# Providence Parks Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership

*Providence, Rhode Island*

Using the network of over 100 existing and accessible parks in Providence, partners in Rhode Island are coming together to bring a conservation and wildlife message to the city. One of the most ethnically diverse cities in the U.S., Providence anchors a population of 1.6 million people and many families do not have the resources to travel to rural national wildlife refuges. In an effort to connect school children and families with nature where they live and work, partners will work with schools and conservation groups, using the Providence Parks System as a foundation, to restore and maintain wildlife habitats, build nature trails and interpretive signs, and provide environmental education programs. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated the collaborative effort as the Providence Parks Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership on May 5, 2014.

*Bird's eye view of the city of Providence from top of Neutaconkanut Hill Park*

The Providence Parks System spans over 26 neighborhoods. Many of the parks are within a half-mile of a school, on public transit routes and currently used by schools as recreation sites. Some of the parks are located along rivers, greenway bike paths and fish ladders. This infrastructure provides opportunities for urban residents to find, appreciate and care for nature in their own backyard and beyond.

The Service is serving as a catalyst, collaborating with other conservation organizations to leverage resources, staff and funds to broadly and comprehensively reach this urban community. The partnership builds on existing projects in the city, as

Providence is unique in the number of parks that support rivers, forests, shrublands and grasslands.

*Youth kayakers paddling along the Woonasquatucket River in downtown Providence.*

*Riverside Fish Ladder Art Project with the Woonasquatucket River Rangers*

Partners, such as The Nature Conservancy, Roger Williams Park Zoo, Audubon Society of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the Woonasquatcket River Watershed Council, Parks' Conservancy Groups, and others have begun assessing habitat and wildlife capabilities of different parks, developing interpretive nature trails and supporting volunteers and youth hires to perform restoration projects and deliver education programs.

Under the partnership, the Service will work with neighborhood friends groups to train seasonal interns under various programs, including visitor services, invasive species management, habitat restoration, endangered species recovery and environmental education.

The partnership also supports the Roger Williams Park Zoo's Teacher Institute, which benefits wildlife, habitat and students and is a multi-partner endeavor. Teachers spend a week in the field led by park staff and are introduced to field biology, wildlife conservation, and Service work with the ultimate goal of bringing those lessons back to the classroom.

The Partnership for Providence Parks and the Providence Parks and Recreation Department have a formal agreement with the Service, and they will supply space and tools to provide students with environmental education. The Paks Department will also continue to identify and authorize demonstration areas for habitat restoration and interpretation. There are currently nine recreation centers that house afterschool programs, summer learning experiences, and community events throughout the year and are possible sites for the partnership to engage students in wildlife conservation.

*Roger Williams Park Zoo Teacher Institute*

The partnership has also hired a conservation program coordinator, who will bridge the various conservation organizations efforts, Park System friends groups, schools and local government resources.

Moving forward, the partnership work will continue at Neutaconkanut, Riverside and Blackstone Parks, and other Providence Parks, to offer more wildlife oriented opportunities for residents. The partnership will continue to meet with representatives from Providence public schools to discuss the use of public green spaces as supplemental areas for learning, and to expand the network of partners that can offer a myriad of diverse support and resources.

*Discovering nature while making fairy houses at Blackstone Park, hosted by the Blackstone Park Conservancy*

*Conservation Program Coordinator, April Alix, with 4th grade students and their teacher, Kelly Barr, from the Paul Cuffee School, cleaning nature trails and planting a tree at Neutaconkanut Hill Park*