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FEATURED

Master Naturalist program provides ‘pipeline’ of volunteers for Prescott Creeks, other local organizations

By CINDY BARKS, The Daily Courier
Oct 21, 2024



Volunteers with the Prescott Creeks organization work on vegetation management at the Watson Wood Riparian Preserve. Prescott Creeks is among the local organizations to benefit from the local Master Naturalist program, which is gearing up for its 2025 round of expert-led lessons on the region’s natural world. (Cindy Barks/Courier)

Courtesy Prescott Creeks

From the “electricity” for the natural world that Chris Schneider senses, to the “hunger for knowledge” that Michael Byrd has noticed, participants in the local Master Naturalist program are bringing a singular enthusiasm to volunteering for outdoor organizations.

Now preparing for its fourth round (cohort) of providing expert-led lessons in things like plant life, wildlife, geology and hydrology, the Central Highlands Master Naturalist Program has established a track record of educating participants in all things natural in the region.

And along the way, the program has channeled dozens of well-versed naturalist volunteers to such local organizations as Prescott Creeks, Audubon Society, Prescott National Forest, Highlands Center for Natural History, Natural History Institute, Heritage Park Zoological Sanctuary and Sharlot Hall Museum.

“We’ve been beyond excited about the Master Naturalist program,” Byrd, the executive director of the Prescott Creeks organization, said on Thursday, Oct. 17, as a group of volunteers gathered to work on vegetation management in the Watson Woods Riparian Reserve, the swath of wooded land south of Watson Lake that is managed by Prescott Creeks.

Byrd pointed out that the number of volunteers for Prescott Creeks has been buoyed by the Master Naturalist program. “From my perspective, it’s kind of a pipeline, getting volunteers to organizations like Prescott Creeks, Highlands Center, Audubon,” he said.

And the naturalists who do volunteer are particularly open to learning. “What we see is folks come in with a context, so they understand the bigger picture that this fits into,” Byrd said. “I think the other thing we see is there seems to be this hunger for knowledge.”

Schneider, the president of the Central Highlands Chapter of the Master Naturalist program, said the program inspires passion among its participants.

“There’s something that happens with this group of Master Naturalists who’ve completed the coursework and are now volunteering,” she said. “They have an electricity about them, and a passion for the natural world.”

Schneider participated in the first cohort of the Master Naturalist program in 2022, and has gone on to volunteer with the Highlands Center for Natural History and with youth education.

“What drew me to it is I had just moved to Prescott, and just as when I meet a new person, I want to get to know them,” Schneider said. “I wanted to get to know the lands and waters of where I was going to call home.”

Maria Icenogle, the education director at the Highlands Center for Natural History (the local sponsor for the program), said one of the major goals of the Master Naturalist program is to foster volunteerism.

"Volunteering is the point, and there's some really cool volunteering happening here," she said. "We're in the thousands of hours (of volunteerism) as a chapter annually, easily."

Another of the program's objectives is to create a sense of place, Icenogle said. To achieve that, the coursework delves into different areas of study each week, including hydrology, biology, botany or ecology, and provides an overview.

While the participants do not become experts from those overviews, Icenogle said, "It gives you that context; it roots you down, so then you can decide, yes, this resonates with me, and this is what I want to dig more deeply into, and this is where I want to be of service."

The next cohort of the Master Natural program is set to get started on Jan. 7, 2025. Meanwhile, those interested can get a better idea of what the coursework involves by participating in an information session, conducted virtually by Zoom, on Nov. 14 and Dec. 12.

The program offers a hybrid teaching model comprising twice-weekly expert-led Zoom lectures on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, as well as in-person field experiences on select Saturdays throughout the course.

Registration for the 2025 course is now open, at a cost of \$535, with some scholarship funds available. More information is available online at <https://azmnch.org/>, and registration is available at highlandscenter.org/adult-programs.

In addition, Icenogle can be reached at micenogle@highlandscenter.org, or 928-776-9550 for more information.

The Highlands Center program is a chapter of the Arizona Master Naturalist program, which is a part of a larger national program.

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