and fungi while out in nature. It will record the date and time of your observation, allow you to upload photos and is really great for helping you to identify the species of the flora or fauna you’ve observed.

How does it work? It’s very simple. The easiest way to use it is to install the iNaturalist app on a smartphone. Set up an account, then get ready to observe. Find an interesting animal, insect or plant and snap a few good pics. Within the app, click the green plus sign to add an observation and upload one or more pics – the app will automatically fill the time and place where the pic was taken. Click on the “What did you see?” button and a list of candidate species will appear. Select the correct species. The app is incredibly good at identifying species! Other users can verify the identification of your species or suggest other species if they believe your identification is incorrect.

Head to **iNaturalist.org** for more information. You can use the website to upload observations from conventional cameras, but you may need to manually add the location and time/date of the observation. On the website search for “Agassiz Environmental Learning Center” or “Fertile Sand Hills” to see all the observations that have been recorded there. When you record an observation within the Sand Hills, it will automatically be added to our project!

So how is this science? You can create your own research questions such as “How many species of trees can I identify along the Sand Hill River today?” or “Will the wildflowers I observe in the prairie today be different than the wildflowers I observed there two months ago?” or “Which one of us can find and identify the coolest insect in the sand dunes?” Then you head out into the field to collect data to try to answer your questions.



Your data can also be used to help other researchers answer their questions. A researcher studying ruby-throated hummingbird migration, or the extent of rare western prairie fringed orchids or invasive common buckthorn can use iNaturalist to gather and analyze a huge number of field observations – including yours! Of course, when you log your observations in iNaturalist it’s valuable to the staff at AELC, too. We can use your data for outreach and the development of species lists, management plans and environmental programming. Give iNat a try!

Send me a note at agassizelcfertile@gmail.com if you have questions or if you’d like me to meet you in the Sand Hills for a lesson on getting started with iNat! ~ Brent Silvis

Sand Hill River Recreation

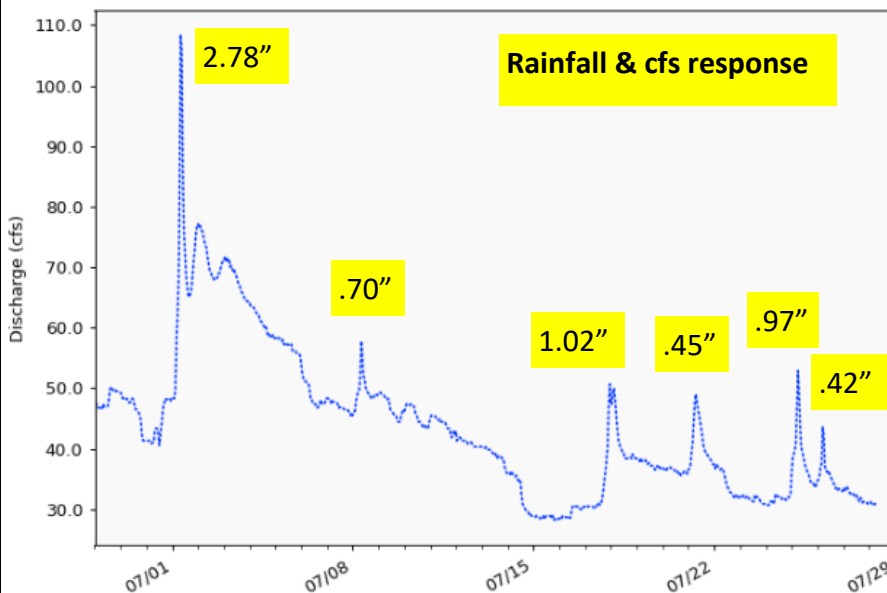
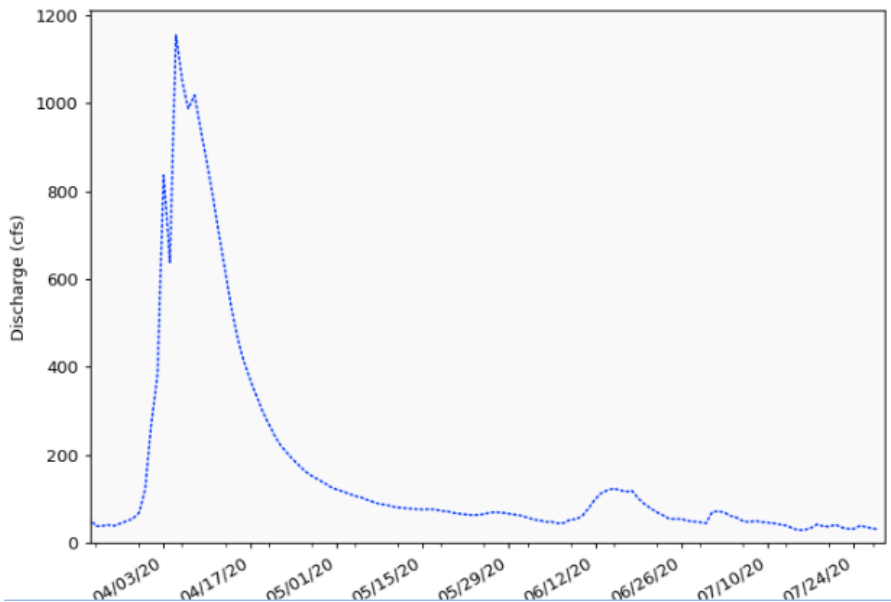
Kayaking opportunities on the Sand Hill River in the Fertile area were noted in the last newsletter including reference to a river [gaging station](#) just downstream of Fertile that provides near real-time information online for river flow and stage or height—a very useful tool to assess river conditions and plan your trip.

