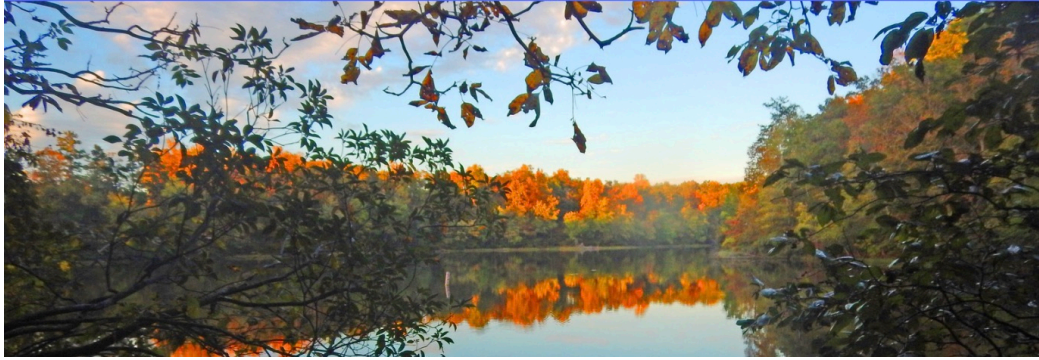


RIVANNA MASTER NATURALISTS



APRIL 2026



President's Corner - RMN Sherri Fitzgerald

President of RMN 2026

My father's family was originally from Waynesboro, Virginia. I grew up in Southern California surrounded by 30 cousins from my Irish immigrant mother's family. Every summer, we would pack into a car and drive cross-country to Lynchburg and Charlottesville to visit asignificantly more peaceful and restrained 7 cousins. I always hoped that I would someday live in Charlottesville.

Fitness and health, curiosity and contrariness, led me to a successful and satisfying career as a chiropractic sports medicine physician. Deep dives into health and fitness research led me to the microbiome in our gut and ultimately how it relates to the microbiome in the soil.

My partner and I purchased a farm in Howardsville, where I started a raw organic milk grass-fed dairy. I wanted ice cream. This meant restoring pastures in fallow, poorly managed fields. I reached out to extension agents, attended beef, dairy, hay, and forage conferences. I learned about terroir and how the microbes and plants that the cows eat affect the taste of the milk. It was a success; the ice cream was delicious. Covid and the pandemic came, and I shut down the dairy.

I have pivoted my efforts to create a wildlife sanctuary by planting well over 1,000 native hardwood trees and other Virginia native shrubs and meadows. The cows continue to rotationally graze through different pastures, fertilizing to assist in the restoration and diversity of the land.

My favorite activities as an RMN revolve around citizen science, learning and having fun. I started the Kestrel nest box program after learning about the plight of the grassland birds due to the farming practices of farmers like myself.

As president of the RMN, I hope to inspire the joy we get from learning and to make the world a better place for all creatures, great and small.

Upcoming 2026 topics

KESTREL BOX PROJECT WORKSHOPS
 RARITY & NATURAL HERITAGE
 BUTTERNUT TREES AT BLANDY EXPERIMENTAL
 THE CLAUDIUS PROJECT UNVEILED: MUSHROOMS
 BOX TURTLES & VA WORKING LANDSCAPES
 DAM DEMOLITIONS IN OUR AREA
 THE PROBLEM(S) WITH DEER
 FROGS & HEALTH
 MONARCHS & MADISON COUNTY
 NATURE IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL REGION
 NATURALIST IN FOCUS: JOHN MUIR
 USING iNATURALIST AND ROCKED APPS

Rivanna Master Naturalists "86" Recertifications for 2026 CONGRATULATIONS on this wonderful achievement!

