

Bitten by the Outdoor Bug

Where my love of the outdoors began...

In addition to telling the District's story of its past 50 years, we wanted to highlight some of our staff in photos and a short paragraph on how they become a lover of the outdoors. Here's a fun way to get insight on how different people were influenced by nature or outdoor experiences at a young age. So throughout our 50th anniversary celebration we will share brief stories—a little remembering of how the great outdoors have made an impact on our lives and possible shaped us into who we are today.



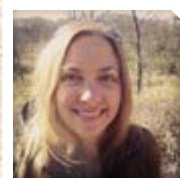
I grew up near Midway Airport and joined the boy scouts when I was 11. My first camping experiences were with the scouts. I was the oldest of 7 when I joined the scouts and enjoyed the opportunity to spend weekends away from my brothers and sisters. Scouting introduced me to the outdoors beyond the local park near my home and my love of the outdoors continued to grow over the next several years. I spent eight weeks one summer, following my freshman year of high school, at Boy Scout camp in Michigan as part of the staff. It was a great summer of being outdoors, surrounded by the Manistee National Forest, teaching a variety of outdoor skills to younger scouts. This included teaching non-swimmers how to swim, a skill that I had learned at the same camp three years before. Only once did I feel the pangs of home sickness. This occurred, not at camp, but when I returned home. This was the moment when I realized how much the outdoors had become a big part of my life. — **Bob Menard, Part-Time Volunteer Coordinator**

My love of the outdoors and wildlife began at a young age. When I was growing up we spent many summers at our cottage in Wisconsin. I spent my spare time catching frogs and crayfish and going fishing. We collected monarch caterpillars from the milkweed that lined the gravel road, put them in an aquarium with a lid and watched them turn into butterflies. At home, located in the suburbs of Chicago, I spent most of my time outside, crawling around in the grass looking for ants and other insects. When periodic cicadas emerged I had a glorious time catching them. I collected them and put them in a jar and quickly learned the consequences of the greenhouse effect, of course I didn't have a name for it at the time but I did stop putting them in jars! To this day, cicadas remain my favorite insect. My Grandmother, who lived with us, was a retired science teacher and she taught me a great deal about nature, both plants and animals. — **Cindi Jablonski, Wildlife Ecologist**



Left: Me holding out one of the frogs I caught at our summer cottage.
Right: Here is a photo of me with a fish.

When I was a young child, my family lived on the land that is now owned by the District, Pleasant Valley Conservation Area. Pleasant Valley is the place where nature became a part of who I am. Some of my earliest memories are of taking walks in the woods and fields, learning to love trees and flowers and animals. I always knew we were getting close to home when we passed the "elephant rock," a big glacial boulder that looked a little bit like the animal to a child's eyes. There is a grove of tall pine trees and the smell of pitch, the dappled patterns of sunlight in the branches, and the soft carpet of needles on the ground made it feel like a special, secret place. I was small enough in those days for the pines to feel as towering and majestic as the great redwoods. Our house and many of the paths we used to walk are long gone, but the elephant rock and the pines are still there. The land has grown wilder and more beautiful around them with each passing year of my adult life. — **Aimee Collins, Education Outreach Program Coordinator**



"A lot of my early childhood memories are those amongst the natural world. I was introduced to the outdoors by going on annual family summer vacations to Peninsula State Park located in Door County, Wisconsin. There wasn't a time I didn't want to go running towards the Nature Center upon arrival to receive an Explorer Booklet and get to work on the provided activities. The booklet was an entry way into nature that provided kids with simple tasks that would help them engage in the wild. From looking under rocks for insects, to drawing pictures of the wildlife you observed in your campsite, it was a memorable time and a time that shaped me to be the person I am today. It is now my turn to witness that same excitement within my little cousins and to help them complete their Explorer Booklets. It's rewarding to see the pure wonder in their eyes and their eagerness for learning new things. This provides me with hope that future generations will continue to preserve and respect our natural areas and appreciate the natural world that surrounds us." — **Bri Roeser, Habitat Technician**

