

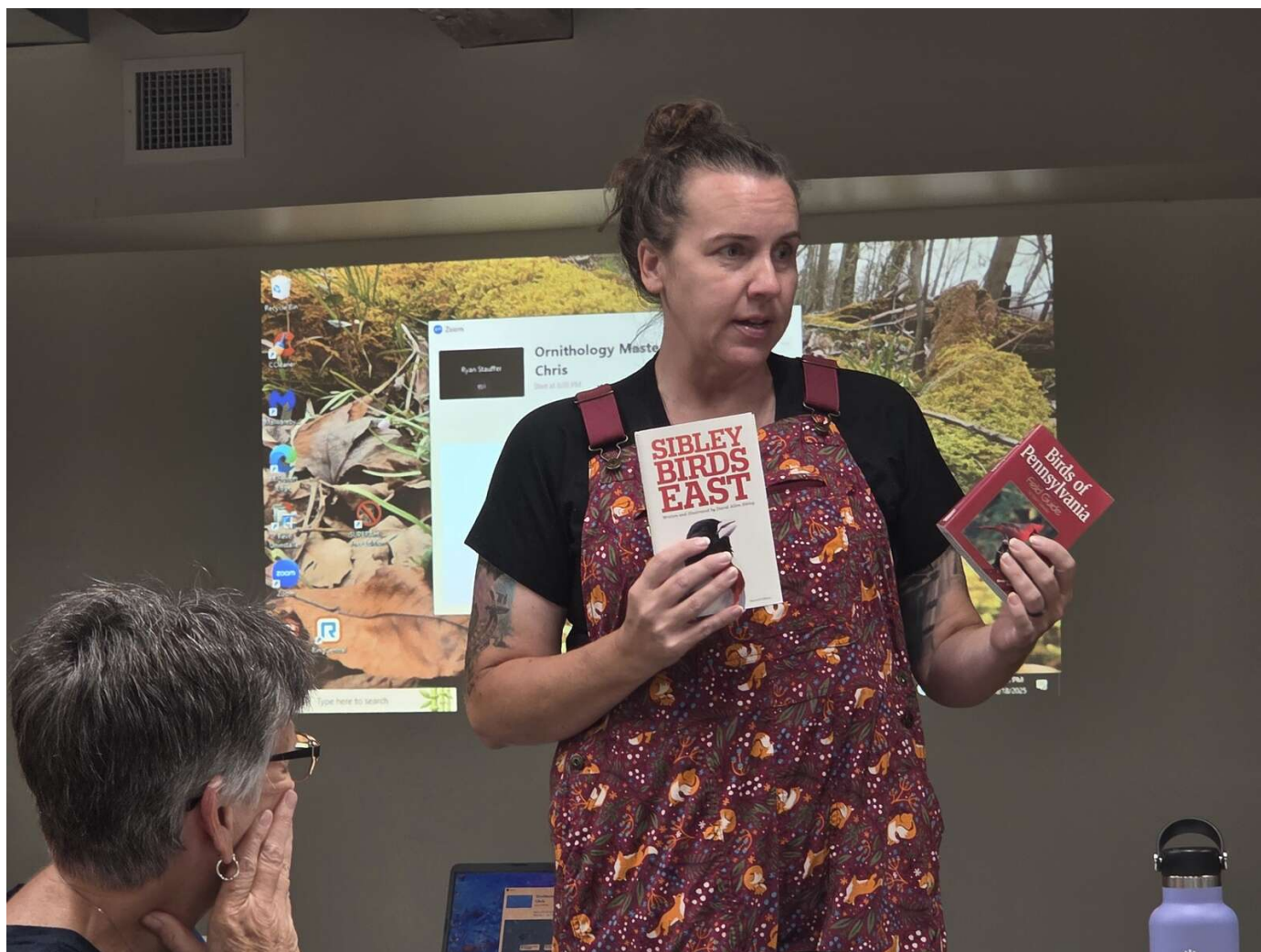


MAKING MASTER NATURALISTS

Master Naturalist course comes to Butler County

Eddie Trizzino Eagle Community Editor

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RaeLynn Harrison leads Butler County's first Pennsylvania Master Naturalist course, which uses books, presentations and interactive activities to teach about animals and plants. Eddie Trizzino/Butler Eagle

PENN TWP – Encompassing 50 acres filled with hundreds of animal and plants species, Succop Nature Park is already a haven for “nature nerds,” who enjoy exploring the woods to seek out the most unique-looking birds and trees Butler County has to offer.

A few self-described nature nerds are making the park even better for those people by bringing a Pennsylvania Master Naturalist course to Succop and other Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania parks in Butler County for the first time.

The course, similar to the Master Gardener course, not only gives people a base of knowledge for identifying animals and plants, it is meant to teach people about their characteristics.

On Thursday evening, Sept. 18, the group of Master Naturalist-hopefuls crouched on the ground outside the T.W. Phillips Barn, drawing with chalk pictures of birds that they invented with characteristics that could make them viable in the real world.



Students of Butler County’s first Pennsylvania Master Naturalist course draw a bird of their own design, which they would then have to describe through its features and their purposes, during a class session on Thursday evening, Sept. 18, at Succop Nature Park. Eddie Trizzino/Butler Eagle

RaeLynn Harrison, the coordinator of the Pennsylvania Master Naturalist course in Butler County, said the mental exercises help awaken knowledge the people learned as children, but they may have not realized they retained. The course further helps them identify characteristics seen in nature that ultimately make them better at picking out species.