Beth Adams	Mark Foley	Letitia (Tish) O'Connor
Margaret Armand	Helen Gordon	Bradley Odom
Chris Asquith	Neal Grandy	Jocelyn Prostko
Marion Baab	Kim Grosner	Michelle Prysby
Carol Baber	William Hamersky	Steve Pullinger
Sarah Bingham	Lucy Hartley	Christine Putnam
Linda Birch	Tana Herndon	Lauren Record
Megan Buetow Thomas	Holly Hintz	Dave Saylor
Catherine Buck	John Holden	Steven Sayre
Cali Busch	Gareth Hunt	Sabine Scholes
Nancy Carey	Jennifer Jarrett	David Smith
Dorothy Carney	Erin Johnson	Marilyn Smith
Janelle Catlett	Lucy Kinsey	Cheri Stephan
Nancy Cohen	Daria Kiselica	Ruth Stornetta
Sharon Cole	Pat Klima	Tina Strealy-Colom
Teresa Cornwell	Beth Kuhn	Cathy Summers
John Cruickshank	Frances Lee-Vandell	Leigh Surdukowski
Deirdre Curran	Cheryl Lewis	Kimberly (Kim) Swartz
Judy Cutright	Carolyn Long	Donna Vinal
JoAnn Dalley	Laura Long	David (Dave) Volin
John Day	Deborah Luzynski-Weber	Mary Voorhees
John Dent	Barbara Marshall	Janet Walker
Ruth Douglas	Courtney McLaughlin	Rod Walker
Mary Lee Epps	Heather Meixler	Clark Walter
Jane Erwine	Vicki Metcalf	Tex Weaver
Julie Farrell	Rebecca Minor	Tim Weber
Elizabeth (Betsy) Fechteler	Anna Momper	Martha Weiss
Nancy Fiddner	Karen Mulder	Peyton Williams
Sherri Fitzgerald	Monica Newby	

The 2026 Death Valley National Park **Superbloom**

submitted by RMN JoAnn Dalley

It was was a rare, major event marking the best bloom since 2016.

Known as the driest place in North America, it was teaming with life, transforming a normally brown desert landscape into carpets of green and gold. The bloom was triggered by a record 2.41 inches of rain in the fall of 2025 which activated dormant seeds.

We scheduled a birthday inspired trip from April 2-7 fulfilling my years long personal goal to see a Superbloom. The lower-elevation flowers (Desert Gold, Phacelia) peaked in early March, but there were still areas blooming on our visit. Sometimes we crouched down to look over a large flat area to get the effect or laid at ground level to capture images of tiny plants or insects.



Desert Paintbrush, Darwin Road and Talc City Cutoff



Desert Gold sunflower, CA -190 Panamint Springs

We spent most of our viewing time at high elevation areas however, because blooming occurs there through April and into June. These flowers tend to be in clusters between shrubs and don't tend to create hillsides of color.

Who is pollinating all these flowers? Who might be eating the tasty green shoots? Who is resting or nesting in the shrubs and rocks? iNaturalist was a great help in getting some answers. We saw over 50 wildflower species, 95 avian species and some insects, mammals and reptiles, so I'm still working on my photos and observations.



(Clockwise top image, l to r: Donkey, Rock Wren, Desert Cottontail, Desert Horned Lizard)



Bee on Panamint Daisy, Cactus Chimney Bee on Beavertail cactus, Painted Lady on Mojave Indigobush, Desert Carpenter Bee on Palo Verde.)

A Hunt in the Woods—and a Lesson in Native Plant Resilience

by RMN Anne Regn

How wild azalea and other natives survive against late spring frost

Hunting spring blooms is a bit like an Easter egg hunt—you always wish you found more. After several warm days followed by a sharp cold snap, I felt both concern and relief when I returned to a favorite stand of wild azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*) and found plenty of flowers still intact.

Frost (<32°) [during bloom](#) can disrupt plant reproduction because ice damages floral tissues—killing pollen, injuring stigmas and ovules, and preventing successful fertilization.

Native species, however, often hedge their bets through *timing strategies and physiological resilience* that reduce long-term reproductive failure compared with many cultivated plants. Wild azalea provides a good example. Its flowers open over several weeks rather than all at once, so later buds may bloom after a frost. Its flower buds are adapted to local climate variability and can tolerate light freezes, delay opening during cold snaps, or retain unopened backup buds.

At the population level, additional protection *comes from variation* in elevation, slope exposure, canopy cover, and soil moisture. Even if one shrub loses flowers, nearby plants often succeed.

