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Virginia begins Master Naturalist program emphasizing volunteer training

Blacksburg, Va., April 24, 2006 -- A new partnership in the state, the Master Naturalist Program, is a grass-roots effort to train a cadre of volunteers who will work in their local communities to improve the environment.

Virginia is basing the program on a model that is proving highly successful in other states and that is similar to the Master Gardener Program.

Partners include Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Virginia Department of Forestry, and the Virginia Museum of Natural History. They recently named Michelle Prysby as coordinator of the newly formed Virginia Master Naturalist Program.

"The Master Naturalist Program is all about citizen participation, and we are honored to serve as the home for such a program," said Harold Burkhart, head of the forestry department at Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources, who will oversee the coordinator office. Virginia Tech's forestry department serves as the host department for the program, with Prysby's office located in the Virginia Cooperative Extension office in Charlottesville, Va.

State Forester Carl E. Garrison III added, "Master Naturalist volunteers not only educate the public, they actually get involved with hands-on stewardship activities, such as creating wildlife habitat. By improving the state of our natural resources, all of our citizens reap the benefits of a better and healthier Virginia."

Virginia's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries anticipates that Master Naturalist volunteers will provide valuable assistance to the agency on a wide range of projects ranging from population censuses and habitat restoration to interpretive programs and site enhancements along its Birding and Wildlife Trail. "Most importantly," added David Whitehurst, DGIF's Wildlife Diversity Division director, "Master Naturalists will become better-informed citizens who will promote the value of conserving the Commonwealth's wildlife and the natural resources on which they and all Virginians depend."

Several states currently have master naturalist programs already in place. "Virginia's master naturalist program was formed with the help of a steering committee, which patterned our program after the Texas program due to its success in achieving high levels of volunteer involvement in a variety of activities including citizen involvement in scientific research, education, and stewardship," Prysby explained.

As coordinator of the Virginia Master Naturalist Program, Prysby said, "My goal is to recruit, train, and inform groups of volunteers in educating citizens on natural resources." Prior to heading the master naturalist program, Prysby served as the citizen science director at the well-known Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont (GSMIT) in Townsend, Tenn. While with the GSMIT, Prysby directed an education and research program aimed at training and involving youth and other citizens in field research in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

She has a bachelor's degree in biological sciences from North Carolina State University and a master's degree in ecology, evolution, and behavior from the University of Minnesota.

Persons interested in becoming a master naturalist may contact Michelle Prysby at (434) 872-4580 or masternaturalist@vt.edu. Interested citizens can go to the web site at <http://www.virginiamasternaturalist.org> to find a chapter near them.