



## Natural Area Restoration In Progress



The restoration or improvement of native habitat is a long-term process that requires ongoing maintenance, which may include mowing, controlling weeds, and prescribed burning. This area will look very different throughout the seasons and every year, so visit often to see the progress!

CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT  
NATURAL AREAS

# Community Stewardship Program Volunteer Handbook

Version 1.0, updated January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2026



CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT  
**NATURAL AREAS**

The Nature  
Conservancy 

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2025 Stewardship Summit at Northerly Island © Edward Warden, Chicago Park District / The Nature Conservancy

## About this Handbook

The goal of this handbook is to lay out the scope, vision, policies, and nature of the Community Stewardship Program. While current or pending volunteer stewards are likely to use this handbook the most, it is a resource for anyone—from regular stewardship participants, to program partners, to staff of The Nature Conservancy and the Chicago Park District, to donors, to the general public—to quickly and easily learn about the program regardless of background, ability, or identity. The hope is that people who pick up this handbook can envision their participation in the program and how to fully use the program's resources and potential to maximize their impact in Chicago Park District natural areas.

This handbook is a work in progress and will likely never be fully complete. That's a good thing. As the program necessarily evolves, changes, and grows, so too should this handbook. We hope that this version and future iterations serve as a tool that empowers you, the stewardship community, to be the best leaders of this program and drivers of its future.

## Community Values

Our community is built on respect for each other and the parks we care for. Every interaction, whether with other volunteers, park staff, park visitors, wildlife, or the park itself, should reflect kindness, patience, and a shared commitment to stewardship. Volunteers represent the program and its values whenever they are in the park and are expected to act with integrity, honesty, and courtesy.

Disrespectful, disruptive, or unsafe behavior toward any part of the park community undermines the spirit of our work and will not be tolerated. We're here to make our parks better places for everyone. That starts and ends with how we treat one another and the communities we serve.

## Introduction to Community Stewardship

The Chicago Park District's Community Stewardship Program (CSP) aims to connect people and communities through Park District natural areas, inspiring investment in, care for, and appreciation of urban nature. Launched in 2001 with just 29 volunteer habitat restoration workdays at ten sites, the program now hosts more than 400 workdays annually across some 35 sites.

### Purpose and Goals of the Community Stewardship Program

The purpose of the CSP is to provide a pathway for and empower members of the public to take action for natural areas in their local parks. Through this program, the Park District trains, equips, and formally recognizes volunteer leaders who, in turn, create opportunities for their communities to connect with nature.

These leaders, known as Stewards, facilitate public-facing conservation activities from nature education to ecological restoration that are in short supply due to limited staff time and resources. This helps the Park District achieve a level of community engagement and conservation outcomes that are otherwise not possible. Ultimately, the program seeks to create an inclusive culture of conservation, where neighbors come together to connect with each other and with nature by caring for

their local natural areas. We envision a future where our communities and parks thrive together—where people uplift the ecological health of parks, parks uplift the wellbeing of communities, and all Chicagoans feel welcome in and have a sense of ownership of green spaces that reflect the diversity and resilience of our “city in a garden.”

### What Is Community Stewardship?

In this context, “community stewardship” is defined as activities conducted by members of the public that actively improve, study, or build connections to natural areas, a definition that is broader than traditional conservation volunteer programs.

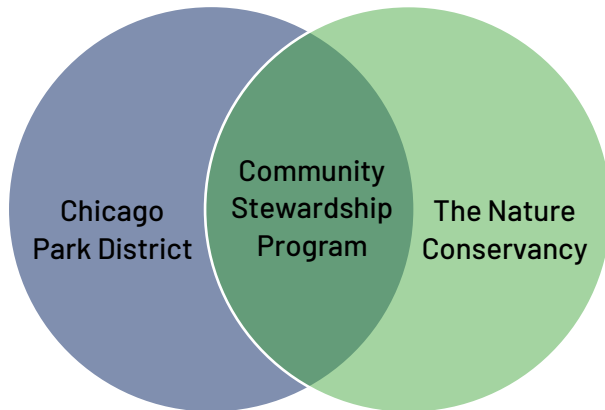
The recognition that nature in the city is inextricably linked to humans drives the reasoning for the program name: community stewardship, and the broad array of activities that are considered to have a net benefit to people and wildlife. These activities are intended to be welcoming to people of all backgrounds.

For a full list of possible community stewardship activities, see the Stewardship Day Types section.



Butterfly garden planting day at Burnham Wildlife Corridor © Chicago Park District

## Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy Partnership



Most elements of the CSP are jointly managed and coordinated, such as staff, program goals, program materials and publications, and volunteer management.

### Community Stewardship Program Staff

The CSP is overseen by a small team composed of a full-time CSP Manager, one part-time CSP Assistant, and one seasonal CSP Intern. These staff are jointly managed by both the Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy via the aforementioned partnership. The primary roles of the CSP staff are to administer the program on behalf of both organizations while supporting the needs and development of stewards, other volunteers, and partners in the Park District natural areas.

The Community Stewardship Program is jointly supported by the Chicago Park District (CPkD) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a global conservation-focused non-profit. Program staff are shared and report to both organizations. In turn, the program draws from both organizations' resources, staff, and expertise to accomplish shared program goals.



