

Volunteers persevere despite pandemic

By Ilana Federman, Outreach Manager

Volunteer workdays came to a grinding halt for much of the winter in 2020. For months, hundreds of people across Cook County waited patiently—yet eagerly—to resume their labor of love, caring for the forest preserves. Thankfully, the forest preserves remained open throughout the pandemic, providing a safe place for people to get outside, release stress and exercise and for children to play and explore. But while the forest preserves were sustaining us through a crisis, volunteers observed their sites becoming even more overgrown with invasive brush, littered with more trash, and damaged by activities like fort building and poaching. As they waited for the return of group workdays, individuals showed remarkable dedication and took it upon themselves to perform solo activities as allowed by the Forest Preserves of Cook County, such as trash pickup, pulling garlic mustard, and trail monitoring.

Slowly—and safely—volunteer groups were permitted to return in late spring. But there were restrictions on group sizes that made certain activities, like native seed collection, more difficult. Gathering, sorting, and spreading native seeds is critical follow-up work after removing native spe-



Volunteers exceeded their expectations and smashed their previous record of both seed variety and volume - collecting 698 lbs from 318 different native species!

cies, requiring hundreds of volunteers working throughout their regions. Knowing that large group gatherings were not possible, volunteer groups were preparing for a less-than-stellar year of seed collecting.

The Spring Creek Stewards' perspective was no exception. They participate in the Barrington Greenway Initiative, which was founded in 2017 by Citizens for Conservation as a partnership among volunteers, three county

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While it can still be seen

by Jeff Skrentny

I never did find the red-bellied snake I was looking for when I turned up an acorn with something white growing on it. The shell of this decaying acorn looked like it was hosting a small forest of the tiniest darn mushrooms I had ever seen. This was, in fact, exactly what they were. I had discovered the very first stalked hairy fairy cups I had ever observed. To date, they are indeed the tiniest mushrooms I have ever seen. It was quite simply one of the most fantas-

tic finds I made exploring for wildlife in Cook County in 2020. These tiny fungi were mesmerizing.

So went many of the days of exploration I made in Cook County in 2020, as I set out to do a “Big Year” to see as many species of living things as I could in the county from January 1st to December 31st, 2020.

Exactly what is a “Big Year?”

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Hannah and Nick of the Barrington Greenway Initiative Conservation Corps Crew joined volunteers in hand-processing seeds. In all, 698 lbs of seeds were processed.

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forest preserve districts and non-profit organizations active in the greater Barrington area (including Friends of the Forest Preserves). An important part of this landscape-scale partnership is sharing and distributing hand-harvested, native seeds among nearby preserves and volunteer groups. By combining resources, volunteers have been able to collect and spread more seed than they could individually, resulting in healthier, more diverse natural areas. Many worried this would not be accomplished in 2020.



Kevin Scheiwiller, Restoration Manager at Citizens for Conservation, is the mastermind behind the seed mixes. Under Kevin's watchful eye, each of the 318 plant species found its way into the right mix.

However, Friends and partners adapted to the new circumstances with creative solutions. In 2019, volunteers and partners working with the Spring Creek Stewards put in tremendous effort, including monthly workdays. In total, volunteers identified, monitored, harvested, and cleaned an impressive 519 pounds of seed from 309 native plant species. For 2020, seed collection leader training went into overdrive, and the newly trained volunteers committed to leading small, socially distant group workdays for seed collecting five times a week, in addition to spending hours collecting seeds individually. This effort paid off in gold: volunteers exceeded their expectations and smashed their previous record of both seed variety and volume, collecting 698 pounds from 318 different native species.

“This year Spring Creek volunteers persevered through many different challenges brought by the pandemic, working creatively and flexibly to improve local habitat for all.” said Peter Whitney, Spring Creek Field Organizer.



Barrels of native prairie seed, all mixed up and ready to be sown! Seeds were processed by individual species and then combined into habitat-specific mixes.

One of the wonderful consequences of volunteering is building a connection to a site. Volunteers embody the mutually dependant relationship we have with our forest preserves, the exchange of caring. Through dedication and innovation, the Friends community continued to care for the forest preserves throughout the pandemic, with unbelievable results. Volunteers, like the natural ecosystems they work to protect, are resilient and often defy expectations.

At the time of this writing, volunteer opportunities have resumed. Workdays are open to the public with some restrictions. If you're interested in volunteering to help care for our forest preserves, please contact Ilana Federman, Outreach Manager, at ilana@fotfp.org.

Member interview with David and Becky Perry

David and Becky Perry have been Friends members since 2013, when their son Michael began his first of two summers in our Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps program. The Perrys share their thoughts on what the preserves mean to them and why they volunteer in them.

