

Tamarack Nature Center

by JB Andersen and Catherine Carey
photos courtesy of Tamarack Nature Center



One of the best ways to get in touch with spring is by visiting Tamarack Nature Center at 5287 Otter Lake Road in White Bear Township.

Tamarack Nature Center

The Nature Center is a 320-acre nature preserve located within Bald Eagle-Otter Lakes Regional Park, owned and operated by Ramsey County. It is dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding of the natural environment and preserving natural resources for future generations.

The facility provides outdoor recreational opportunities as well as quality environmental education to schools and community groups. Professional environmental educators and trained volunteers staff all programs.

The Building

The Nature Center features a stunning facility with an excellent building and a diverse set of walking, skiing and snowshoeing paths.

A most inviting lobby with a real wood fireplace and high ceiling greets the visitor and a desk with a receptionist faces the lobby. The feeling is very comfortable and pleasing. The high ceiling imparts a sense of wonder and the space has many stuffed animals, birds mostly, that help define the nature of the place. Three benches in front of the fireplace offer plenty of seating for visi-

tors. The whole of the entry is very nice and inviting. This makes for immediate involvement and can occupy adults and children while waiting for others to arrive.

Facilities

Adjacent to the lobby is a staff meeting room with a small library for use by the employees in planning programs. Community rooms are well placed for excellent views of open areas.

Straight ahead, behind the fireplace, is a display case with a live American Kestrel. To the right is an alcove with aquariums containing turtles that are fed as spectators watch. A snake is housed in a terrarium.

A large open room with excellent windows overlooks an open area of the Nature Center. This room has more stuffed animals and touch-and-see objects. As I looked out a window, a melanistic (all black) squirrel ran by.

There is a classroom off this large open area and, on the day I visited, second-graders were engaged in a variety of activities. A small white board at the entrance to the classroom described their agenda:

Glue cotton balls on snowman
Sequence snowman pictures
Number matching games
Play with snow
Feed the turtles

A corner of the classroom has a full-service kitchen that, among other things, is used to make maple syrup. The Nature Center's annual "Sugar on Snow" party will be held from 1 to 3 p.m., Sat., March 17.

Again, windows adorn this room for a view of the grounds. Out the classroom windows can be seen a large enclosure where participants are allowed to play beneath the tree canopy in the underbrush.

Back in the lobby, a hallway guides us through the south wing where a rental shop makes available snow-



shoes and cross-country skis for all ages.

A large demonstration room is located in this wing. As in other rooms, windows make for a wide view of the Nature Center outdoors. Many stuffed animals line the walls and sit atop the cabinets in this room. The hallway contains a display case and several photos of animals.

The Grounds

Tamarack Nature Center is largely a wetland area containing three bodies of water: Tamarack Lake in the north, Fish Lake in the south and the large centrally-located Teal Pond containing the George Mack Observation Deck.

Several trails are available at the center and include some great boardwalks.

The Prairie Trail is the shortest at .5 mile and is handicap accessible. It is paved. It loops around the prairie behind the Nature Center and brushes the southern tip of Teal Pond. It then rims the line of a forest back to the building. A spur off the Prairie Trail leads to the George Mack Observation Deck on Teal Pond. The pond is an excellent habitat for heron, turtle, mink and muskrat.

The Goldenrod Trail is 2.1 miles across the northern side of Teal Pond through a forested area followed by a long stretch that crosses wetland in two areas and skirts the southern border of Tamarack Lake.

In the spring, summer and fall, it is a walking trail and, in the winter, it is used for cross-country skiing.

The Fish Lake Trail combined with the Goldenrod Trail forms a 2.5-mile journey. Fish Lake Trail forks off south from the Goldenrod Trail, crossing a wetland and through a forest on the southern side of Fish Lake and looping back northward to join up with the Goldenrod. It also is a three-season walking trail and is used for skiing in the winter. The Goldenrod Trail is an easy walk or ski across mostly level ground. The Fish Lake Trail is along more difficult terrain.

The Tamarack Trail encompasses Tamarack Lake at a distance in the North and close up along the southern shore. On the West side of the trail is a spur that joins up with the Goldenrod Trail. The Tamarack Trail loop is completed by the short Oak Trail through a forested area to the north of the lake. The two trails combined form a 1.3-mile walk. The Tamarack and Oak Trails are used for walking and snowshoeing and are covered with grass, woodchips and boardwalk.

Meadowlark Trail is a short walk that joins Tamarack, Goldenrod and Fish Lake trails at the southern side of the Nature Center. It is closed in the winter.

Along all trails red fox, deer, birds and other wildlife can be observed. And do not forget the plant life.

Scientific Partnerships and Citizen Science

Tamarack Nature Center has aligned itself with other institutions to aid in gathering data on a wide variety of research projects. Partnering also involves the use of the Nature Center facility by other groups.

Anna Newton, a Naturalist at Tamarack, is in charge of the partnerships and citizen science projects.

Volunteers are used in the observation and data gathering work done for the partnerships. The detailed research and careful observation that are a part of the program does require training by the Tamarack staff. Interested volunteers are always appreciated.

The oldest citizen science project is the nearly 100-year-old Audubon

bird count done every year on Christmas Day.

Bluebird Recovery is a citizen science project. Tamarack has nearly 100 bluebird nesting boxes installed. As a result of DDT insecticide use during the 1950s, the food for bluebirds was diminished and the shells of the birds were weakened. Also, habitat loss due to human expansion led to bluebird population decline. Citizen scientists aid in egg and hatchling counts. Volunteers for this project are needed.