CSP staff run orientation at a workday with Envision Unlimited members © Joel Zavala, The Nature Conservancy

## Introduction to Chicago Park District Natural Areas

Founded in 1934, and now with more than 600 parks in the system, the Chicago Park District is one of the largest and oldest municipal park systems in the country. Within this vast network of picnic groves, fieldhouses, beaches, dog parks, sports fields, swimming pools, and much more are more than 100 designated natural areas and nature gardens.

Chicago Park District natural areas are native habitats that are dedicated to the cultivation and enrichment of ecological diversity, nature exploration, and learning. These areas vary dramatically in size and shape from small pockets or narrow strips within parks to self-contained large parks.

As a result of these differences, as well as variations in habitat types and cultural and community connections, no two natural areas are the same. However, all exist to achieve the same key goals: environmentally healthier communities, resilience in the face of climate threats, biodiversity preservation, and public health benefits both physical and psychological. These public health benefits are deeply connected to the presence of thriving wildlife populations and healthy ecosystems.

### The Importance of Natural Areas

Natural areas in Chicago parks include a wide variety of native habitat types including prairies, savannas, woodlands, wetlands, rivers, lagoons, dunes, and the Lake Michigan shoreline. Ranging in size from just 0.25 acres to more than 300 acres, the Park District's natural areas are spread all across the city.

These protected spaces provide habitat, food sources, and safe corridors for resident and migrating species, from common species to those that are rare, threatened, or endangered. At the nexus of three major biomes—the central tallgrass prairie, eastern deciduous forests, and northern mixed forests—ours is one of the most biodiverse urban regions in the country.



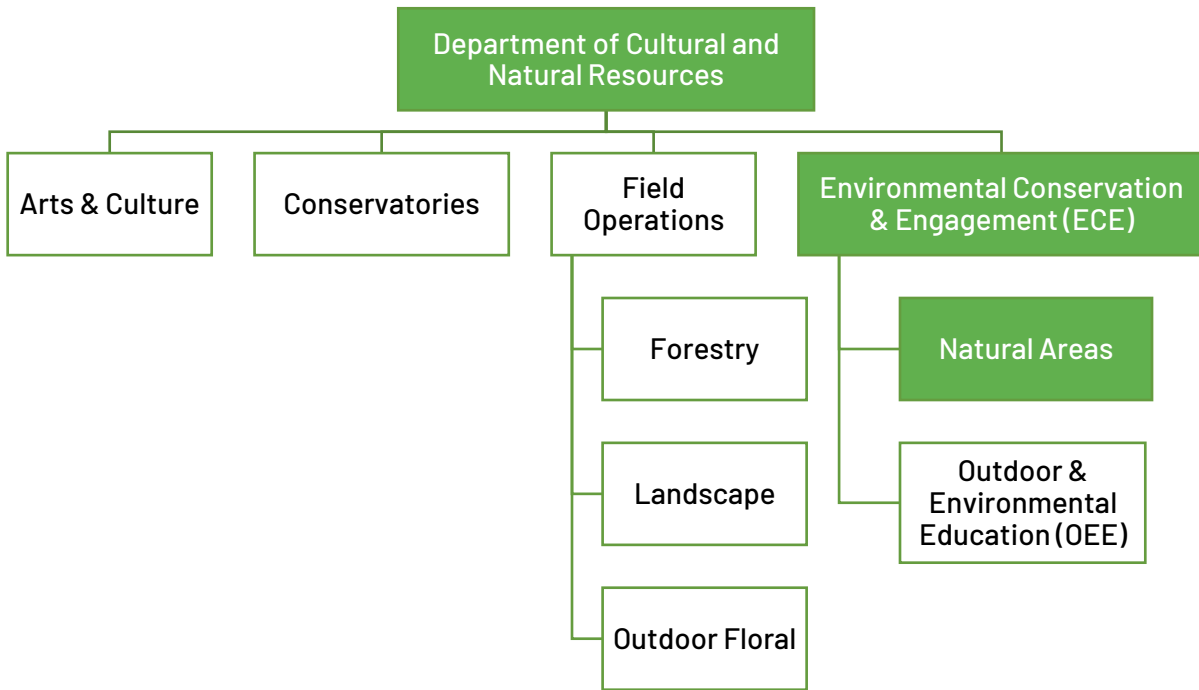
Palmisano Park Natural Area © Chicago Park District

Commonly known as ecosystem services, the benefits that natural areas and native plants provide that support and protect infrastructure and public health include:

- Reducing urban heat and air pollution
- Helping manage stormwater by capturing rainwater, reducing flooding risks
- Filtering pollutants and improving the quality of water before it reaches rivers and lakes
- Preventing erosion and protecting riverbanks and shorelines
- Absorbing carbon dioxide and producing oxygen

Natural areas provide opportunities for recreation, education, nature programming, and cultural celebrations. Whether hiking, birding, or sitting peacefully in nature, many Chicagoans consider natural areas to be special sanctuaries. Your role in community stewardship not only helps maintain these spaces but also strengthens people's connection to nature.

# CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT



## History and Organization

Natural areas were formally established and became part of the Chicago Park District’s programming and land management efforts in 2001. This reflected the District’s (and that of the City of Chicago more broadly) growing and evolving commitment to greenspace preservation and biodiversity conservation. These areas are often established in response to community interest and informed by a variety of criteria, including ecological benefit, community equity, biodiversity preservation and recovery, and CPkD capacity.

The Natural Areas staff and programs live under the Park District’s Department of Cultural and Natural Resources (DCNR) Environmental Conservation and Engagement (ECE) team. In addition to maintenance and stewardship of natural areas, ECE is the umbrella for the city’s three nature centers and a variety of roaming programs such as Nature Oasis, which runs nature-based programming from fishing to bird walks to nature play.

