

Love the Environment? Become a Master Naturalist!

By: Sallie Gilman, Virginia Master Naturalists

The Virginia Master Naturalist (VMN) Program is a statewide corps of volunteers contributing to natural resource education, citizen science, and stewardship. After program participants graduate from a basic training course, they join with others to work on projects and provide education related to helping the environment.

By definition: the VMN volunteers “inspire a love of nature by facilitating volunteer stewardship opportunities, offering environmental education programs, and hands on work on various environmental projects.” VMN volunteers contribute to the environment by being citizen scientists. A citizen scientist is, by definition: “an individual who voluntarily contributes his or her time, effort, and resources toward scientific research in collaboration with professional scientists or alone. These individuals don’t necessarily have a formal science background.”

A 40-hour basic training course covers the background knowledge and skills that every naturalist needs to have. Each VMN chapter tailors their course to fit their local environment and community, so no two courses are exactly the same. For example, the course for the Historic Southside Chapter includes 27 hours of classroom instruction. This includes information on ecology, birds, mammals, insects, fish, reptiles, plants, wetlands, forestry, weather, and geology. The training course also includes 13 hours of field trips (Saturdays only). The field trips include places such as the Great Dismal Swamp, Chippokes Plantation, and Piney Grove Preserve, which is home to longleaf pine and the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. There is also a tour of the Blackwater Ecological Preserve.

In addition to the basic training course, all VMN volunteers in training are required to complete 40 hours of volunteer service in citizen science, stewardship, environmental

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Darren Loomis, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, explains how to use fire to manage longleaf pine forests, to a group of Master Naturalist trainees at the Blackwater Ecological Preserve near Zuni, Virginia. Photo by: Stephen Anderson, VMN

education, or chapter administration and 8 hours of continuing education in an area of their choosing within one year following completion of the basic training course. VMN volunteers maintain their certification by completing 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of continuing education each year.

The Virginia Master Naturalists look forward to having you join them as they learn all about the natural world!! Find a chapter near you:

<http://www.virginiamasternaturalist.org/chapters-a-map-and-contacts.html>

Sallie Gilman is the publicity coordinator for the Historic Southside Virginia Master Naturalist Chapter, which is currently accepting applications for their 2020 basic training course. For more information or an application, visit www.vmn.historicsouthside.org or call the Virginia Cooperative Extension Office at 757-365-6261 by January 21, 2020.