Virginia's [nine species of *Rhododendron*](#) span Virginia's ridges and swamps from now through June, providing reliable nectar across spring and early summer. Their resilience lies not in avoiding frost entirely, but in being synchronized with regional climate patterns.

In that sense, native azaleas have learned how not to put all their blooms in one basket!

THE WILDLIFE AT RURITAN LAKE IS WAKING UP

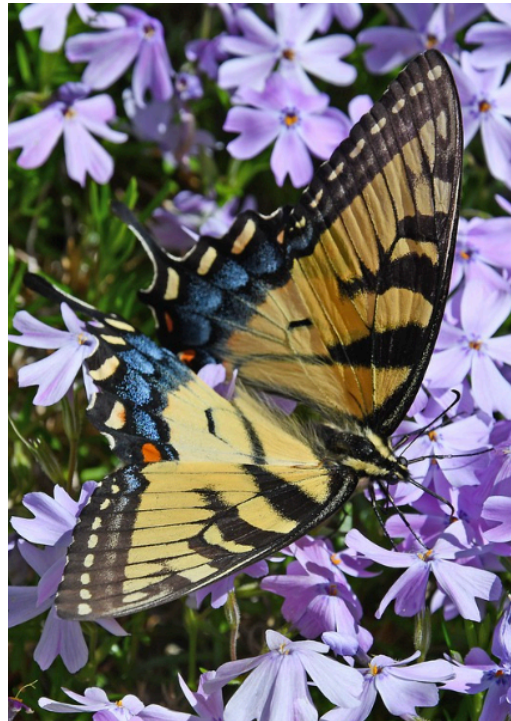
Submitted by RMN Dave Volin



The beavers have built a new lodge just across from us.



Pic of the geese and mallards. Looks like the mallards are bowing down to their superiors.



We've had numerous Tiger Swallowtails on the Phlox.

Natures Bounty



by RMN Steve Pullinger

Three Plants to Find This Spring

All 3 of these plants are plentiful and remember to follow the 'honorable harvest' if collecting.



The first plant/shrub we'll cover this month is the Black Haw, sometimes called 'cramp bark'.

To the casual observer, the Black Haw looks very similar to Dogwoods, same size tree/shrub and they bloom at the same time of year. The Black Haw is in the Viburnum family and it is quite plentiful in this area.

The bark of the Black Haw is highly medicinal and is tinctured or made into a decoction. It is used for menstrual cramps, it is said to help prevent miscarriages and it can lower blood pressure.

The ripe fruit looks very similar to raisins and can be eaten raw or used in jams/jellies and it's important to remove the seeds before ingesting the fruit. The fruit contains salicin, which our bodies convert to salicylic acid, which is nature's aspirin.

The second plant is Curly Dock. All the Dock plants are in the buckwheat family. The seed heads on a healthy plant can make up to a pint of seeds. These seeds can be ground into a very nutritious flour or used as a soup thickener. The Curly Dock leaves can be cooked like most greens. The older the greens, the more bitter the taste and the tougher they are. You will need to cook the old greens in several changes of water to make them palatable.

Dock plants are also useful as a remedy for stinging nettle stings. Remember, Nettle in and Dock out. I have not personally tried this but if you're stung by stinging nettles, just crush a Dock leaf and rub on the affected area. There is something in the Dock leaves that neutralizes the nettle stings. The plants in the pic are on the bank of Wegman's west parking lot.



The last plant is Rock Tripe. These guys were spotted on the Ingalls Overlook trail in Warm Springs, Va. It is an amazing TNC property that is their largest property in Virginia. Kimmer goes into great detail on Rock Tripe in Braiding Sweetgrass. Rock Tripe is a survival food. With starvation a 10, eating Rock Tripe is a 9 !! It is something to choke down but does have some nutritional value. I think they are cool to just look at.

OUTREACH

UPCOMING RMN VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Saturday April 18th: EcoFair at the Botanical Garden of the Piedmont,

This will be held from 9am to 1pm (set-up at 8:30). We'll be featuring our pollinator exhibit, and one or two more volunteers would be helpful. Contact Nalini Ayya at ayya1960@gmail.com to help out at an early or late shift (8:30-11am; 11am to shortly after 1pm). Rain date is April 19th.