Monarch Butterfly caterpillar and egg counts are also done at Tamarack. The information is passed on to university researchers.

Prairie restoration at the Nature Center is also an ongoing project.

Other volunteer opportunities include buckthorn management. The buckthorn needs to be girdled, that is, the bark stripped away near the base of the tree for about a foot wide area. This will kill the invasive and domineering species and allow native species to survive. Buckthorn also needs to be burned and the remaining stump is often covered by metal cans to prevent daylight from aiding the tree to sprout again.

Donations

Frequently people wish to honor the memory of a friend or family member. A woman who visited the site with her mother purchased some Tamarack trees for the Nature Center.

A man who had grown up on a farm that was once part of the property bought a bench to honor his parents.

People will often buy educational supplies and books to aid the staff and the programs.

Volunteer Opportunities

Nancie Klebba is the Volunteer Coordinator. Volunteers are asked to fill out an application and take part in an interview so that she can place them based on their interests and skills. No special skills are required. Staff members train people for volunteer projects.

The Youth Volunteer Program is strong at Tamarack. It is made up of teens who attended classes and used the Nature Center when they were children. These young people are



then trained to do animal care and assist with programs, especially Day Camp.

Community Partnerships

White Bear Center for the Arts uses the Nature Center for art classes. Spring classes now being offered are Spirited Watercolors; The Perpetual Art Class: All Media, All the Time; Nature Printing and Printmaking Techniques, Watercolor Techniques, and Oil-based Media; Small Baskets; Creative Writing, Earth Gifts: Poems of Celebration with John Caddy. For more information, visit www.whitebeararts.org.

Education

Mary Rogers is a Naturalist and Early Childhood Family Education (“ECFE”) educator who works with the classroom activities. Children can explore the natural world through hands-on experiences in “My Nature School,” a collaboration between Tamarack Nature Center and White Bear Lake Area Schools.

Adding a new twist to the early childhood curriculum, My Nature School revolves around the natural world – learning from it, about it and within it. The cornerstone of the program is providing frequent access to the natural world and making it a part of children’s (and parent’s) everyday lives while simultaneously using nature to enrich the development of children’s hearts, minds and bodies. Imagine a school where it is not only encouraged, but expected to roll down a hill in cushions of autumn leaves, follow fox tracks in the snow and keep track of a bluebird’s nesting progress.

My Nature School classes are offered for three to five-year-olds, and ECFE classes are offered for two and three-year-olds with an accompanying adult.

Each class has a team of dedicated adults – an early childhood educator, a naturalist, a classroom aid and other specialists trained to give children the best possible start in school and in life.

History

The land for the Nature Center was purchased in the 1960s and 1970s from Township residents. It abuts the Otter Lake and Bald Eagle Lake Regional Parks and that is probably, in part, why the site was chosen.

Some truck farming was being done on the land when it was purchased. As a result, prairie restoration has been done and is in progress.

Megan (Gange) Strike was the first Naturalist hired at the Nature Center. She worked for many years out of a trailer. Programs included “show and tell” using stuffed animals and hiking the site. She was instrumental in getting the excellent building erected on the property in 1990.

Today the Nature Center has 15 full or part-time staff members.

Marcie Oltman is the current Director of Tamarack Nature Center. She is a certified ECFE educator holding additional degrees in biology and environmental education.

In addition to helping design nature experiences, Oltman is an exhibit designer for the design and building firm Kidzibits, Inc. She develops exhibits and environments for children’s museums and nature centers through Kidzibits. She is also the editor of *Natural Wonders: A Guide to Early Childhood for Environmental Educators*.

Tamarack Nature Center Summary

Public programs:

- apple cidering;
- snowshoeing;
- maple syruping;
- bird banding;
- cross-country skiing;
- moon walks;
- pond study;
- nature crafts; and
- classes for all ages.

Day Camp Programs

Summers and school breaks are excellent times to share Tamarack’s tremendous natural resources with children of all ages. Each camp session focuses on a specific theme and includes exciting, hands-on environmental and recreational activities.

Scout Programs

The Nature Center offers programs to help scouts complete the requirements needed to earn individual badges and patches. Tamarack offers a choice of programs to meet each person’s need.

Birthday Parties

The Nature Center is available for birthday celebrations. It has many party themes from which to choose.

Parties may include the use of live animals.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers have an essential role at the Nature Center. Volunteers may be individuals (ages 11 and up), families or groups.

Volunteering is a great way to share your love of nature and staff members will train you.

Volunteers may participate in annual recognition and awards and naturalist-led trips. It is a great way to meet people of similar interests.

Volunteer options:

- trail guides;
- program assistants;
- animal care assistants;
- jr. naturalists (day camp assistants);

- special event assistants;
 - bluebird trail monitors;
 - trail management; and
 - artists and crafts people.
- Programs do have fees, the average fee is \$3 per person.

Free parking.

Hours:

The Nature Center is open year-round.

Monday–Friday: 8 am–4:30pm

Saturday: 9am–5pm

Sunday noon–5pm

Trail hours:

1/2 hr before sunrise and
1/2 hr after sunset.

The center is closed on official government holidays.

Directions: Take Otter Lake Road north from Highway 96, about one mile. The Nature Center entrance is on the left and is well marked.

Address:

5287 Otter Lake Rd
White Bear Township, MN 55110

Telephone:

651-407-5350

651-407-5354 fax

Email: tamarack@co.ramsey.mn.us

Web site: www.co.ramsey.mn.us/parks/tamarack

Rates: Free admission.