The hydrograph to the right shows the ups and downs of the Sand Hill River thus far in 2020—from a high during spring peak runoff of nearly 1,200 cubic feet/second (cfs) to less than 30 cfs in late July, about a 4.5 foot difference.

Being relatively small, the Sand Hill River can be quite “flashy” in response to rain events—going up quickly and then dropping nearly as fast. Knowing when it’s getting too shallow is of particular importance for a fun trip.

When flow drops to around 30-40 cfs, paddlers will be hitting rocks, often scraping bottom, and may need to get

out and drag through in spots. Flows above 250 cfs can be dangerous for inexperienced paddlers due to potential tree snags—especially during the spring cold water season.



The graph to the left illustrates how flashy the Sand Hill River can be. There were several larger rain events in July as shown in the yellow boxes and the associated river rise. The 2.78 inches reported July 1 resulted in the river rising quickly to nearly 110 cfs. The smaller but yet significant rain events later in July caused quick spikes but river levels came down quickly as well.

Watch for updates on the AELC and Sand Hill River Kayaking Facebook pages regarding river conditions—and please share your trip scouting reports as well. WG

Kayak rentals have resumed, although only by special arrangement. Generally, kayaks must be checked out on Friday and returned on Monday to be able to comply with Covid-19 guidelines. Also kayaks will not be rented when flow conditions go below 30 cfs as measured at the downstream DNR gaging station. Call Lisa at the city office if you are interested in kayak rentals (218-945-3136).

Sand Hill River Fishing. Completed in 2016, four drop structures between Fertile and Beltrami were modified to allow fish passage upstream during high flows. This appears to have been very successful as DNR sampling upstream of Fertile has now found viable populations of channel catfish, smallmouth bass, and northern pike. More information on this project and partners found here, [GFHerald](#).

Americans With Disability Act Turns 30 ~ Access to Nature

The Americans with Disabilities Act, A.D.A., recently had its 30 year anniversary of being signed into Law by President George Bush on July 26, 1990. It was a victory for a group of people who had been systematically denied basic rights and access to public spaces and services.

People with disabilities are the largest minority in the United States, representing about 20 percent of the population, but for the most part remain invisible. We have to keep in mind that when one thinks of disability, it is not just ramps and grab bars and the like that are needed. The [Center for Disability Rights](#) lists the following invisible disabilities: deafness, autism, depression, fibromyalgia, arthritis, Alzheimer's, mental health disorders, A.D.D./A.D.H.D., sleep disorder, Crohn's disease, and many more.

Things have come a long way, but there is much more to do. As the Agassiz ELC seeks to better serve the public, we strive to include accessibility in our planning. This past year, Options Resource Center for Independent Living provided an accessibility assessment of the Nature Center and grounds. They provided a report with specific recommendations that will be of great help to guide future site improvements.

Some minor, but important improvements have already been done such as changing door and faucet handles in the Nature Center. Door thresholds and parking improvements are next on the list. We'll be seeking funding support for larger ticket items at the Nature Center and surrounding site and keep accessibility as a guiding principle, not an afterthought.