In 2015, the Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy entered into a partnership to establish and co-manage the Community Stewardship Program, furthering both organization’s goals of improved conservation outcomes in the city. All CSP staff and programming, in addition to being nested under the CPkD ECE team, are also managed by the Illinois chapter of TNC under the Chicago Conservation Team.

## Maintenance Crews

Maintenance of natural areas is conducted by internal and contracted ecological restoration crews. As of 2025, roughly half of the natural areas are managed by internal crews and half are managed by contracted crews. Which sites are managed by which crews is not permanent and can change from time to time in response to various site and department needs.

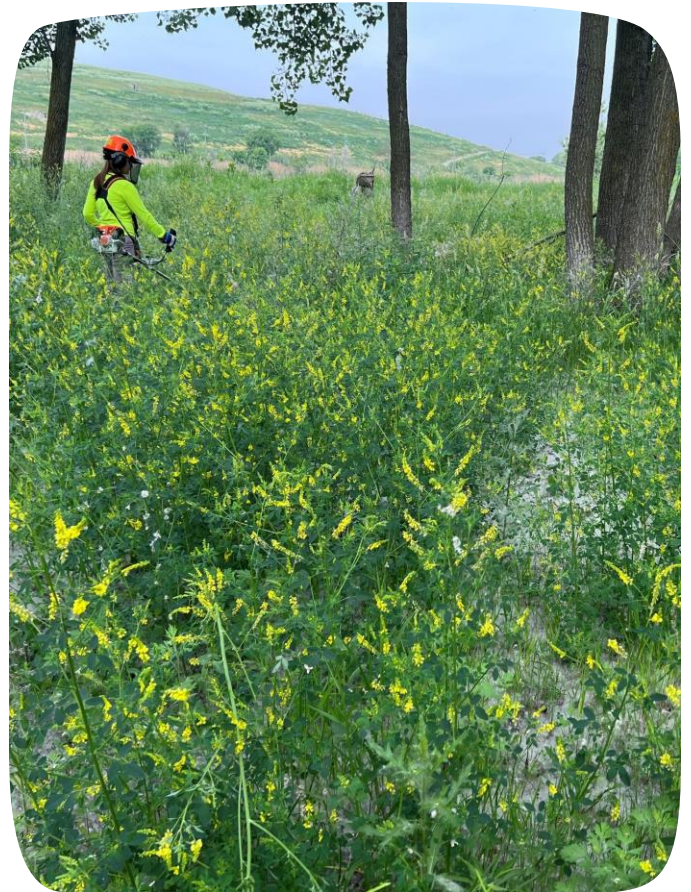
All natural areas and their activities are overseen by one and sometimes two Chicago Park District Natural Areas Managers; one overseeing internal crew sites and one overseeing contract crew sites. They set ecological and

other site goals and work plans for each natural area under their purview. Natural Areas Managers also work directly with the CSP team and stewards to ensure work is coordinated to advance overall site goals.

Contracted crew leadership reports to the Natural Areas Manager to plan work, site goals, and schedules. The contract for this work is awarded via a public bidding process. This contract is a two-year contract with the possibility of three one-year extensions. The current contract can be found on the Park District website or sent upon request from the CSP Manager

Natural areas maintenance crews are active year-round, with increased activity during the growing season. Their work ranges from invasive species management and native plant installation to litter management and tree removal, as well as larger construction projects such as grading, trail creation, or fence installation.

Site visit cadence varies depending on seasonal needs, but regular visits to all natural areas occur on average every two weeks during the growing season. During the winter, activity decreases but continues to include tasks such as prescribed fire, brush removal, and trash pick-up.



Natural Areas crew cut invasive sweetclover  
© Chicago Park District



Natural areas crew and volunteers coordinate on a plug planting at Washington Park © Chicago Park District



Conducting prescribed fire at Canal Origins Park © cassi saari, Chicago Park District

