



Agassiz Environmental Learning Center

~ Fall 2019 Newsletter ~

In this Issue:

It's been a busy year at the Agassiz Environmental Learning Center with lots of activities and updates to share.



First and foremost, our beloved Education Program Director, Danielle Spiten, accepted a full time position as Thief River Falls Lincoln High School Science Teacher. Congrats to Danielle! AELC is now seeking a new Education Director—more inside.

Transitions to the AELC Board are also underway. By-laws were amended and new board members have joined with new insights and ideas to enhance operations.

Partnerships, volunteers, and membership are vital to AELC operations. If you haven't renewed your membership this year, now at year's end is a great time to help support the many activities underway.

Wishing everyone a safe and joyous holiday season. Enjoy your time with family and friends and take a break from the holiday rush to get out and "Enjoy the Fertile Sand Hills ~Naturally!"

Fertile Youth Ski Club

Helping kids enjoy cross-country skiing by learning proper fundamentals is key to further skill development and life-long enjoyment. A Fertile Sand Hills Youth Ski Club is being formed to provide this opportunity. The local club will be part of the Minnesota Youth Ski League with a \$35/participant fee covering the cost of equipment for the season, instruction, and insurance.

With the Nature Center as a warming house, established groomed ski trails, and interested kids and coaches—the Fertile area is a perfect fit. Matt and Merrilee Forgit and Paul and Danell Stromstad are coordinating this effort and will serve as coaches. Plans are to meet weekly—most likely on Sunday afternoons for instruction and skiing. For more information email Matt at sandhills@mysl.org. To register and learn more about the MN Youth Ski League in general visit www.mysl.org.

Fertile Haunted Trails—YES!!!

The Fertile Haunted Trails Boo Crew aka the Sand Hills Spooks, had another fun and successful year of scaring the living daylights out of hundreds of willing and wary souls who traversed the Haunted Trails at the Fertile Sand Hills. Due to heavy rain and snow, the first two weekends in October had to be cancelled for safety, but over 600 people came out for the final two weekends for thrills and chills galore. All proceeds help support Agassiz ELC youth education programs and outdoor recreation opportunities. THANK YOU to all the Haunted Trails volunteers who make this happen—and to ALL who came out for the scare!



Agassiz ELC Board Matters

The Agassiz ELC was officially incorporated as a 501 (c)3 non-profit organization in May 1992 with a mission “to foster a greater understanding of the interrelationships between humans and nature.”

Initially a seven member board provided oversight of two staff to fulfill this mission, primarily by providing quality hands-on outdoor learning experiences to elementary students in the unique Fertile Sand Hills.

While the mission remains the same and commitment to youth engagement is still at the core of AELC programs, the Board has been making changes to keep up with the times. By-laws were updated in 2019 including changes in membership categories and benefits, expanding the Board from seven to eleven members and adding Board term limits.

Three new board members—Nicole Bernd, Laurie Fairchild, and Wayne Goeken—have joined the Board to provide additional skills and ideas to help advance the AELC. Board member bios will be featured in future newsletters. Below is the current list of AELC Board members and officers.

Board of Directors

Wendell Johnson, Crookston **Chair*

Craig Engelstad, Fertile **Vice-Chair*

Daniel Wilkens, Fertile **Treasurer*

Wayne Goeken, Erskine **Secretary*

Nicole Bernd, Gentilly

Laurie Fairchild, Faith

Gary Kiefert, Fertile

Al Pierson, Fertile

Stanton Wang, Fertile

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

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.

Education Director Transition



Danielle Spiten, Agassiz ELC Education Program Director since 2015, resigned in August to take a full-time position as Biology Instructor at Thief River Falls Lincoln High School. Danielle has already been involved with Thief River Falls for several years as the Girls

and Boys Swim Coach.

Helping kids connect to the outdoors via fun, hands-on activities with an emphasis on getting students to think about what they can do to help the environment was key to Danielle’s interactions with students. Danielle also helped teachers identify how the outdoor activities at the Fertile Sand Hills, while fun, also fulfilled academic standards across many subject areas.

The Agassiz ELC has been very fortunate over the years to have had dedicated, inspirational professionals share their passion and knowledge of the environment with youth and community members alike. We will all very much miss Danielle’s smiling, positive demeanor and willingness to help advance the Agassiz ELC in any way she could, but we wish her all the best in her new education pursuits.



New Opportunities-Now Hiring!

Providing outdoor education programs related to the unique environments of the Fertile Sand Hills is central to fulfilling the Agassiz ELC mission. As such, the AELC is currently seeking to hire a new Education Program Director. For more details on the position description and application status, please contact Lisa Liden at the Fertile City Office, 218.945.3136 or email lisa@cityoffertile.com.