David:

I've lived in Beverly (a neighborhood on Chicago's southside) for 36 years, and have always loved the Dan Ryan Woods. It's a great place to walk, and I do walk there several times a week when it's not muddy or icy. I love the wildlife, including the hawks soaring above.

My favorite memories are when I've seen coyotes there. The first time I saw one, it ran by with a squirrel in its mouth, breakfast, I'll bet. Another time, one was chasing a rabbit into a bush.

Once, a CTA bus driver at 87th Street and Western

in the middle of nowhere, even though the very busy 87th Street is only a quarter mile away.

The best part of being part of the Friends community is working alongside other people who are there because they also love the forest. I've made friends with many of the other volunteers, and always have interesting conversations with one or two others while chopping down buckthorn and other brush. Unfortunately, for all that we clear, there's always more to do. Anyone who uses the forest preserves should come out and help—we could use an army!

Becky:

My first experience visiting the forest preserves in Cook County happened after I moved from Lincoln Park to the Beverly neighborhood. I moved to Chicago for a job and did not discover this treasure until I moved next door to it.

My favorite memory is probably providing the

“The forest preserves need to be seen as a refuge for everyone to share and we need to make sure that funding isn't cut. The trash pickup is important along with the eradication of invasive species.” Becky Perry, member since 2013.

food for my son Michael's Eagle Scout project in the Dan Ryan Woods. We had over 20 scouts and it was fun to see them all working on a project to improve the preserve.

I love seeing the photos from the annual photo contest. It reminds me of all the forest preserves have to offer our community.

The forest preserves need to be seen as a refuge for everyone to share and we need to make sure that funding isn't cut. The trash pickup is important along with the eradication of invasive species.

Thank you both for all that you do for the preserves, and to Michael for his work in the Corps and as an Eagle Scout. We look forward to seeing you in the woods again soon.



Avenue said to me, “Did you see the two coyotes?” which I hadn't. But when I turned around there they were in the meadow.

After a big rainstorm, when the Civilian Conservation Corps channel running along the limestone path is full and I can hear the water, it is also wonderful. It seems like I'm

Bruised but resolute, 2020 taught us some things

The year that ‘wasn’t’ sure did leave its mark. Events were canceled, in-person meetings were prohibited, volunteers and conservation corps crew activities were restricted, and Friends funding took a hit. And yet, we all learned some critical lessons.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion were front and center on the global stage last year, and the Friends community intensified our long-term commitment to this essential work. We bring people together, all across the county, through programs that are intentionally designed to diversify the voices (and hands) doing the hard work of caring for the forest preserves. We have much to learn about the part we

region, and even the world.

With more than 1,100 participants attending our ‘Hidden Life of the Preserves’ webinars, we connected more people, from farther away, than we could have ever done in person. We came together to explore hidden gems across each of the major regions in the preserves –like mushrooms seeds as well as new places and ways to enjoy them - like forest bathing and insect-watching. All of the programming is available on our YouTube channel, and the views just keep stacking up.

It is hard to beat in-person interaction. And yet, being able to connect more people with local nature and each



“Golden” at Camp Bullfrog Lake, Williow Springs, by Jeanne Grunhard

can play in dismantling systems of inequality plaguing the environmental field. This work remains at the core of our programs and advocacy efforts.

If not for the pandemic, we would not have learned and

If not for the pandemic, we would not have learned and grown in unexpected ways.

grown in unexpected ways. Engagement events, like nature walks, have always been in person and in the woods, of course. COVID-19 forced us to figure out how to bring our community together virtually, and we learned that our community is spread out throughout the county, the

other, albeit virtually, has significant benefits.

We did figure out how to drink beer and celebrate the preserves together for Beer in the Woods, Backyard Edition, last September. Participants gathered with their pods, safely distanced, to raise a glass to our community. We’re happy to say that all things point toward Beer in the Woods being back at LaBagh Woods this year, on September 25. We hope you can join us for this much-needed opportunity to gather together again.

Our adult Conservation Corps crews shifted inside last spring until we all learned more about gathering safely. And then they were back at it, outside, with a vengeance. They had a lot to catch up on because the weeds don’t wait. But hard work and determination –and the collective efforts

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of Forest Preserve staff, volunteers, and partners - helped everyone catch up on 2020 goals. Thank you all.

Due to safety concerns involving transportation and port-o-let availability, the Forest Preserve Experience program for high-school-aged participants moved online. While this was not ideal, it pushed us to create extensive virtual programming and service opportunities for the 100 teen participants. All reports indicate that it went extremely well, expanding our toolbox of resources to connect people with nature.