## Prescribed Fire

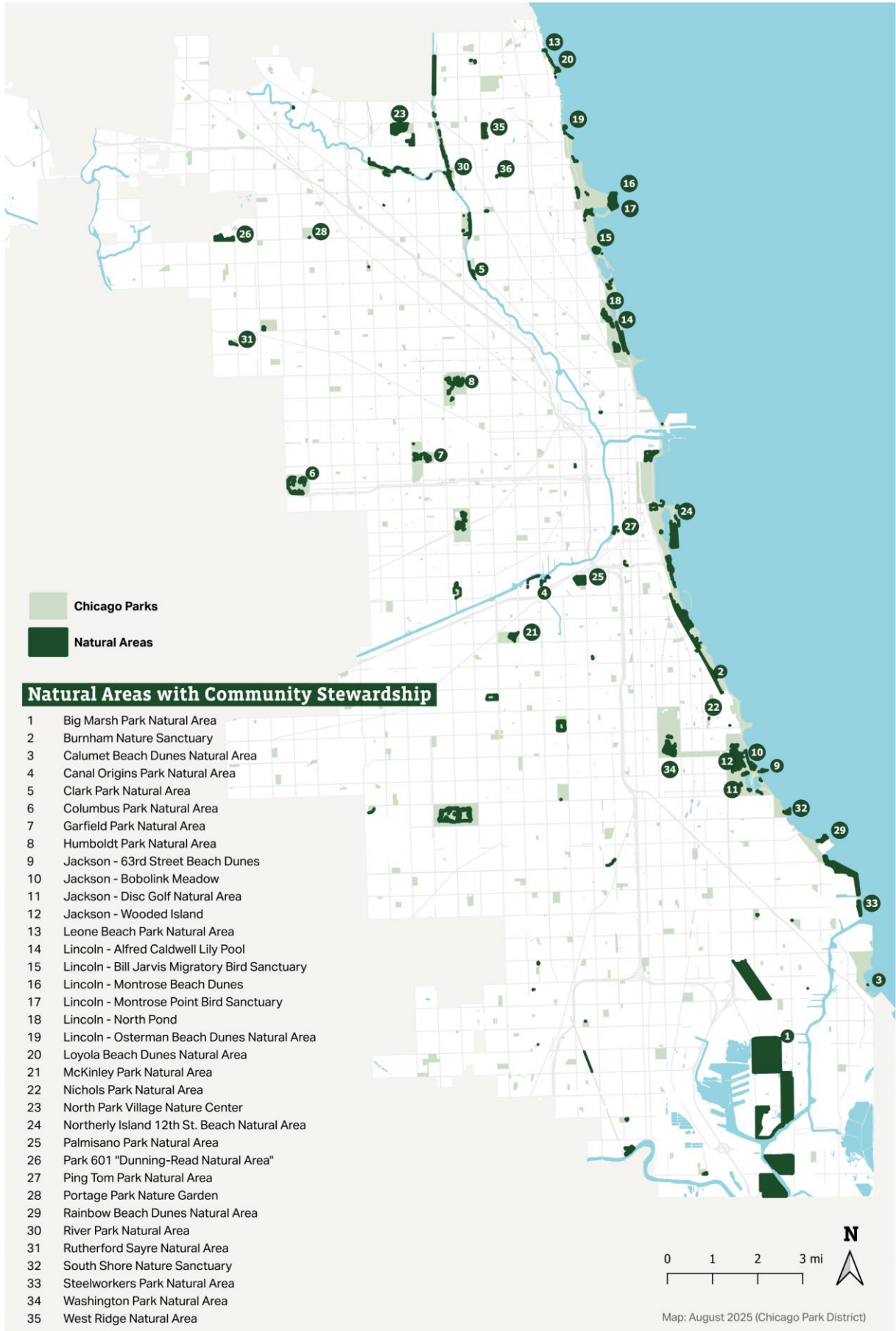
Fire is an important tool that the Chicago Park District uses to further restoration goals. It is, however, an inherently dangerous tool, implemented meticulously by trained professionals. At this time, volunteers are not allowed to participate in or implement fires in Park District natural areas.

The Chicago Park District conducts prescribed fires at select sites every burn season, as well as occasional brush pile fires to remove woody debris. The burn season generally runs from November through March, with exact start and end dates determined by climate conditions in that given season.

Natural Areas Managers maintain burn priority lists based on restoration goals and burn cycles for every site under their purview. These lists change every year and are also subject to change at any time based on evolving weather conditions, burn results, and crew availability. Stewards may request their site be considered for the burn list, but

there is no guarantee a fire will be conducted in any given season.

Stewards will be notified by the CSP Manager when their site is on the burn priority list. It is generally not possible, however, to give any specific dates or much advance notice due to variable and highly specific weather conditions required for any given site to have a burn. At minimum, stewards will be notified the morning of intent to burn.



## Becoming a Volunteer

The Community Stewardship Program welcomes involvement at many levels. Becoming a volunteer can be as simple as showing up to a workday, or it can involve taking on a defined leadership role with additional responsibilities and training. Becoming a volunteer offers many benefits, including learning about plants and animals, gaining hands-on experience in ecological restoration, developing leadership skills, meeting new people, and helping foster an environmental ethic in the City of Chicago

### Volunteer Roles

There are six distinct roles within the Community Stewardship Program: Lead Steward, Assistant Steward, Apprentice Steward, Greeter, Nature Ambassador, and Workday Volunteer. Volunteer roles are open to individuals of all backgrounds. We actively encourage diverse participation to reflect the richness of Chicago's communities.



A flyer for community stewardship days at Rutherford Sayre Park © Chicago Park District



Pulling weeds at Big Marsh Park © Joel Zavala, The Nature Conservancy

### ***Lead Stewards & Assistant Stewards***

Lead Stewards are the main points of contact between a natural area's stewardship community and CSP staff. These individuals are recognized as leaders that act as representatives of the Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy at their respective sites, within the scope of the CSP. In their role as stewards, they can conduct workdays and other stewardship activities with members of the public without direct supervision or oversight from CPkD or TNC staff. They oversee stewardship days and activities and ensure that they are safe and welcoming environments. A natural area can have more than one lead steward, but all sites must have at least one in order for volunteer-led stewardship workdays to occur there.

Assistant Stewards are secondary points of contact between a natural area's stewardship community and CSP staff. These individuals support the Lead Steward in all aspects of record keeping, stewardship day management, and decision making. Assistant Stewards can lead stewardship days in the absence of the Lead Steward with prior notification to the CSP team.

Lead and Assistant Stewards must be at least 18 years old and commit to a minimum of two (2) years of service. Lead and Assistant Stewards must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application and clear a background check before beginning service.

