

COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP REPORT

2020-2022



*Celebrating the people who love and care
for Chicago Park District Natural Areas*



CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT
NATURAL AREAS

The Nature
Conservancy 

Preserving Chicago's Wild Spaces and Creatures



© Cristina Rutter

Michelle Carr



© Chicago Park District

Rosa Escareño

Cover photo: Youth volunteers in a Chicago green space.
© The Nature Conservancy

Chicago is home to one of the largest park systems in the United States, with nearly **9,000 acres of parkland**. In addition to providing room for recreation and events, Chicago's green spaces offer access to cherished native habitats and contribute greatly to the city's sustainability, health and wellness and the vibrancy of our neighborhoods. About 20 years ago, the Chicago Park District (CPD) launched its Natural Areas Program. Today, we are proud to have **nearly 2,000 acres of natural areas**—ranging from **wetlands** to **oak savannas**.

Chicago's famous moniker, "City in a Garden," reflects the vital natural wonders that define Chicago's urban environment, including **native prairies** buzzing with **butterflies** and other **pollinators**, **dune habitats** busy with **migratory birds** and **ponds and lagoons** humming with **frogs and dragonflies**.

Key to the health of these habitats are our **volunteer community stewards** who work alongside CPD staff to restore and maintain urban wild spaces. Since 2015, CPD and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) have partnered to engage Chicago's **diverse communities and populations** in stewardship activities at local natural areas and inspire equitable investment and care of these shared spaces citywide.

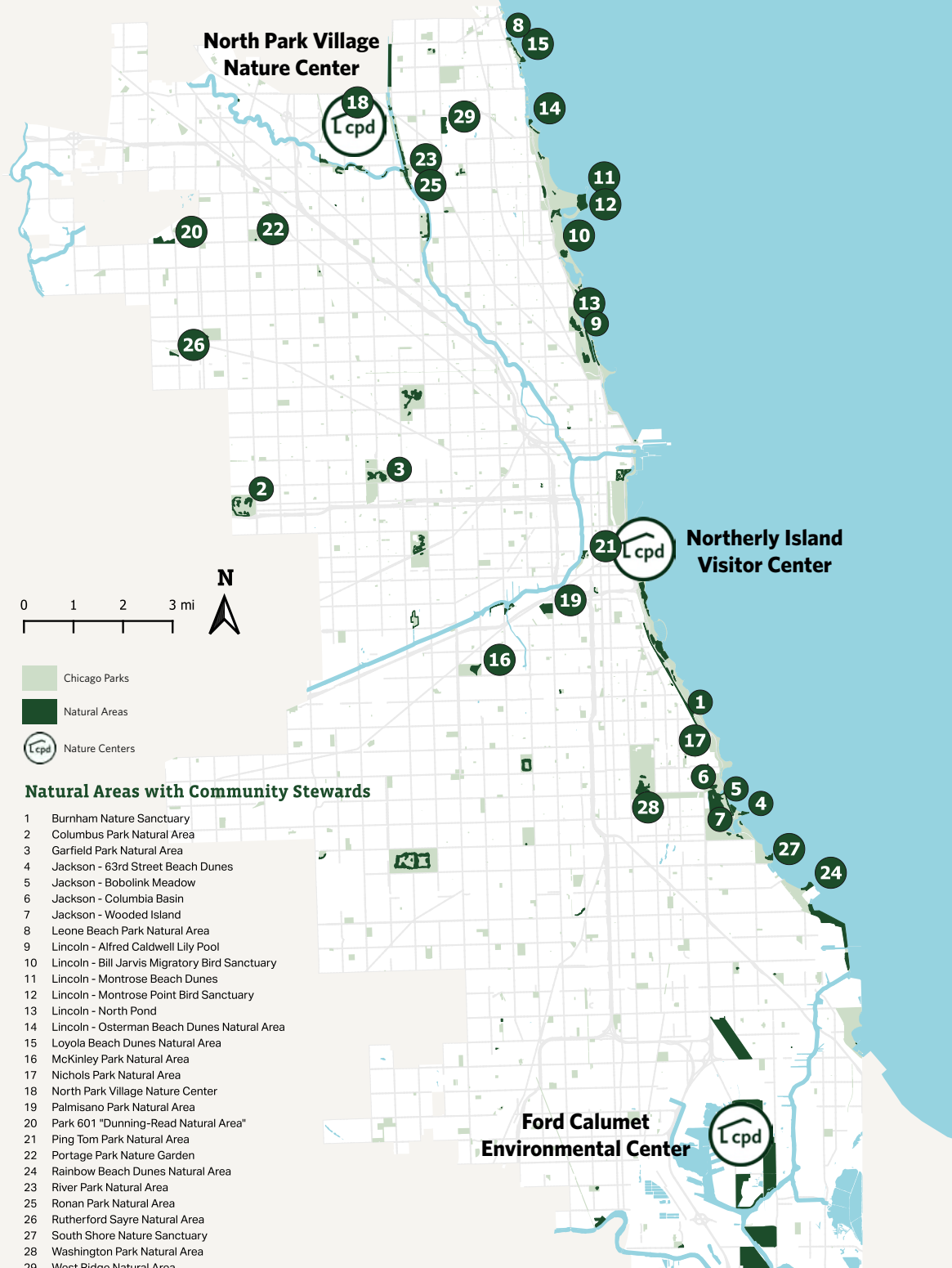
Stewards from various ages and backgrounds and with all levels of experience engage in a variety of roles, from **removing invasive plants** to **monitoring bat populations**. The program continues to reach more communities with nearly **400 workdays annually across 26 sites**.