Replaced doorknobs with lever handles

Nature has been proven to be a very healing, calming influence for people struggling with any number of maladies. The Agassiz ELC has waived trail fees during our current pandemic to encourage people to take a "nature break" and enjoy the solace nature can provide. We will continue to strive to do our best to make the healing power of nature available to all.

Membership Challenge – Nature Center Tech Support

Technology can be a great tool to help make nature more accessible. The iNaturalist app noted in this newsletter is an example. With the current challenges for in-person programming, our Education Director is working hard to connect with our community to best serve schools and public visitors alike. One way of doing so is through online learning and sharing of nature via technology.

We have a big gap that needs filling in this regard and we are asking for your help! St. Joseph's Catholic Church of Fertile donated a SmartBoard for use at the Nature Center. A new laptop computer, projector, and software is needed to complete this package which will greatly enhance programming and communications, especially in this time of social distancing, remote learning and Zoom meetings. Not only will it help address school and public program delivery, it will be an additional useful tool for groups that use the Nature Center for meetings to utilize.

To address this need, the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center Board of Directors has issued a Membership Challenge to help secure funds for these overdue technology improvements. Please help us meet our goal of \$2000 – half of which has already been dedicated to this purchase from the 2020 AELC budget! Donations of any amount are greatly appreciated and tax deductible. Donations can be mailed to: *Agassiz ELC, PO Box 388, Fertile, MN 56540*, or placed in an envelope and dropped in the payment slot in the door of the Fertile City Office. Please make sure to include your address so a receipt acknowledging your tax deductible donation can be sent to you. THANK YOU!!

Membership Matters.... Member support is critically important to help the Agassiz ELC provide education and recreation opportunities to youth and adult users of the Agassiz ELC and Fertile Sand Hills. Outdoor engagement has been proven to play a positive role in physical and mental well-being—now more important than ever.

During this time when school visits and revenues are restricted, we are constructively busy maintaining trails, improving signage, and developing additional interpretive materials. We are also exploring partnership and project options with others who have compatible interests and needs.

Members DO Matter ~ Help create a sustainable future for the AELC and the Fertile Sand Hills! Membership and contact information online at agassizelc.org. *Individual memberships-\$30; family-\$40—Thank you!*

Make a Difference ~ Support Agassiz ELC with AmazonSmile

Did you know you can support Agassiz Environmental Learning Center every time you shop on Amazon??!! We really want you to support our local retailers, but if you must go online for those hard-to-find kinda stuff, please support the AELC by using AmazonSmile. If you sign up for AmazonSmile and select Agassiz Environmental Learning Center as your charity, AELC will receive a donation every time you shop! Visit this site to sign up and designate "Agassiz Environmental Learning Center" as your charity: smile.amazon.com Remember to sign into your account at smile.amazon.com every time you shop so AELC can receive their donation! Thank you for your support!!!



Thanks for choosing to make a difference!

Your purchases here at smile.amazon.com will support **Agassiz Environmental Learning Center**.

Can you Volunteer?

Volunteers needed for lots of jobs! We're a pretty small operation so a little help goes a long way! Some of these opportunities will wait until we can resume some of our normal operations, but let us know now if you are interested.

- ⇒ Be one of our "scouts"!!! Take pictures on your site visits and post them to social media, or email them to us (agassizelcfertile@gmail.com) to use on our Facebook page, brochures and website. Also, lots of citizen science opportunities! Contact us for more information.
- ⇒ Staff the Nature Center! It's a pretty sweet deal. Hang out at AELC and welcome visitors to the Fertile Sand Hills! Wi-Fi connection available.
- ⇒ Help out with programming. Sooner or later we will need help introducing area school students back to AELC to experience nature. The more help we have with our programming, the better the experience for the students.

WISH LIST

The following wish list would greatly help provide opportunity for outdoor observation and engagement:

- ⇒ Bird feeders and birdseed (black oil sunflower seeds preferred)
- ⇒ Plastic storage totes (all sizes including large ones for Haunted Trails props)
- ⇒ Outdoor gear - unused personal flotation devices, kayaks, cross-country ski equipment or snowshoes.
- ⇒ Push lawnmower for trim work around Nature Center, campsites and work on snowshoe trails.

Any help with any of the above would be greatly appreciated. Call Brent at 701-885-1548. **Thanks!**