#### **Qualifications:**

- Possess a desire to learn, a strong interest in the management of the Natural Areas, strong leadership and communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.
- Previous experience in natural areas management or volunteering is preferred, but not mandatory.
- Completion of one season as an Apprentice Steward (candidates with prior stewardship experience may be deemed exempt).
- Willingness to participate in supplemental trainings as recommended by CPkD staff.

#### **Responsibilities:**

- Work with CSP staff to schedule volunteer workdays and manage site volunteers. Stewards are expected to coordinate and lead at least four (4) workdays per year.
- Coordinate with CSP staff to contribute to the ecologically-sound management of a designated Natural Area.
- Share observations of public use, community attitudes, and the health of plant and wildlife communities to inform site management plans.
- Support management activities including native species planting and propagation, woody and herbaceous invasive species control, trail maintenance, ecological monitoring, and litter removal as planned with CPkD.
- Coordinate tool and supply requests with the CSP Manager.
- Send communications to volunteers.
- Record attendance and service hours in Volgistics and provide a summary to the CSP Manager following each workday (by Monday following the workday).
- Assist with the recruitment, recognition, and retention of volunteers.
- Provide direction and guidance to Community Steward Greeter(s) and Apprentice(s).
- Option to serve as a mentor to Apprentice Stewards.

### ***Apprentice Steward***

Apprentice Stewards are future Lead or Assistant Stewards in training. These individuals have committed to stepping into a leadership role but require additional training to ensure they are prepared for the role.

Apprentice Stewards are able to assist in leading stewardship days but cannot lead them without the presence or supervision of a Lead or Assistant Steward.

Apprentice Stewards must be at least 16 years old and commit to one (1) year of service. Apprentices under the age of 18 must have parental consent. Apprentice Stewards must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application.

#### **Qualifications:**

- Possess a desire to learn, a strong interest in the management of the Natural Areas, strong leadership and communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.

#### **Responsibilities:**

- Assist with a minimum of four (4) workdays in a 12-month period. If you are preparing to apply for a Lead or Assistant Steward position, you should participate in at least one workday at the site you seek to serve (if possible).
- Take direction and guidance from the Lead and/or Assistant Steward(s).

### ***Greeter***

Greeters are part of stewardship day leadership and assist the Lead and Assistant Stewards in ensuring successful and safe workdays. Greeters are people-focused, making sure that all attending volunteers feel safe and welcome at stewardship days. Greeters also assist with wayfinding, waiver management, and workday set-up/breakdown. Greeters are not able to lead workday activities without the supervision of a Lead or Assistant Steward.

Greeters must be at least 18 years old and commit to a minimum of one (1) year of service to the Group. Greeters must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application and clear a background check before beginning service.

#### **Qualifications:**

- Possess a desire to learn, a strong interest in the management of the Natural Areas, strong leadership and communication skills, and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.

#### **Responsibilities:**

- Welcome and orient workday volunteers.
- Administer CPkD Liability Waiver forms and submit signed forms to CSP Manager.
- Engage with park patrons to promote the Community Stewardship Program, volunteer workdays and the benefits of the Natural Areas.

The above responsibilities are carried out by the Lead and Assistant Stewards at locations that do not have a Greeter.

### ***Nature Ambassador***

Nature Ambassadors lead nature walks or other nature-based learning opportunities in CPkD natural areas. Nature Ambassadors are not able to lead other workday activities without the direct supervision of a Lead or Assistant Steward.

Nature Ambassadors must be at least 18 years old and commit to a minimum of one (1) year of service. Nature Ambassadors must complete a Chicago Park District Volunteer Application before beginning service.

#### **Responsibilities:**

- Collaborate with the CSP Manager and the Lead Steward to offer nature walks or other nature-based learning opportunities as part of workdays in the natural areas.
  - Activities may occur at more than one natural area

#### **Qualifications:**

- Experience leading others in nature walks or activities.
- Knowledge of Illinois' natural areas and habitat types.
- Strong communication skills and the ability to work collaboratively with diverse populations.

Lead and Assistant Stewards may choose to conduct these types of activities at locations that do not have a Nature Ambassador.

### ***Workday Volunteer***

Volunteers without a formal role are welcome to participate in workdays without submitting an application or having prior experience. These can be one-time attendees or regulars who are looking to volunteer their time in support of the stewardship leaders and the goals for that natural area.

Workday volunteers are required to sign a waiver prior to participation. Waivers can be signed the day of the event.

Participants under 18 must have their parent or guardian sign a youth-specific waiver. Youth between 13 and 18 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian to their first workday. Children under the age of 13 must always be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

## Onboarding

There are several steps to becoming a volunteer, with some variation based on the role sought.

### **Waiver**

All volunteers must sign a CSP liability waiver, which should be updated annually.

### **CPkD Volunteer Application**

All long-term volunteers must fill out the CPkD Volunteer Application. This is a one-time application for individuals volunteering in any long-term capacity with CPkD.

### **Workday Shadowing**

In order to become a Lead or Assistant Steward, Apprentice Stewards must shadow a Lead at a minimum of four (4) stewardship days at locations other than their own. Preferably these will occur at at least two (2) different sites. They must communicate with the Lead in advance of the workday with their intention to follow and observe their leadership in action. The CSP staff can assist in selecting sites and making these connections.

### **Steward Approval**

If an aspiring steward is seeking a formal role in a natural area with an existing group, prior approval from that Lead Steward(s) must be obtained before proceeding.

