Nature Center Celebrates 30 Years

Sara Focht, Wildlife Educator, MKNC

On July 2nd 1990, the MK Nature Center opened its doors for the first time! For the last 30 years, the nature center has been a wildlife viewing location adored by Treasure Valley residents and visitors, alike.

Animals come and go, as do employees, interns, and budgets. What remains constant here is the calm stream that meanders from the iconic waterfall to the sturgeon pond.

The Nature Center is a place in the midst of an urban environment where you can see wildlife living their lives in a natural setting. Great blue heron, trout, sturgeon, mink, and songbirds are common!

Reflecting back on the last 30 years, we all appreciate the visionaries, founders, and designers who created the MK Nature Center out of a flat weedy field. As the stewards of the Nature Center grounds, building, and programming today, we ponder the future 30 years from now. In the meantime, we will continue to do our best to make your visit to the MK Nature Center meaningful and rewarding. Idaho Fish and Game staff, the Friends of MK Nature Center, volunteers, and visitors all contribute to making this place special.

Enjoy our “30 Things to Do and Discover at the MK Nature Center” for our 30th Anniversary!
Nature Notes

Vicky Runnoe, Conservation Education Supervisor, IDFG

Summer has arrived at the nature center in the form of new flowers, ducklings, cottonwood fluff, baby garter snakes, and fawns. Missing in this most unusual of years are the flocks of students being shepherded around the nature center grounds by staff and volunteers. As the shadow of COVID 19 moved over our community, the normal routine of school visits came to a resounding halt and an unusual quiet settled over the nature center grounds.

This does not mean, however, that our visitors abandoned us. In fact, the very opposite occurred. Instead of visiting as large groups, you came in couples, small family groups, or with just a friend or two. And while it did not seem like it, you came in larger numbers than in the past. Comparing our trail counter data for January – May, almost 22,000 more visitors enjoyed the nature center than during the same timeframe last year when we had school groups visiting!

Nature centers around the country have seen similar increases in visitation as people head outside for exercise, fresh air, and to have some sense of a normal life during pandemic strangeness. In reconnecting with nature, people are discovering or reuniting with what the writer Gretel Ehrlich calls “The Solace of Open Spaces.” In natural settings large and small all around the world, people are finding peace, renewal and calm by stepping outdoors. They are finding that time outside helps ease the worry and stress our collective situation has created. We are so glad that you have found solace and pleasure in the nature center’s own small open space.

YOU GAVE! Thank you!

Sara Focht, Wildlife Educator, IDFG

Idaho Gives this last May was a huge success for our partners, Friends of MK Nature Center (FOMKNC)! With a goal of $15,000 for the new Nature Center Kiosk, you showed up and the goal was exceeded. Over $23,000 was raised for the much needed educational and storage structure that will replace the old kiosk on the west side of the Nature Center grounds.

For those of you who donated during Idaho Gives, or financially support the Friends Group with a membership, 100% of your donations go to on-the-ground projects. The FOMKNC just finished installation of their last project...a crawl-through log and jumping/stepping stumps for kids!

On behalf of the Idaho Fish and Game, Nature Center staff, Friends of MK Nature Center Board, and all the visitors who enjoy the nature center, thank you, for your contribution!

Left: A rare moment when the new crawl-through log and stepping stumps don’t have someone climbing on them. This fun interactive area is located near the middle of the Nature Center grounds.

Right: The colorful interpretive sign that accompanies the new play area. Photos by Austin Reich.

A special Thank you to Howard Sheppa and Kevin Wilson, MKNC volunteers who installed the log and stepping stumps!
July 7

Visitor Center Re-opens After COVID-19 Closure

Sara Focht, Wildlife Educator, IDFG

On March 16, 2020, MKNC’s Visitor Center was closed for COVID-19 precautions. On July 7th, we will re-open with a few new “standard operating procedures.” The building will be open from 10 am-3 pm Tuesdays-Sundays for the summer (or until something changes). When visiting, please keep in mind the following:

1. One way traffic only through the visitor center. Enter through the front door and exit through the double doors by the observation hive.
2. Keep 6 feet between you and other visitors.
3. Use hand sanitizing stations at the front door and around the building.
4. Wash hands after using the restroom.
5. Wear a mask when inside if you can.
6. Stuffed animals and cabin toys are not out for play in the log cabin area.

What is 6 Feet?
- 16 hummingbirds
- 6 rainbow Trout
- 3 Great Blue Heron
- 2 Mule Deer Fawns
- 1 Nature Center White Sturgeon

Sturgeon image by Joseph Tomelleri
Swarms

Vicky Runnoe, Conservation Education Supervisor, IDFG

On the afternoon of May 4, Sara came rushing in to say “You have to see this!!” “This” was a cloud of bees buzzing loudly over the bird-viewing area. In a matter of minutes, the cloud of bees coalesced into a large cluster gathered on a nearby branch. The loud buzzing quieted into a gentle hum. A quick call to Master Naturalist and beekeeper Roger Wallace confirmed what we suspected---our bees had swarmed!

Swarming is the fascinating process by which a honeybee colony reproduces itself. Crowding in the hive is usually what prompts swarming. In the days prior to swarming, the bees gorge themselves on honey and stop feeding the queen. This helps the queen lose weight and stop egg production so she is better able to fly. Workers gorging themselves increase their weight by 50%! This will provide a food reserve for the colony. A few hours before swarming, scout bees begin to scramble over the other bees in the hive, making piping sounds. This signals other workers to begin warming up their flight muscles in preparation for departing the hive as part of a swarm. The final signal is called a buzz run where scout bees run excitedly around the hive buzzing their wings.