Thanks in large part to our community stewards, Chicago residents and visitors can easily find and enjoy a **nature-filled respite** from city life. This proved especially important during the **isolating months of COVID-19** when many Chicagoans needed a nearby and healthy escape. Local and migratory wildlife has also benefited from our stewards' work. For instance, many rare, endangered and threatened species—including **snowy owls and piping plovers**—have been sighted in our natural areas.

On the following pages are specific examples of how our community stewards and partners are caring for natural areas and spreading their knowledge and love for nature. **Conservation work happens collaboratively**, and we make the greatest gains when we work together.

Michelle Carr
State Director
The Nature Conservancy in Illinois

Rosa Escareño
General Superintendent and CEO
Chicago Park District



Celebrating Community Stewardship

The wild spaces in Chicago parks help residents and visitors connect with nature and provide habitats for local and migratory wildlife. These habitats also help to address environmental and infrastructure challenges. For example, natural spaces help cool the city in summer, soak up rainwater that could otherwise flood basements and filter pollutants from the air we breathe. In addition, natural areas along the lakefront help stabilize the shoreline and minimize erosion.

Preserving and improving our natural areas takes a lot of hard work—and our community stewards and other volunteers regularly roll up their sleeves to help. In 2022 alone, they had a tremendous impact:

13,700
HOURS CONTRIBUTED

2,600
PEOPLE ENGAGED

386
STEWARDSHIP WORKDAYS

26
NATURAL AREAS TENDED

Snapshots from Chicago Park District Natural Areas

Our community stewards and other volunteers are busy throughout the year preserving and enhancing dunes, savannas, woodlands and other natural areas within the city's parks. As shown in these photos, they plant native species, remove invasive plants, collect seeds, participate in community science projects, lead nature hikes and help with various other activities.

Lincoln Park-Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary

Community stewards have played a critical role in making Montrose Point, which juts out into Lake Michigan, an urban paradise for birds and people. Tens of thousands of migratory birds stop by this native habitat in spring and fall to eat, rest and take shelter. An accessible trail, installed in 2021, has made it easier for people to explore this internationally recognized birding area on Chicago's North Side.



Have wheels, will plant: Theresa Pacione (front) and Ginger Lane sling black-eyed Susan and partridge pea seeds along the accessible path at Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary. © Lucy Gomez-Feliciano

Garfield Park Natural Area

The 18-acre natural area at Garfield Park, on Chicago's West Side, contains a lagoon, wetland, prairie and savanna. A recent expansion added five acres of native habitat around the lagoon. Community stewards are helping CPD staff and contractors remove invasive species and add native plants. New interpretive signs and fishing stations draw park visitors into the new natural area.



Lead Steward Carol G. Johnson explores the recently expanded native habitat at Garfield Park. © Lucy Gomez-Feliciano

Washington Park Natural Area

Community stewards have put a lot of work into the 35-acre natural area in Washington Park on Chicago's South Side. They collect and plant native seeds and plugs, pick up trash, monitor flora and fauna and remove invasive species. Paved and gravel trails wind through the 35-acre natural area, which includes a native prairie, wetland, lagoon and quiet islands.



Lead Steward Jackie Smith leads tours through the Washington Park Natural Area, educating visitors about native flowers (top) and the park's lagoon (bottom). © Lucy Gomez-Feliciano

Big Marsh Park

A magical Fairy House Village was erected at Big Marsh Park to the delight of local children—and fairies seeking homes. The project began in 2021 when CPD and TNC worked with community members, including Girl Scout troops, church groups and children in Park District programs, to design and construct 20 fairy houses. These enchanting creations were displayed in 20 natural areas for park visitors to enjoy. Later that year, all 20 houses were brought to Big Marsh, on Chicago's Southeast Side, and arranged like a fairy town to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Park District's natural areas.



The fairy houses added a sense of fun and whimsy to the natural areas they decorated. © Lucy Gomez-Feliciano

The Power of Partnerships

A goal of the Community Stewardship Program is to engage people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds—from across all of Chicago's neighborhoods—in nature-related activities, ranging from hands-on stewardship work to learning opportunities and artistic pursuits. To attain this goal, CPD and TNC have partnered with a number of local organizations that share our passion for preserving and celebrating urban wild areas. Here is a sampling of our many valuable partnerships.

