



2025

Natural Areas Program Annual Report



When someone asks me what I do for work, I subtly smile and say, “It’s complicated to explain.” My mind flips through a myriad of possible answers. Should I say land manager, scientist, educator, advocate, fundraiser, administrator, negotiator, laborer, or perhaps wizard? The reality seems and feels exhaustively endless at times. But in society’s expectation of short quick answers versus in-depth explanations, maybe the best answer is just healer.

While our staff and partners work every year to heal the natural areas in the park system, this past year we’ve spent a significant amount of resources restoring our most damaged landscapes, which are the Parks leased agricultural fields. This year 182 acres of formerly leased land has begun the journey of long-term restoration through the reestablishment of wetlands, prairie, and woodlands. For well over a century, these fields have given everything to grow crops, livestock, and rural aspirations. It may take just as long to fully mend them, because in many places the soil had been worn precariously thin and is seemingly parched of life.

Breaking over a mile of drain-tiles has restored the groundwater, the life blood of the wetlands, and allows them to heal quicker than the prairie and forest. In just the first year, 50 species of waterfowl and shorebirds returned to these reemerging wetlands, whether drawn by opportunity, by need, or by an ancestral memory of former wetlands buried deep within their DNA ... it is hard to say.

A 60-acre prairie was planted on what were historically woodland soils because they are far too damaged to grow trees in the short-term. It will take the prairie grasses, wildflowers, and pollinators generations to restore the soil, and only then will the adjacent hardwood forest begin its march across the grassland. Even this first-year prairie brought nesting Vesper Sparrows, as well as Bobolink and Meadowlark scouts during fall migration. Future residents?

The woodlands will take the longest to recover. This constitutes one of our largest tree plantings to date with nearly 2,000 trees and shrubs. While we take every precaution to nurture their establishment, only the most tenacious will survive and form the foundation of the forest that will grow here hundreds of years in the future. However, the forest of the future will not be the forest of the past, because we have incorporated species that prefer slightly warmer climates. Sycamore, Black Gum, and Shingle Oak, among others, have been given the opportunity to grow alongside forest species historically native to the county with the hope that they will be well adapted to future growing conditions and provide for a more diverse forest.

Breathing life back into a forgotten landscape is always a humbling experience, and rediscovering something cherished that was thought lost forever is inspiringly precious.

Maybe the Natural Areas Team are aspiring wizards after all.... it does sound cooler.

Naturally Yours,

Brian Russart, Natural Areas Supervisor MCP



Root River Tree Plantings

1,975

Native trees and shrubs planted

64

Species total

77

Native species interseeded to enhance pollinator habitat while trees mature

16.5

Acres reforested to buffer existing forest and wetlands

Geo-located climate change tree species to assess long-term survival

Big **Thank You** to [Milwaukee Parks Foundation](#) and [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation](#) for your support!



Other Reforestation Projects

126

New landscape trees planted at Clarke Square, Estabrook, Harriet Tubman, Lafollette, MCCarty, Meaux, Rose, Tippecanoe and West Milwaukee parks

434

Trees and shrubs planted to reforest 3.7 acres of turf at County Grounds Park, Lyons Park, McGovern Park and the Menomonee River Parkway



Vegetative Surveys

56

Sites surveyed for native and invasive plants

1,961

Acres surveyed for native and invasive plants

Seed Collection and Planting

82

Species collected by staff

17

Species collected by 8 volunteer seed collectors

24.5

Acres seeded at 6 restoration sites

57

Species of Local Conservation Concern

46.8

Acres enhanced with native seed, shrubs, and trees

Developed innovative greenhouse partnership with UWEX to grow plants from local native seed sources to be used in restoration projects around the park system.

Plant Rescues

Transplanted native plants from future construction areas within Kohl Park, Kinnickinnic River Parkway, and Root River Parkway into protected natural areas within the park system



Seed Collection and Planting

Installed pollinator plantings at Doyne and Falk parks to improve habitat for the federally endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee



Doyne Pollinator Planting

27

Species of native prairie plants installed into four of the former golf greens to create pollinator patches



834

Plugs

28

Species of native prairie plants seeded



Falk Pollinator Planting



288

Woodland plugs

9

Species

Invasive Species Management



54

Natural areas receiving restoration work

229

Acres of total invasive species controlled by staff

49

Invasive species monitored and controlled throughout the park system

278

Acres of invasive species controlled by volunteers, contractors, and partners

1,332

Conservation volunteers

8,349

Volunteer hours donated towards restoration projects throughout the park system

\$283,866

Value of volunteer time



Endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bee using invasive crown vetch

Balancing the management of invasive plants while minimizing negative impacts to rare pollinators that utilize those plant species as a food source.



