



LoriAnne Barnett and Michelle Prysby identifying a tree.

Helping Others Nurture Nature

Michelle Prysby & the Master Naturalist Program

by Libby Carty **McNamee**

Following a lifelong interest in the environment, Michelle Prysby has been busy spreading the word on the Commonwealth's vast natural resources. It shows: The results of her efforts as administrator of Virginia's Master Naturalist Program are impressive. Although the program only started in 2006, over 30,000 Virginians have already attended one of the many programs across Virginia. In addition, the value of time donated by volunteers has already exceeded a whopping one million dollars.

As program administrator, Michelle coordinates the volunteer organization that provides education, outreach, and public service for better appreciation of our natural resources.

You too can become a master naturalist, receiving training and participating in local service projects. The process, which normally takes six to 12 months, consists of a 40-hour basic training course provided by a local chapter, plus eight hours of advanced training as well as 40 hours of volunteer service. Then you are ready to take on a local service project as a full-fledged master naturalist!

The actual service projects are diverse, so you can get involved in one that interests you. While some are oriented to education, such as running a program in a state park, others have to do with science, such as collecting data on wildlife. For those who enjoy physical labor, there are plenty of stewardship projects such as working on park trails.

The Master Naturalist Program receives its funding jointly from five state agencies—the Cooperative Extension and the Museum of Natural History, as well as the respective departments of Conservation and Recreation, Forestry, and Game and Inland Fisheries. Although based in the Department of Forestry within the College of Natural Resources at Virginia Tech, the program extends to all



Michelle Prysby identifies a large poison ivy vine.

Photos by Peter Warren

Spring is a great time to get involved in the blossoming Master Naturalist program.

corners of the Commonwealth, from Abingdon in Southwest Virginia to the Eastern Shore and then over to Arlington in Northern Virginia.

Chapters are springing up across Virginia at a rapid pace, initiated by interested volunteers with the assistance of an advisor from a sponsoring agency. When the program began in 2006, there were 10; today there are 25 with over 600 active volunteers. Chapters in the V readership area are Riverline in Hanover County; Pocahontas in Chesterfield County; Old Rag in Madison; Central Blue Ridge in Nelson County; and Central Piedmont in Cumberland County.

In addition to her other duties, Michelle is the Vice President of the Alliance of Natural Resource Outreach and Service Programs, a national organization for master naturalist-type programs. She quipped, "When I'm not busy doing all of these things, you can find me playing old time music on my fiddle or spending time outdoors." She is grateful for her parents, who took her to visit many national parks, a neighbor who got her interested in birds at her bird feeder, and many teachers who encouraged her interest in natural science.

Spring is a great time to get involved in the blossoming Master Naturalist program. Michelle's next major event is Virginia's first statewide Invasive Plant Removal Day, which will take place on Saturday, May 2, 2009. Now that's what I call spring cleaning! What better way to start than by removing plants not native to Virginia?

For more information about the Virginia Master Naturalist Program, call 434-872-4580, visit www.virginiamasternaturalist.org, or e-mail masternaturalist@vt.edu. V

Vlibby Carty McNamee is a local freelance writer and mother, excited to check out the Pocahontas Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program. Check out Libby's web site at www.libbymcnafee.com.



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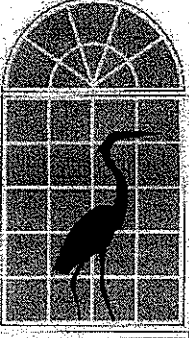
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