### **Volunteer Agreement**

Lead Stewards and Assistant Stewards must sign a Volunteer Agreement that outlines the general expectations and guidelines. This agreement may be updated any time there is a change in leadership or in the event of a significant change to the guidelines.

### **Background Check and Fingerprinting**

Because their roles involve leading members of the public, including minors, in volunteer activities and serving as representatives of a Park District program, Lead Stewards, Assistant Stewards, and Greeters are required to complete and submit a background check and fingerprinting. Background checks are arranged through the CSP Manager. Fingerprinting must be done through the CPkD provider and cannot be transferred from other fingerprint providers.

### **Staff Approval and Walk Through**

After all other steps have been completed and approved to the satisfaction of CSP staff, the final step in becoming a Lead or Assistant Steward is a site walk with the CSP Manager, the Natural Areas Manager, any other relevant staff and, if applicable, other site stewards or partners. This walk involves a discussion of expectations and goals for stewardship activity at that site.

### **Summary of Requirements for Each Role**

Role	Sign CSP Liability Waiver	Fill out CPkD Volunteer Application	Steward and/or Staff Approval	Complete CPkD Background Screening	Workday Shadowing	Sign CSP Volunteer Agreement
Lead Steward	★	★	★	★	★	★
Assistant Steward	★	★	★	★	★	★
Greeter	★	★	★	★		
Apprentice	★	★	★			
Nature Ambassador	★	★	★			
Workday Volunteer	★					

## Steward Duties

There are a number of minimum duties laid out in this section that a Lead Steward and/or stewardship team must perform on a regular basis to maintain active status. Adhering to these duties ensures smooth program operations, efficient completion and delivery of program services, and streamlined communications. Many of these duties have degrees of flexibility in completion, recognizing individual circumstances. But failure to complete them can result in disruption of stewardship efforts, workday goals, and permissions to continue as an official steward.

### Representing the Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy

Stewards are representatives of the Chicago Park District and The Nature Conservancy. As such, stewards are expected to maintain a friendly and professional demeanor and work environment when interacting with volunteers, staff, and park patrons. We rely on you to create a welcoming environment in the Chicago parks. In addition, all park users, including volunteers, are expected to abide by the conditions stated in the Chicago Park District [Facilities Users Code of Conduct](#).

While the scope of this role is restricted, and you are not employees of the Park District, members of the public will likely see you as THE Park District, so it is important to practice good customer service even when your ability to help or answer questions is limited.

Remember the acronym LEAF: Listen, Empathize, Answer, and Follow-up. This is a simple way to ensure every interaction is respectful and helpful while leaving people feeling welcome and heard.



## Communicating with Media

As stewards, you are acting as representatives of CPkD and TNC. As such, prior approval must be obtained from the CPkD media team before engaging with any official members of the media at any news level. If you have been contacted by or wish to initiate contact with members of media, contact the CSP Manager to begin the approval process.

Occasionally, members of the media or press may approach you for comment during a stewardship event. In these circumstances, indicate that you are unable to provide official comment without prior approval, and direct them to the CSP Manager or [nature@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:nature@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

## Working with Staff

Stewards are embedded in the structure of ECE (Environmental Conservation and Engagement) team and directly report to the CSP Manager. Stewards are expected to maintain good working relationships and openly communicate with the CSP Manager, CSP Assistant, and the relevant Natural Areas Manager.

In the course of their work, stewards may work with or interact with many Chicago Park District and Nature Conservancy staff—from natural areas crews and managers, to park supervisors, executives, media liaisons, IT staff, and beyond. As such, stewards are expected to maintain professional relationships with any staff they encounter as part of their stewardship duties.

## Spring Walk-Through

One of the most important ways that stewards align stewardship goals with the CSP Manager and Natural Areas Manager is through an annual spring walk-through. This in-person meeting conducted sometime between the months of February and April is important for outlining plans for the year, identifying needs, voicing concerns, and working through ideas or challenges in real time.

It is important to note that while the spring walk-through is the only required in-person site visit, stewards and CSP staff can request additional visits throughout the year as circumstance and schedules allow.



Site visit to plan volunteer activities at 63<sup>rd</sup> Street Beach Dunes (Jackson Park) © Chicago Park District

### **Setting Workday Dates**

Setting up a stewardship workday or series of workdays involves a few key steps. This process must be followed for any stewardship event the stewards wish to conduct at their site. Steps can be completed for individual workdays or for a series of workdays.

Note that this pre-approval process is not needed for spontaneous visits and approved actions taken by stewards that don't involve volunteers or members of the public.

#### ***Selecting Dates***

Lead Stewards select the dates that work best for them and their team. Typically, stewards host monthly workdays on a recurring basis throughout the growing season, such as third Saturdays of the month from April through October at 10 a.m. This regularity is not required, however. Stewards can conduct as many stewardship days as they are capable of hosting and the site can handle, but a minimum of four (4) in a calendar year is required.

Once workday dates have been selected, stewards must submit the chosen dates to the CSP Manager for approval and posting on the CPkD website. CSP staff may offer recommendations or, in extreme cases, veto dates if they directly conflict with large CPkD or city-run events.

New approval requests for workday dates can be submitted at any time. Whether it is for additional public workdays or requests for private workdays with, for example, school groups, all must be vetted and approved by the CSP Manager. New dates added to the schedule after the original schedule was approved must be approved through the process outlined here. There is no deadline by which new dates must be submitted, but as much lead time as possible is appreciated.