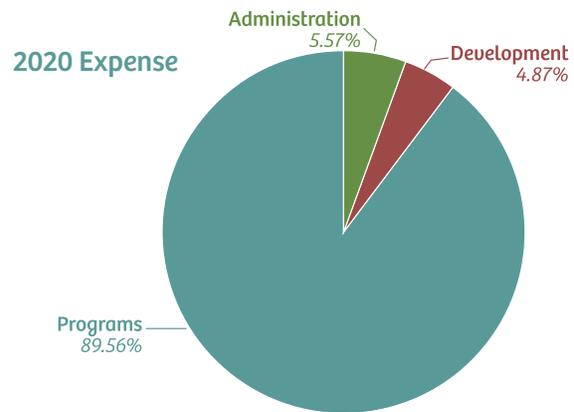
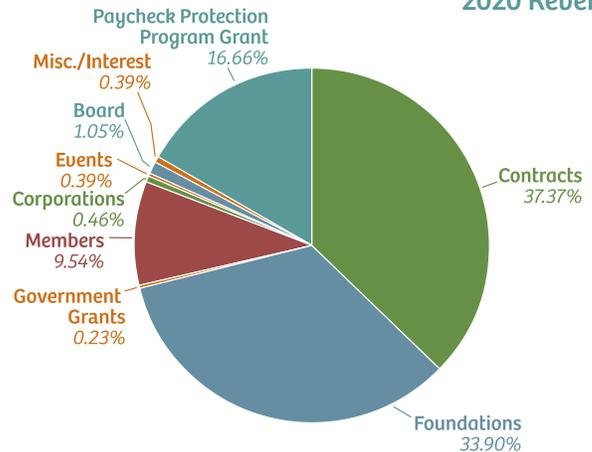
The biggest winners of 2020, though, were the preserves themselves. Previous years' usage of the preserves is estimated around 60 million visits per year; in 2020, however, estimates are well over 100 million. People were mostly unable to travel, and many discovered the wonderful and impressive nature that is right here. Cook County's 70,000 acres brought respite, comfort, and cherished memories in a time of stress and loss. This was one of the cornerstones for the founding of the preserves, and this purpose remains essential today. We are grateful for this system that is larger than a quarter of our national parks and more than twice the size of any other forest preserve or conservation district in the state.

Think about that. This is the second largest county in the country by population, and yet we have all of these prairies, woods, wetlands, rivers, lakes, and so much more to enjoy. Native species abound and can be accessed from more than 300 miles of paved trails, 297 picnic groves, 40 fishing lakes, six nature centers, and five campgrounds. And you are never more than 20 minutes' drive from a preserve. Thanks go out once again to the founding women and men that fought to establish this system more than 100 years ago.

Friends' overall funding was down significantly, not that money is the goal. But it is a key tool for getting things done. Unemployment, a battered economy, and tax code changes made nonprofits nervous across the country. And yet, we saw consistent and increased giving from individual members, the absolute foundation of our strong community. There is strength in numbers, especially when it comes to advocacy, and we are an advocacy group at our core.

There's no doubt 2020 was a devastating year for so many in our community. And yet, we made important discoveries about who we are and our capabilities as an organization and a community. We expect to continue exercising those core muscles in 2021 and most likely in 2022. Thank you all for your hard work, contributions, and love of these precious natural areas that provide a place of peace, healing, and joy in our own backyards.

2020 Revenue



Income	2019	2020
Contracts	1,754,593	1,009,190
Foundations	855,174	915,388
Government grants	167,729	6,228
Members	366,011	257,482
Corporations	173,388	12,552
Events	40,549	10,460
Board	17,410	28,371
Misc./Interest	34,617	10,646
Paycheck Protection Program		450,000
Total	\$3,409,471	\$2,700,317
Expense	2019	2020
Programs	2,975,795	2,672,340
Administration	160,215	166,241
Development	108,338	145,420
Total	\$3,244,348	2,894,001
Assets	2019	2020
Net Assets at beginning year	1,022,085	1,187,208
Net Assets at end year	1,187,208	903,518
Change in Net Assets	\$165,123	(283,690)

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The term was first used by birders. Not bird watchers, mind you, because they don't just watch birds, they actively look for, seek, and search for the birds they want to observe. Sometime after Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher published *Wild America*, the "sport" of "Big Years," (seeing how many birds could be seen in a calendar year), became a thing. Because of Peterson's footnote mentioning he had seen 572 species of birds in 1953 while exploring America. Now birders engage in competitive "Big Years" worldwide, or much friendlier versions of this in just a county, state, or in a favorite birding patch. Botanists took up the "Big Year" game here in Illinois, and elsewhere, and now there are annual "Botany Big Years" to see which enthusiast can find, and have peers confirm the identifications of, the most plant species seen in a state in a calendar year.