As kids, I always remember my parents taking my sister and I out to do a variety of outdoor activities. Some of my favorite childhood memories involve the outdoors. It's funny, but I always remember the mishaps most of all and they still bring a smile to my face. I remember the car breaking down in the mountains and camping at this very primitive campground while the car was fixed. There was the time we tipped the canoe trying to get it in. Or the time we camped in Michigan and it rained so much my sister and I woke up in our tent floating on our air mattresses. Those are the stories we laugh about to this day. We had a lot of great times camping, canoeing, fishing, hiking and doing all kinds of outdoor activities. Its these memories and experiences that gave me my love of the outdoors and the desire to pursue a career in conservation. — **Stephanie Michael, IT Specialist**

Right: Camping with my sister; Hike with Mom, Laramie Wyoming July 1988 - 11 years old; Canoeing the Fox River Memorial Day Weekend 1988.



Ever since I was two, my parents took our whole family to live on a lake in northern Wisconsin all summer. Imagine fitting six people in a 20 x 24 foot cabin! Most days we spent water skiing, but there was plenty of bike riding, fort building, and frog catching to do, too. Every night after dinner we would choose between a fire or a cruise around the lake. Usually that meant falling asleep under the stars. I included two pictures — one of learning to ski at 8 years old, and the other in my prime! — **Jackie Bero, Natural Resources Volunteer Coordinator**

For our farm family, vacations were shoe-horned between the various harvests and live-stock tasks. Since weather dictated that timing, our vacation planning occurred when Dad said; "The cows are turned out, hay is up, oaks look good, how about we go to Watertown for a few days." Mom replied, "Well, cherries are canned, chicks are old enough, and raspberries are preserved. I'll check with the resort."

Resort carries a different connotation today than in 1975, at least the resort we could afford. Ours was a collection of postage stamped-size, four-room hamlets on a lake west of the Twin Cities with a fish-cleaning shack that needed paint. The goal was to remove bullheads from those Minnesota waters and usher them back to Iowa for supper. We could not believe there was no regulatory limit on these hand-sized catfish. We could catch them as fast as Dad could bait our hooks. We proudly walked back to the cabin with our buckets of fish, careful not to let other anglers know where we caught them. Ironically, they were considered rough fish; nobody but us wanted them. The locals were as happy to get rid of them, as we were to catch them! — **John Kremer, Director of Operations and Public Safety**



One of my earliest memories is of sitting in the yard of my childhood home, as still as a statue, holding seed in my outstretched palm. I was hoping a robin or chickadee, or even a squirrel, would land on me for a snack so I could admire it up close. Everything about my childhood was connected to nature: my father took me fishing most weekends, my mother enrolled me in preschool at a farm down the road where the curriculum was nature-based, and my grandfather took me on walks in the woods where he named each of the 100-year old oak trees. I now realize these were not experiences most children of my generation were gifted, and I know they shaped who I have become. While I don't sit in my yard holding handfuls of birdseed these days, I'm still as curious about the natural world as I was then. — **Caitlynn McWhorter, Social Media Specialist**



Left: Me with my brother (Joey) climbing a tree; Returning from a fishing trip with my dad, showing off our catfish; With my Papa (grandfather) in the woods where he named the oaks.



When I was young, school's out meant summers up north at the lake cottage in Minocqua! While the parents slept in after a late night of card playing, Grandma would sneak us out of the house for a walk in the woods. She delighted in having us all to herself and used the time to point out the enchantments of the forest, the whispering in the swaying trees, the fairy matchsticks, and the lore of the Indian pipes. Roadside flowers were not weeds but little beauties that we picked and twisted into flower crowns. We'd stand on stumps like they were a mini stage and recite a little diddy and walk to grandma's "sitting spot" which was the scraggly roots of a tree along the sloped roadside. And we were content just to sit in our quiet patch of woods, watch and listen, at least for a few moments before we'd head back for a day on the lake skiing, fishing, canoeing, and searching for leopard-frogs and painted turtles in the lily pads.

Pictured: Me far left with sisters and cousins at the creek (towel dresses and bathing suits underneath - daily wear at the lake!) — **Wendy Kummerer, Director of Marketing & Education**