Partnerships

\$1,268,627

in external funding provided by partner organizations towards restoration work throughout the park system

NEW PROJECTS

Piloted an urban forestry outreach and education project with the WDNR to plant 130 trees in neighborhood parks

CONTINUING PROJECTS

Restoring 57.8 acres of habitat for the federally endangered Rusty Patched Bumble Bees in six natural areas in partnership with USFWS

Ongoing wetland mitigation bank management across 16 acres in the Oak Creek Parkway in partnership with WDNR and NRCS

Managing 107.6 acres for invasive species control and native plant establishment along the Little Menomonee River Parkway in partnership with the WDNR and USEPA [AOC program](#)

Thank you to Urban Ecology Center and Hunger Task Force for their continuing restoration work on Parks properties!



Partnerships

PROJECTS COMPLETED IN 2025

Completed a 90-acre wetland restoration, reforestation, and prairie establishment along the Root River Parkway in partnership with Ducks Unlimited, MMSD, USFWS, and SOGL. Permanent conservation easement placed on project area.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING CONTRIBUTIONS

Lake Park Friends for control of invasive species within Lake Park

Johnson Controls, Inc. to reforest 1.5 acres of turf grass around the lagoon and wooded natural areas at McGovern Park

ARPA funding through Milwaukee County to reforest former leased farmland within the Root River Parkway in 2025 and 2026

MMSD and Milwaukee Riverkeeper to reforest 1.5 acres of turf grass along the Menomonee River Parkway

GROWING THE NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM

Engaged in a creative land transfer with the Village of Greendale to acquire a sizeable portion of Grootemaat Woods while transferring a portion of the Dale Creek Parkway to the Village.



A huge thanks to all of our funders and supporters!

Engagement

689

Individuals reached through public presentations

Click the icons to see our socials



Milwaukee County Parks
Natural Areas & Conservation
mkenaturalareas



Further advanced the newly formed Milwaukee Region Natural Areas Coalition (MRNAC) with the goal of establishing effective strategies and partnerships to best protect and steward the remaining natural areas within Milwaukee County

Lego “Field Tech Maggie” posts reached tens of thousands of social media accounts showcasing our natural areas and the work that our seasonal Field Techs undertake. Thanks Parks Marketing team for your help!

Want to learn more about the Natural Areas Program?

[Milwaukee County Parks Natural Areas Program](#)

[Natural Areas Staff POV Feature](#)

[Milwaukee Parks Foundation Reforestation Feature](#)

Click the links!



Wildlife Monitoring Programs

Wetland Monitoring

6

Sites surveyed by
Natural Areas staff

5

Wetlands monitored
by volunteers

Native Species Counts:

4

Crayfish

5

Amphibians

13

Fish



Mammal Monitoring

25 Species documented

Piloted first ever beaver surveys to gather essential baseline information to better understand the populations using our parks

Continued bat acoustic surveys at 4 Sites

Continued camera trap surveys throughout park system

Wildlife Monitoring Programs

Bird Surveys and Conservation

187

Species documented

489

Staff surveys conducted

337

Volunteer hours donated by WI Metro Audubon

Bird window-strike mitigation installed at Brown Deer Boathouse, Oakwood Golf Course Clubhouse, and Wehr Nature Center



Insect Surveys

Bumble Bees

11

Species found

54

Natural Areas surveyed

Listed Species

22 Rusty Patched* sites (5 new)

17 Yellow** sites (3 new)

5 American** sites (all new)

15

Volunteer monitors

NEW COUNTY RECORD: SOUTHERN PLAINS BUMBLE BEE



Butterflies

63

Species observed

3 NEW COUNTY RECORDS: SLEEPY ORANGE, HORACE'S DUSKYWING, WHITE ADMIRAL



Odonates

56

Species of dragonflies and damselflies observed

NEW COUNTY RECORD: SLATY SKIMMER**



*Federally Endangered

**WI Species of Concern

Biodiversity Wrap-Up

454

Native species of fungi, lichens, and slime molds found to date

8,407

Acres of plant, wildlife, and fungi research in 2025

473

Non-native species in park system

2,733

Native species in park system



28

New populations of state or federally listed species documented in park system for a total of 711 listed species populations

946

Invertebrate species documented to date