Last year, I decided to blow the whole paradigm up. Instead of restricting myself to one taxon like birds, plants, or insects, I would count all the wildlife, and see how much I could see in our highly urbanized county, Cook County, here in Northeast Illinois.

It was an eye-opening and thrilling year-long experience.

For no reason I can explain, I decided I was going to set a target to see 2,500 species in Cook County in 2020.

I would use the [iNaturalist.com](https://www.inaturalist.com) (iNat) platform and app to post my observations, and have iNat users confirm the species I saw. To identify one's observation, one needs to provide evidence of the organism that can be shared in the iNat platform. In birding "Big Years," there is an unspoken code of honor that if you say you saw or heard it, then you can count the bird species on your year list. Yeah, you can see how that can, and does, quickly go sideways. What I like about iNat is that you need a photo or audio evidence that someone else can use to examine and then confirm, or disclaim, your observation.

In retrospect, I should have planned more. My only real plan to see 2,500 species in Cook County was that I would need to see about 250 bird species, 1,000 "insect" species, 1,000 plant species, and that would leave me to find 250 additional species in the mammal, mollusk, amphibian, mushroom, reptile, protozoan, and/or fish taxa.

Surely, that would be possible. Wouldn't it?

Then I looked to see what everyone in Cook County had seen in 2019. All iNat observers only saw 2,549 species throughout all of Cook County in 2019. In 2018 they only recorded 2,328 species. I may have set a goal that might be a bit more difficult to accomplish than I guessed. Still, I had confidence knowing that the plant "book" for Cook



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County suggested nearly 2,000 plants as possible here, and certainly there were 1,000 or more insects in the county, if I could find them. I knew I had seen more than 250 birds in the county in a year, several times in the past.

Knowing a species is in the county, and seeing it in the county, are two wildly different things. You can't count it unless you can document it. I spent somewhere between 1,300 and 1,500 hours exploring Cook County, from the far south east to the far north west, and dozens of points in-between. Additionally, I spent countless hundreds of hours doing research, editing photos and posting observations and curating them on the iNaturalist platform.

In the end it was a shockingly successful year.

It probably wasn't successful in the way most thought it would be. In the end, for me, it wasn't about the number of species I recorded at all. It was about the pure joy of finding species such as a Common five-lined skink, a long-tailed giant ichneumonid wasp, a small green wood orchid, a mottled sculpin, a butterfly orbweaver, a Blanchard's cricket frog, a Wabash pigtoe, a painted bunting, an American red squirrel, that stalked hairy fairy cup, and so much more than I can list here. Those were the individual successes that made the whole year one of the most treasured experiences of my life.

In the end, the real discovery was how much wildlife still does call Cook County home. The real success was documenting just how much wildlife still survives here in Cook County. Really diverse wildlife. Far more diverse wildlife than most of the 5,150,233 residents of the county (as of 2019) and I were aware. The real success was learning that a guy without any science education or background could get out and explore this highly urbanized county and see wildlife diverse as one could see almost anywhere else in the United States. One just has to get out and look for it while it can still be seen.

If more of us did, maybe, just maybe, more of us would be motivated to do what it takes to make sure it will all continue to survive. Because as The Lorax tells us "UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."



Photos from top to bottom, left to right: Common five-lined skink (*Plestiodon fasciatus*), August 15, 2020, private residence in South Chicago. This area is one of only three areas where this reptile can be found in Illinois. • Blanchard's cricket frog (*Acris blanchardi*), far southwest Forest Preserves of Cook County, October 6, 2020. This was the first iNaturalist record of this species in Cook County in decades. • American red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*), Sand Ridge Nature Center, December 11, 2020. This is the first American red squirrel observed in Cook County in decades. • Small green wood orchid (*Platanthera clavellata*), Forest Preserves of Cook County, summer 2020. This critically endangered orchid, was only discovered by Jeff and his friends in Cook County in 2019, and likely represents the only population of this species in the county. • Painted bunting (*Passerina ciris*), private residence in Chicago's Westridge neighborhood, May 2, 2020. • Stalked hairy fairy cup (*Lachnum virgineum*), Busse Forest Nature Preserve, October 14, 2020. All photos and commentary by Jeff Skrentny.



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YOUR FAVORITE FESTIVAL IS BACK!

The 5th Annual Beer in the Woods is Saturday, September 25, at LaBagh Woods in Chicago, with a weeklong virtual festival September 20 - 24 leading up to the main event. Learn more and purchase tickets at bit.ly/BITW21.

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