#### ***Submitting Workday Plans***

When submitting workday dates, consideration should be given to plans for those workdays. Stewards must indicate what their rough plans are for any given workdays. These plans do not need to be extensive or finalized, recognizing that a lot can change over the course of the year. A plan can be as simple as indicating



CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

**NATURAL AREAS**

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Site \_\_\_\_\_

Stewardship Activities: \_\_\_\_\_

I declare that I have exercised my own judgment in signing this waiver and consent, and I further declare that my decision to sign this waiver and consent was voluntary and not based on or influenced by any representation of the Chicago Park District or The Nature Conservancy.

	Name (Print)	Signature	e-mail address or phone number <small>if a number is provided you give permission to receive text from CPD staff and Community Steward to learn about future workdays or cancellations</small>	Zip Code
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				

All event participants must sign the Community Stewardship Program sign-in sheet/waiver at the beginning of each event (that includes Lead Stewards and other organizers!)

that a given workday or several will be spent pulling a certain weedy species. Workday plans can be submitted at the time of submitting workday dates or as part of conversations at the spring walk-through.

**Event Promotion**

Event promotion is an important part of any stewardship day. CPkD and TNC conduct some stewardship workday promotion primarily through listings on their respective websites, occasional social media posts, and posting of signage in the parks. Stewards can request additional promotional support for specific dates/events with sufficient advance notice.

Each stewardship group typically develops their own email list or newsletter for communicating with volunteers at their site.

Stewards are not required to conduct any kind of promotional effort. However, if stewards do choose to do so, any promotion involving the use of the CPkD and/or TNC logo or name must receive approval from the CSP Manager. See the Communicating with Media section for details about speaking to members of the media.

**Workday Expectations**

Stewards are expected to conduct, at minimum, four (4) stewardship days in a calendar year. There are numerous different types of possible stewardship day and ways to run them. For more information on workday types and how to manage them, see the Workdays section of this handbook. At the end of the day, conducting these stewardship days in a safe and friendly manner is the core duty and goal of this program.

**Waiver Management**

All members of the public attending and participating in community stewardship events in Park District natural areas must add their name and signature to the sign-in sheet, which doubles as a waiver, or the individual volunteer waiver. Minors must use the minor waiver and have the signature of a parent or guardian. This requirement extends to stewards, as well.

It is important to note that there are different waivers for various Chicago Park District and partner programs. **All participants must sign the Chicago Park District Community Stewardship Program group sign-in sheet/waiver.** It is easily identified by the presence of both the Chicago Park District and Nature Conservancy

listed in the first line of text. A blank copy of the group and youth waivers can be found in the CSP Google Drive (a resource hub shared with stewards) or can be sent by any member of the CSP team.

Lead Stewards must collect all waivers at their stewardship events and return them to CSP staff as part of their Lead Steward duties. There is no expectation of frequency for submitting waivers during the year, but all waivers from a calendar year must be physically handed off by February 1 of the following year. This can be accomplished either in person or via U.S. mail. CSP staff may ask for waivers at any time.

### **Workday Reporting**

As part of their duties in various stewardship leadership roles, all stewards are expected to help keep records related to their stewardship events. These records are essential for CPkD and TNC to keep track of the program's work, measure progress toward goals, enable reporting for grants and external agencies, ensure legal compliance, and support future growth of the program.

### ***Post-Workday Reports***

By the Monday after a stewardship event, one of the site's stewardship leaders should email a brief report to the CSP team at [stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com). The report should include updates on what work was done, any issues encountered, requests for crew follow-up, and any other notable information. These reports are helpful to the CSP team and Natural Areas Managers for understanding what is happening at each site and ensuring work does not conflict/overlap.

### ***Volgistics***

CSP volunteer hours and effort are recorded via the volunteer management website, Volgistics. Each stewardship site has unique logins to record volunteer hours for their site. Lead Stewards are responsible for tracking and inputting volunteer hours into Volgistics but can be assisted by other members of their stewardship team. There is no expectation on frequency of entering hours during the year, but **all hours from a calendar the year must be entered by the end of January of the following year.**

For full instructions on how to access and use the Volgistics website, see the Volgistics Guide found in the CSP Google Drive. The guide can also be emailed by reaching out to any member of the CSP team at [stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

## Conducting Stewardship Workdays

Stewardship workdays are the backbone of the Community Stewardship Program. By planning, organizing, and leading these events, stewards provide a key avenue through which the public can engage with and develop personal connections with their natural areas. Every steward's personality and skill set is different, which makes every workday across sites and seasons different. No matter what your leadership approach is, all stewardship days should follow a few key steps to ensure they are successful.

### Workday Preparation

The first step in preparing for a workday is setting the date and time in collaboration with your stewardship team and the CSP Manager. See the Steward Duties section for more details about this process.

Once a date has been set, plans should be drawn up as to what volunteers will be doing, and the steward's team and CSP Manager should be notified. The activities that occur on a stewardship day and how events unfold is highly variable and driven by numerous factors, such as site needs, community needs, capacity of stewards, number of expected volunteers, predicted and/or recent weather, emerging site issues, and much more. When considering the many aspects that will determine how your stewardship day will go, it can be helpful to consider the following questions:

- Site—Where will you be working? How will volunteers get there? Where are available amenities such as bathrooms (if any) and parking? Are there any potential hazards or accessibility issues?
- Group—Who is volunteering? What is the expected size of your group? What is the expected age range of your group? What is their experience level and what are they capable of?
- Activity—What will you be doing? What kind of help is needed? Do you have the necessary tools and supplies? Is there an alternative activity or plan if there is unexpected weather or other site issues?
- Leaders—Who is your support team? How many eyes will you have on your group? Can tasks be divided up?