Saturday April 25th: Kid*Vention

The Virginia Discovery Museum's science and technology fair. It runs from 9:30-1pm at the Key Recreation Center in Charlottesville, and one or two more volunteers would be helpful. Contact Jocelyn Prostko at jocelyn.prostko@gmail.com to sign up for a shift, 9-11am or 11am to 1pm. We'll be featuring our owls exhibit.

Saturday May 9th: Rivanna Riverfest

It will be held from 2:30-6pm at the Rivanna River Company. We'll be doing demonstrations and presenting activities related to watersheds. We need a few more volunteers: contact Beth Kuhn at bethkuhnrmn@gmail.com to volunteer for a shift from 1:30-4pm or 4-6:30pm. Rain date is May 10th.

Monthly tabling at IX Market is beginning! We will be focusing on various wildlife topics this year. Dates include:

April 11th (no more help is needed)

May 30th

June 13th (topic - turtles)

July 11th

August 22nd (topic: spiders)

Possibly September 26th and October 24th

Contact Holly Hintz about market tabling at hollyhg1@yahoo.com



PEN PARK PROJECT

Lisa Wittenborn from the Rivanna Conservation Alliance suggested that the Rivanna Master Naturalists adopt an area in Pen Park designated as "306B" in the Rivanna Conservation Alliance Rivanna Forest Resiliency project. Steve Gaines, the city's urban forester gave us the OK to get busy so the stewardship working group mounted their first effort at clearing invasives from the "RMN Pen Park Pilot area" on Friday, April 4. **Sabine Scholes, Cheri Stephan, Neal Grandy, Barbara Payne and Sherri Fitzgerald joined group leader Ruth Stornetta** for several hours of pulling Multiflora rose and Japanese honeysuckle from the area's border by the Rivanna Trail. Although we barely scratched the surface, we still felt satisfied with making a difference! You are invited to join and any RMN interested can sign up for workdays through Better Impact or contact Ruth Stornetta (rs3j@virginia.edu) to be added to the email list.





Hello Charlottesville Invasive Plant Partnership,

Hope you are all taking care and enjoying Earth Month so far!

I wanted to reach out and remind you that our partners at the Botanical Garden of the Piedmont and the Office of Sustainability (my office) are co-hosting Charlottesville's ECO FAIR 2026 THIS SATURDAY, April 18th!

A couple of you are signed up to table or present in some capacity but in case you'd still like to be involved, the chance to volunteer is still very much available and needed. We are looking for folks to support with set-up, tear-down, assist with parking, our bike valet program, and staffing our craft table.

If you are interested or know others who might be, please send them the link here: <https://forms.gle/5fhxdWHXrXA5bSJm6>

Thank you for your support as always!

Gabriel Sherzada (he/him)

Climate Program Specialist

City of Charlottesville

434-962-3843 | sherzadag@charlottesville.gov

POSTING ANNOUNCEMENTS ON THE RMN Google groups listserv

To post announcements, mention projects, and pass on information of interest to RMN members, please contact rivannamn.info@gmail.com.

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COME JOIN US AND SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES AND PHOTOS.

RMN PRIVATE Group - Rivanna Master Naturalists Private Group - Only RMNs can join and post. Join us to post your own pictures and see photos by others.

"Rivanna Master Naturalists Help" Page - This page is **OPEN TO THE PUBLIC** if they want to ask questions, see what we are doing, etc.

Rivanna Master Naturalists Public Page - Our public face to the world.

SEE SOME OF OUR POSTS FROM FACEBOOK BELOW

GOODLinks

Log In Your Volunteer Hours Click on BETTER IMPACT

Resources for Master Naturalists [Click Here](#)

Virginia Master Naturalist Webinars - Check out the available webinars at the VMN Webinar page for Continuing Education Credit

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www.vmn-rivanna.org

The Virginia Master Naturalist program is open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/ affirmative action employer.



**Virginia
Department
of
Wildlife
Resources**