The Shedd Aquarium

As an extension of its conservation mission, the Shedd Aquarium has adopted four CPD natural areas: three lakefront sites and one site on the Chicago River. As part of the partnership, TNC and CPD provide the Shedd with various resources to restore and maintain these water-based areas, including tools for removing invasive species. In recent months, the Shedd set up a seed propagation program to help ensure the survival of rare or threatened plant species, including the state-threatened large-flowered penstemon (*Penstemon grandiflorus*).



CPD, TNC and Shedd staff and interns meet at 63rd Street Beach Dunes, which was adopted by the Shedd, to discuss site goals and coordinate volunteer workday needs. From left to right: CPD's Michael Raczyla, natural area manager; TNC's Edward Warden, community stewardship program manager; the Shedd's Krystyna Meyer, conservation action coordinator; and two Shedd conservation action interns, Kluivert Suquino and Emily Beach. © Forrest King-Cortes

Envision Unlimited

One of our partners is Envision Unlimited, an organization that provides day programs, community living opportunities and other support to children and adults with intellectual, developmental and psychiatric disabilities. Envision members and staff regularly volunteer at community stewardship events in various CPD natural areas. In addition to helping preserve urban native habitats, Envision aims to provide members who have an interest in conservation with opportunities to learn how to become community stewards and eventually teach others to become stewards.



An Envision Unlimited member cuts down invasive buckthorn during a stewardship event at a CPD natural area. © Envision Unlimited Media Club

Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community

CPD and TNC also partner with the Coalition for a Better Chinese American Community (CBCAC), a nonprofit that advocates for community empowerment in Chicago. CBCAC works with TNC and CPD on cultural activities and stewardship projects. For instance, all the lovely photos on this page were taken by youth ages 8 to 15 who participated in a nature photography showcase at CPD's Ping Tom Natural Area in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood in 2022.



Blue vervain, *Verbena hastata*. © Siqi Tang



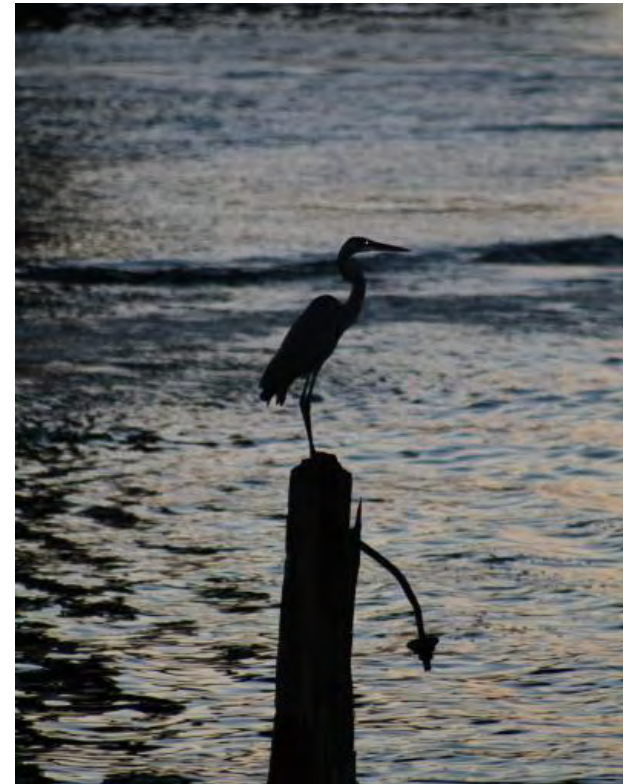
Red milkweed beetle, *Tetraopes tetraphthalmus*. © Ethan Jiao



Common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*. © Claire Tian



Ox-eye sunflower, *Heliopsis helianthoides*. © Cyrus Di



A long-legged, long-necked wading bird. © Guang Gao

Join Our Volunteer Force

Come out and help care for a Chicago Park District natural area near you, while enjoying the outdoors and connecting with others. Nature needs your help.



A stewardship workday at Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary. Ecological restoration takes many years, but a team of volunteers can get a lot done in one day. © cassi saari



Lead Steward Carol G. Johnson plants native plants at Garfield Park Natural Area. © Joshua Lott

Volunteer Positions

A variety of volunteer opportunities are available at CPD natural areas:

- **Workday volunteer:** No formal role or application required, just show up.
- **Lead/Assistant Steward:** Work with Park District staff to schedule and conduct volunteer workdays, contributing to the ecologically sound management of the natural area.
- **Apprentice Steward:** Assist the Lead Steward with workdays.
- **Greeter:** Welcome and orient volunteers.
- **Nature Ambassador:** Collaborate with Lead Steward to offer nature walks or other nature-based learning opportunities.

For more information about the Community Stewardship Program or to volunteer, email stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com.



Learn More About Volunteering

Scan the QR code or visit

www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/communitystewardship



CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT
NATURAL AREAS

The Nature
Conservancy