When the bees decide it’s time, the swarm exits the hive en masse, creating the cloud of bees that we saw. Once they cluster, the scout bees shift duties to searching for a new location for a hive. They will travel as far as several miles, returning to communicate their real estate finds by waggle dancing on the swarm cluster. Scouts visit various locations and over a period of hours or days, come to an agreement on which location will be their new home. Once again, the scouts rouse the cluster of bees through piping and buzz runs to signal the swarm to warm their flight muscles. Within an hour, the swarm takes flight, guided by the scout bees, heading directly to their new home site. It’s a fascinating process!

Meanwhile back in our observation hive, the remaining bees continued with business as usual. Several queen cells were found and we watched to see when the new queen emerged. She did and on May 17 we had what is called an afterswarm with the new queen leaving and taking part of the rest of the hive with her. Afterswarms are usually smaller than initial swarms and this was certainly the case with our bees.

It’s been an odd season for the observation hive, but we have a new colony of bees that will soon be installed. These tiny creatures are full of surprises and provide endless learning opportunities for visitors and staff alike.
Images of SUMMER

As temperatures rise and more reptiles and amphibians come out, I have been getting more people asking me about the turtles they see walking along the Greenbelt. The story of turtles here in southern Idaho is an interesting thing and it actually brings awareness to multiple conservation stories.

There are around 350 species of turtles and tortoises in the world found on every continent except Antarctica. However here in Idaho there is only one turtle that historically called Idaho home, the Painted Turtle or *Chrysemys picta*. There has been much debate on the actual specifics of the turtle, but it is the current understanding that the painted turtle has 4 subspecies, with the Western Painted turtle being the subspecies living in Idaho. Historically Painted turtles were not found in the Treasure Valley, meaning every turtle you see locally is here as a result of being introduced.

One of the main ways that turtles have been introduced to areas like the Treasure Valley is through the pet trade. Since the painted turtle is the most widespread species of turtle, they can be relatively easy to procure, as well as easy to breed in turtle farms. At a glance, pet turtles might seem like a good idea since they eat things that are common in most refrigerators. They don’t need a massive enclosure to be happy, and they don’t get very large. However, they can live for more than 30 years in the wild. A turtle bought as a pet for a child gets taken care of for only so long. The child becomes bored or care becomes too laborious. Thinking they are doing a good deed, they release the beloved turtle into the local canal system, or park pond in Boise.

Plants and animals introduced in to an area where they did not evolve can cause problems for native animals, plants, and ecosystems. It is best to keep animals in their native range and not introduce them when possible.

You may have seen a turtle in a pond enclosure in the visitor center courtyard at MKNC. The turtles who live at MKNC are kept out of the nature center habitat, ponds, and stream, but are available in the courtyard for you to view. Each with their own personalities, “Splashy” and “Yertle” come outside every other day. They are not allowed to co-mingle because they are unfriendly to each other! These non-natives are a hit with the visitors, but we prefer to keep the habitat open for the native animals. Next time you are walking on the Greenbelt in Boise and you see turtles (common in Kathryn Albertson Park, Boise Cascade Lake and other calm water river diversions) know that they are making themselves at home...far from home.

*Chrysemys picta* native range map provided by IDFG.
Summer Interns

Amanda Richael
I go to Compass Honors High School. I’ve lived in Idaho my whole life and the MK Nature Center has always been among my favorite places in Idaho. I have a passion for the outdoors and my community, so volunteering at the nature center seemed a great option for being able to work outside close to home and help my community. I love the outdoors and spend most of my free time hiking, backpacking, fishing, and doing basically any activities outside in nature. I also love to ski in the winter and I play basketball for my school.

Liam Murray
Why do I want to volunteer at the MK Nature Center? I am volunteering at the MK Nature Center because I am very interested in biology and conservation. The MK Nature Center educates the community about Idaho's ecosystems and natural resources. I can't think of a better place to volunteer. I attend Boise High School. When not volunteering, I enjoy backpacking, running (track and cross country), biology and chemistry.

Amanda and Liam are MK Nature Center’s summer interns for 2020. They will be responsible for much of the path maintenance, fish viewing window cleaning and captive animal care this summer, as well as answering questions from visitors. This job is important and vital to the daily operations at MKNC. We look forward to having them, getting to know them and working with them. Photos by Sue Dudley.

Lobby Wall Comes to Life

The Nature Center lobby was transformed into Idaho Fish and Game’s license desk over the winter. On the Nature Center’s side, we were left looking at a big blank wall. The wall now features colorful photos of plants and animals found at MK Nature Center over the years. What a project! It was difficult to choose which photos to use, as we have so many good shots from our 4.6 acres. We hope you enjoy these colorful representations of what you might see outside.
When you have amazing volunteers you can get a lot accomplished in 3 days. The butterfly garden had been neglected and was in need of a thorough weeding. These volunteers powered through lots of grasses, oregano, bell flower and elm trees, to make our garden look great.

Thank you for all your hard work!

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<th>Volunteers</th>
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<td>Emilia Arrington</td>
<td>Alan Crockett</td>
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<td>Kim Chmura</td>
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<td>Ray Corbin</td>
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<td>Cyndi Coulter</td>
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<td>Peggy Faith</td>
<td>William Horton</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Grosse</td>
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<td>Kristin Haustveit</td>
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Left to right: Volunteer Lyla Olson mows the lawn in the formal backyard. Elizabeth Grosse and Carolyn King weed the butterfly garden. Howard Sheppa prepares the ground for the installation of the stepping stumps.