Afton Naturalist

The Natural Resources and Groundwater Committee (NRGC) is pleased to present the Afton Naturalist, an insert to the City of Afton Newsletter. The Naturalist will be published 3-4 times per year to provide information on the organizations Afton works with to improve our natural resources; to provide updates on key initiatives in Afton and nearby communities; and to share examples and case studies of installations and activities supporting our natural resources.

In this issue, please find an interview with The Washington Conservation District and The Prairie Enthusiasts. If you have any suggestions or have follow-up questions for the NRGC to ask the organizations, please call 651-436-5090 or e-mail Julie at City Hall (jyoho@ci.afton.mn.us) and we will quickly follow-up on those – your feedback is greatly appreciated.

The NRGC Met with Jay Riggs, District Manager and head of the Washington Conservation District (WCD) to discuss the organization, its history and to ways Afton residents can work with the WCD.

NRGC: "Jay, thanks for meeting with us, can you provide some background, history and the mission of the WCD?"
Riggs: "Our mission is to: '*enhance, protect, and preserve the natural resources of Washington County through conservation projects, technical guidance, and educational services to citizens and local government.*'"

"The WCD was created in 1942 to support what is now called the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve soil & water conservation and support farmers and land management. In the beginning, the group focused mostly on agricultural erosion but our role has evolved. While agriculture still plays a large part in the district (the District is approximately 25% agriculture) our roles under State statute are to: 1) control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and related pollution in order to preserve natural resources; 2) ensure continued soil productivity; 3) protect water quality; 4) prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs; 5) reduce damages caused by floods; 6) preserve wildlife; 7) protect the tax base; and 8) protect public lands and waters.

"In order to meet these goals, we have 21 staff who conduct over 38,000 hours of conservation work per year making us one of the largest and most active conservation districts in the state. This level of effort is because of our great collaborations with other local units of government, especially the 8 watershed management organizations in Washington County. We have an extensive water monitoring program as we test water quality in 50-60 lakes and 40-50 continuous streams such as Valley Branch and Brown's Creek, which are trout streams. In addition to water monitoring and wetlands management (50% of my personal responsibilities is as a Wetlands Specialist), we have an extensive education program that is a collaboration of over 30 local units of government geared to residents, local elected officials, public works staff and other audiences to help achieve our water quality goals.

"Another area of focus is on soil health and ground water protection – did you know that areas infested with buckthorn do not have healthy soils? As you may know, buckthorn is an allelopathic and one can see how the soils are degrading and even disappearing in the forests and bluff land areas. Buckthorn releases chemicals into the soil that significantly reduce germination, growth and even survival of other plant species. The WCD is investigating new technologies like bio-char – which is wood burned and then doused with water to make char. The bio-char can restore and regenerate the soils from the damage caused by buckthorn. While the funding for buckthorn removal is limited, we may be able to help residents located on a bluff or slope leading into a key waterway. Removing buckthorn is very important and we continue to work to remove it from Washington County and could use everyone's support! A big part of WCD is providing technical assistance for land owners to improve practices and connect them with the available funding."

NRGC: "So, what does this mean for Afton residents?"
Riggs: "We conducted 38 site visits and 15 unique projects in Afton in 2024! These ranged from native landscaping and prairie restoration/habitat improvement projects to edible forests, raingardens and woodland restorations. Our focus is on helping every resident in the county learn more about opportunities on their land.

"In fact, we are pleased about a new project that the Afton City Council applied for in March for habitat improvement and native plant restoration in-front of City Hall. All the invasive plants will be removed and the habitat improved between City Hall and St.

Croix Trail. This will be a great showcase of work by the WCD and the Valley Branch Water District that will improve Afton's native species diversity."

NRGC: "So, what do you recommend Afton residents do?"
Riggs: "We encourage every resident to sign up for a free site visit to understand the condition of their land and opportunities for improvement. Some visits may lead to a grant-funded work while others may simply identify options for landowners to improve the long-term health of their land."

One can sign-up for a site visit at https://www.mnwcd.org/site-visit-signup-form or call 651-330-8220

The NRGC met with Heidi Kassenberg an Afton resident and volunteer with the Prairie Enthusiasts to learn more about the organization, its history and ways Afton residents can get involved.

The Prairie Enthusiasts

NRGC: "Can you help us understand the Prairie Enthusiasts and what they do?"
Kassenborg: "The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE) is made up of 12 regional chapters across the upper Midwest. I am part of the St Croix Valley Chapter which has 106 members. The organization's mission is to preserve and restore native ecosystems—especially prairies, oak savannas, and related habitats—through protection, management, restoration, and education. While TPE manages several prairies and conservation easements, an equally important part of their work is educating landowners on how to restore and care for their own land. One local site managed by our Chapter is Blueberry Hill, a remnant prairie located just south of Bayport (east side of Highway 95). This site, along with other TPE-managed prairies, is open to the public."

NRGC: "How did you get involved and what have you been working on?"
Kassenborg: "I got involved as we wanted to decrease lawn mowing at our house and in 2018, we started our 1.25-acre prairie project. Since joining, I have learned so much about soils, wildflowers, grasses, insects, etc. I have helped collect seeds, participated in controlled burns, was trained how to conduct a controlled burn, removed buckthorn in the winter, and have attended group/speaker events. I learn something new at every event."

NRGC: "Help us understand a 'controlled burn' and some of the resources you found valuable?"
Kassenborg: "I attended a number of burns and was trained at the "burn school" to learn about the responsibilities of and how to conduct a controlled burn. We have burned our own prairie at least three times, and the training has been absolutely invaluable. (see the photo of our burn). We also received essential support from the Washington Conservation District and the Valley Branch Watershed District - I highly recommend reaching out to them."

NRGC: "How can Afton residents get involved?"
Kassenborg: "I encourage everyone to visit the Prairie Enthusiasts website (theprairieenthusiasts.org) but also attend a prairie tour or a butterfly walk. Donations are always appreciated but what we really need is greater community involvement. Helping restore and care for native landscapes isn't just about beautiful plants—it's about revitalizing soil health, conserving water, and supporting biodiversity."