



June 2014

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Forest Preserves of Cook County Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership *Chicago, Illinois*

THE PARTNERSHIP

The Forest Preserves of Cook County Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership has piloted an innovative approach to connecting urban residents of Chicago's south side with its nature preserves through community engagement workers - Wild Indigo Fellows - hired from the local community.



urban wildlife refuge PARTNERSHIP

Residents of Chicago's South Side are learning to play, learn, and work in the natural areas in their neighborhoods. Chicago is fortunate to have a rich network of preserved natural areas protected and managed by the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Many residents of the city never visit these preserves, however, due to lack of familiarity, access, and because they have never been introduced to them in a fun and safe-feeling way. Our goal is to introduce urban residents to nature in the forest preserves, create opportunities for them to engage with nature

through play and restoration work, and to develop an engaged relationship to the preserves that ultimately leads to a new generation of urban naturalists, habitat restoration volunteers, and conservation leaders.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership has piloted an innovative approach to connecting urban residents of Chicago's south side with its nature preserves through community engagement workers ("Fellows") hired from the local community. These Fellows are trained in basic ecological and habitat restoration principles and then design, promote, and lead free monthly restoration field trips that are marketed to South Side African-American communities, feature African-American naturalists and trip leaders, and ensure that everyone has fun in nature. Audrey Peterman, noted author and parks advocate, described Wild Indigo Fellows and staff in her blog as "leaders



that are connecting with urban communities with great verve, originality and success.”

The Fellows lead community members on guided bird and nature walks, field trips, outdoor activities, seed collection and planting, and restoration workdays through the forest preserves and prairies, identifying individuals that would potentially join local volunteer efforts in the future. Wild Indigo provides employment for the Fellows, and in turn, they have formed new and lasting connections with nature. Nita Marchant, Wild Indigo Fellow, had rarely ventured into nature prior to her time with Wild Indigo, but now recognizes: “To be a part of something positive and take care of your community, it gives you a new sense of self appreciation.” The joy the Fellows find in their own learning about nature spills over into their field trips and may be one of the secrets of their successful and well-attended outings.

The Fellows have developed new partnerships with community groups that continue to engage with Wild Indigo Nature Explorations by helping to organize the field trips to the preserves. Connecting with community groups such as the Little Smiles Big Dreams Kids Club and RTW Veteran Center has been key in recruiting field trip participants.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership is a joint effort of Eden Place Nature Center, Audubon Chicago Region, the Forest Preserves of Cook County, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In May 2013, the project competed nationally to be designated as an Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership. The designation of the Forest Preserves of Cook County Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership is a formal recognition of excellence



under the Service’s Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative. Under the initiative, the Service is striving to make the outdoors more meaningful and accessible to urban audiences. This partnership provides a cost effective innovative way to enable urban communities to learn more about the National Wildlife Refuge System and wildlife conservation, and to gain an appreciation for the outdoors.



MORE INFORMATION

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