“How many times as an adult do we get to work our brains like this?” Harrison said. “Of course, I know that this beak shape eats insects. Of course, I know webbed feet are for swimming. You don’t realize what you know and then you look at it.”

Becoming a Master Naturalist

Pennsylvania Master Naturalist is a statewide partnership initiative that aims to connect people with their local ecosystems through intensive natural science training and local conservation service work, according to its website. It is a venture directed toward developing a local corps of “master volunteers and service providers” to offer education, outreach and service dedicated to the understanding and management of natural areas within their communities.

Pennsylvania Master Naturalist works with a coalition of community and conservation organizations to ensure they have the necessary volunteer leadership to address the most pressing conservation needs and challenges, according to its website.



Rachel Spickerman, a student in Butler County’s first Master Naturalist course from Gibsonia, draws a bird that she would have to explain during a course session on Thursday evening, Sept. 18, at Succop Nature Park. Eddie Trizzino/Butler Eagle

Harrison took the Master Naturalist course last year, but had to travel to Armstrong County for each session because it was not yet offered in Butler County, where she lives and works. To earn the title, prospective Master Naturalists have to complete a service project related to the lessons taught in the course, so Harrison made it her mission to bring it to Butler County.

Luckily, she had some help with that. Harrison not only enlisted the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania to help lead courses, she is getting aid from one of her classmates in her own Master Naturalist course, Mariah Hall.

Hall, who also lives in Butler County, said she originally took the Master Naturalist course because she was always the “nerdy little kid who loved to play outside.” She wanted to get a better grasp of the why behind what she viewed in nature.

“You can find things in your own backyard, ecosystems that you don’t know exist,” Hall said.

Hall also said she was happy to help coordinate the class in Butler County with Harrison, whom she became friends with through the course. She said one of the best parts about the class – being a student and a coordinator of it – is meeting people with similar interests in outdoor activity and information.

“Everyone will come into this with something they love and they can focus on and notice things in the world around them,” Hall said. “It’s really fun to be helping with the class now and seeing people get to know each other, building a little sense of community and learning things.”

Harrison said that while many people just enjoy being in nature, the experience is improved in a group setting, especially when everyone is pointing out pieces of a scene.

“I love stomping through the woods with them,” Harrison said of her students. “You should see us on field trips. We literally take hours because, ‘there’s a flower,’ or ‘there’s a tree.’”

Learning in nature

The relationship-building aspect of the course was immediately evident on Thursday, Sept. 18. Participants brought food to share with one another, including a pot of chili and a “cheese duck,” which the class’ group chat is named after.

It was Week 6 of the course, and Harrison started it off by explaining the evening’s agenda – a bird-focused lesson – and recommending texts that help identify species of birds. The session was scheduled to culminate in a talk from Chris Kubiak, education director with the Audubon Society.

But like most of the class sessions scheduled for the inaugural Butler County Master Naturalist course, the highlight of the evening was an interactive assignment. Harrison had members of the class design a bird using different examples of beak, feathers and feet, which they would then draw and explain to the rest of the class.



Judy Brunner, a student in Butler County's first Master Naturalist course from Portersville, holds a butterfly she helped release on Thursday evening, Sept. 18, at Succop Nature Park. Eddie Trizzino/Butler Eagle

Judy Brunner, of Portersville, said she enjoyed the interactive activities presented in the course, which engaged her mentally and socially. She already raises caterpillars into butterflies, but said the course has already taught her more than she expected to learn.

"It's so much more than I thought it would be," Brunner said. "I thought it would be just birds and walks, but I have gotten so much out already."

Rachel Spickerman, of Gibsonia, also said she was enjoying the course so far, adding that she is happy it is being offered at a place close to her home.

"I'm learning so much," Spickerman said.

Harrison said she hopes to bring the class back next year after the success of the inaugural one. There are a few more than 10 people enrolled this year and she said it can teach up to 15 in one unit. Each course is 12 sessions long, plus some field trip days.

Harrison said she is happy to help adults find a renewed sense of wonder in nature.

“The word that keeps coming back to me is ‘joy,’” Harrison said. “I think sometimes finding community is hard. Each week ... it’s a group of people who are curious about the world and adults who want to learn more.”



The banner features the Butler Eagle logo on the left, which includes the letters 'WE' in a large, stylized font. To the right of the logo is a photograph of three men performing on stage. The background of the banner is dark red. On the right side, the text 'WEEKEND ENTERTAINMENT NEWSLETTER' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below this text is a white button with the words 'SIGN UP' in red, sans-serif capital letters. A white hand cursor icon is positioned over the button.



The advertisement has a dark blue background. At the top, the text 'CHERISH YOUR PHOTOS FOREVER' is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below this text is a horizontal dotted line. To the left of the text are several small images: a person on a boat, a person on a roller coaster, a sunset over water, and a group of people. To the right of these images, the text 'Mugs, puzzles, coasters and more.' is written in white, sans-serif font. Below this, the text 'Order reprints of your favorite photos and more from the Butler Eagle' is written in white, sans-serif font. At the bottom right, the website address 'photos.butlereagle.com' is written in white, sans-serif font.

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