BIRDING is BIG

- ◇ There are an estimated 45 million bird watchers in the United States ([Cornell Lab article](#))
- ◇ \$4 Billion/yr is spent on bird feed in U.S. (more than is spent on rods and reels by anglers)
- ◇ \$1.8 Billion/yr is spent on binoculars and spotting scopes (more than is spent on rifles and shotguns)

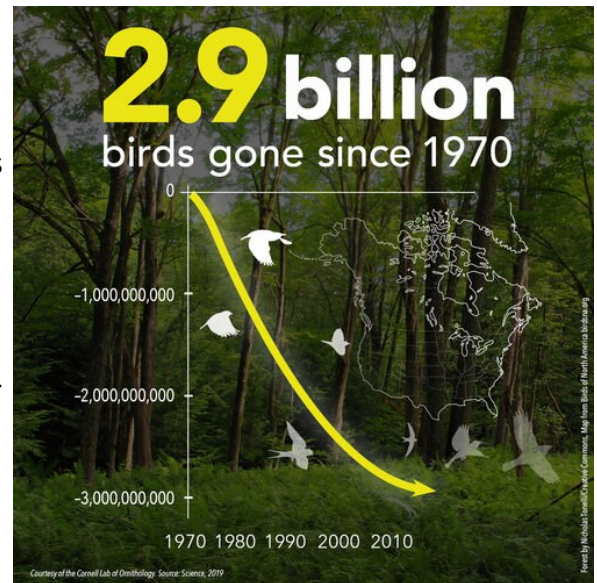
Half of all households in the U.S. feed birds as reported in this [Enzia article](#). Feeding helps birds survive winters, increasing reproduction and boosting bird populations. However, it is important to clean feeders to minimize risks of increased disease transmission due to birds being in closer proximity.

Human health and well-being has also been linked with establishing personal connections with nature through bird feeding.

Birds in Decline—Nearly 3 billion breeding adult birds have been lost since 1970 in North America—that’s a loss of 1 in 4 birds. The Oct. 4, 2019 issue of Science reports, “This loss of bird abundance signals an urgent need to address threats to avert future avifaunal collapse and associated loss of ecosystem integrity, function, and services. “

Seven ways you can help birds:

- 1) Make windows safer by using window decals or screens.
- 2) Keep cats indoors—cats are the #1 human caused reason for bird loss, aside from habitat loss.
- 3) Reduce lawn, plant natives for food and shelter.
- 4) Avoid pesticides that harm birds and their food sources.
- 5) Drink shade-grown coffee to preserve forest canopy that helps migratory birds survive winters.
- 6) Use less plastic and recycle what you do use.
- 7) Do citizen science—help monitor birds.



Christmas Bird Counts

Free and Fun! Be part of a Christmas bird count. The Crookston count is Dec. 14—contact Tom Feiro at 218-521-0223. On Dec. 19, a count will be based out of Rydell Refuge—



Tip: Black-oil sunflower seeds are a popular bird food used by the greatest variety of bird species. Suet cakes provide high energy in cold weather. Water and grit are also important.

contact Ben Walker at 218-230-5563. Contact the count coordinators for more information on how you can join. More background about Christmas Bird Counts in general is available at <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/join-christmas-bird-count>.

AELC Updates and Volunteer Opportunities

Recognizing the need to move ahead on many fronts, several committees of AELC Board members, volunteers and partners are working on priority needs to advance the mission of the Agassiz ELC.

Education: The main activity of late has been developing a job description and advertising for the hiring of a new Education Program Director. Several school visits have had to be postponed until this position is filled. In the meantime, community programs are being identified for delivery. If you have program ideas or an interest in assisting with program delivery, please contact any of the AELC Board members.

Membership/Marketing: A new AELC website, aelfertile.org was created and is a work in progress. A student webmaster from the Fertile-Beltrami Advance Com class is now helping to clean up the site and make it more functional and accessible. Year-end membership appeals are being made with funds primarily needed to support hire of an Education Program Director. Volunteers are welcome to help improve AELC's social media presence. Members and volunteers would also be of great service as Visitor Center hosts to allow regular open hours for ski and snowshoe checkout and keeping the Center open for warming.

Fundraising/Finance: A critical need for the AELC at this time is fundraising for hiring an Education Program Director, supplies for program delivery, and site management needs. Volunteers with expertise in financial planning and grant writing would be most welcome.

Site Management:

Fire management is a traditional tool for prairie management. AELC is working with Tyler Janke of the MnDNR to implement prescribed burns of adjacent DNR and AELC properties. The Fertile Fire Department is also a valuable partner for doing site burns.



Open sand areas are critical for many of the rare plant and animal species found in the Fertile Sand



Hills. Students in the University of MN-Crookston Ecological Restoration Class led by Dr. Matt Simmons

are assisting with vegetation removal to maintain these unique areas.

Trails are critical for both education programs and recreation enjoyment. Mowing was recently done in preparation for the winter ski season. In addition a new snow shoe trail, separate from the ski trails, has been developed as a loop from the Nature Center .

Accessibility needs associated with the Nature Center building and surrounding area have been identified. Items such as door thresholds, door handles, and faucet handles are a few of the initial priorities inside the Nature Center. Developing and signing accessible parking is the priority item for outside the Nature Center.

To keep informed on a more timely basis of programs, activities, and involvement opportunities, please provide your email to Lisa Liden, Fertile City Clerk, at Lisa@cityoffertile.org. You can also follow us on Facebook at [Agassiz Environmental Learning Center](https://www.facebook.com/AgassizEnvironmentalLearningCenter). Thank you for your interest and support.