For a list of common stewardship day types and their respective supply needs, safety considerations and other details, see the following Stewardship Day Types section.

### *Requesting Tools and Supplies*

Once the final details of the workday have been formed, it will become clear what kind and quantity of tools are necessary. The CSP team maintains a deep roster of tools and supplies available for stewardship day use. Stewards can request any of these supplies via the supply request form at any time (email CSP Manager for this link). To ensure successful delivery, **requests should be submitted at least one week in advance of the date that the supplies are needed.** Requests can be submitted at any time and the CSP team will attempt to honor all requests but cannot guarantee procurement or delivery. Check your supplies in advance to make sure you have enough for your upcoming workday!

Some supplies are not stored or managed by the CSP team and require a much longer lead time. The most commonly requested items in this category are mulch and wheelbarrows. **If mulch, wheelbarrows, or any kind of heavier equipment are needed, these requests must be submitted at least two weeks in advance.**

### *Weather*

Be sure to check the weather in advance of the stewardship day and determine if it will impact your plans. Generally speaking, forecasts further out than 48 hours are not useful or accurate. Be sure to check your preferred weather service the day before. If you think that the expected weather pattern poses a potential hazard to your workday, do not hesitate to cancel. See the Safety section for more details on what we consider hazardous conditions.

### *Contact Your Group*

If contact information is available for volunteers planning to attend your event, it is always good practice to reach out in advance, usually via email. This message not only serves as a reminder to your volunteers that the event is happening but is also an opportunity to prepare them

before they ever set foot in the park with critical information such as where to meet, what to bring, what to wear, what tasks to expect, last minute changes, etc. Even a short message with these details can go a long way toward ensuring a smooth and headache-free day.

### ***Safety Considerations***

Safety considerations should be top of mind at all times, but especially in the stewardship day planning process. By assessing all the potential threats and hazards found at your park, presented by the chosen workday activity or that might emerge due to weather or other external factors, plans can be put in place to prevent or mitigate risks before volunteers ever arrive. For more information about safety considerations, emergency protocols and other helpful resources, see the Safety section.

## **Workday Implementation**

### ***Setting Up***

- Some activities or sites may require involved setup such as putting up directional signs or marking work areas. Take care of these tasks before volunteers arrive or have trained volunteers assist.
- Be ready at least 15 minutes before the start of the workday.
- Survey the area for any safety hazards.
- Be sure to count your tools before you start the workday.
- Determine the area where you will do your introduction. Choose a place that is as free from distractions as possible. Common distractions include hot and/or bright sun and road noise.
- When the group arrives, find the group leader (if applicable) and introduce yourself.
- As you are waiting for the workday to begin, this is a great time to get to know the volunteers with simple conversation starters or questions about how they learned about your stewardship day.
- Have volunteers fill out required waivers. Be sure to have a clipboard or hard surface to write on.



Posting directional signage can help orient new volunteers. Signs are available upon request from the CSP staff © Edward Warden, Chicago Park District / The Nature Conservancy

### ***Group Introduction and Instructions***

The goal here is to get your group familiar with you, your team, fellow volunteers, and the work at hand. This is one of the easiest and more important ways to ensure the group's safety. There is often a lot to cover. This is where a prepared workday script can be valuable.

Here are a few ideas when delivering your script:

- If you have a group of volunteers who do not all know each other, ask them to introduce themselves.
- Name tags are a great way to create a comfortable environment. These types of supplies can be requested from the CSP Manager.
- The workday may require different tasks; describe each one and make assignments if necessary.
- Give a site overview.
- Establish a "home base"; this is where you can keep refreshments and extra supplies.

- Establish the work area boundaries and a “personal business area” where volunteers can go to take a break or use cell phones.
- Point out any potentially hazardous areas.
- Point out the location of bathrooms.
- Determine how many tools to give out. If you have your group divided into smaller workgroups, you will already know what each workgroup needs. When you control the number of tools, you create a safer workday. Take an accurate count of how many tools are given out.

If the entire group is late, shorten the working time, not the time spent on the introduction and the safety talk. If individuals are late, designate a person to greet and orient late arrivals.

### ***Dividing the Group into Smaller Workgroups***

One of the most effective things that you can do at the workday is to divide your group into smaller work groups. There are many benefits to doing this:

- You can pair new and less experienced volunteers with long-term volunteers.
- Easier to manage—Instead of having to manage 25 people, you can manage five groups of five; the task of management is shared by the people in the group. In addition, the distribution of supplies is easier when you know how many of each item the group gets.
- Safety—Members of the group have a role and all are responsible for their own as well as the group’s safety; leaders can also work with each group individually to talk about the task.
- Team Building—Small groups enable the members to practice leadership skills and to get to know each other better.
- Accountability—The group can encourage all members to participate and be productive.
- Accomplishment—A lot more can be accomplished by a small group than by an individual, and the group is able to celebrate their achievements together.
- Ownership—A group can take ownership of a specific area or task.

### ***Take Breaks***

Breaks are an essential part of every stewardship day. A break in the workday, even for five minutes, has numerous benefits and can ultimately boost morale, increase group cohesion and improve safety. Breaks do not need any structure beyond encouraging everyone to rest and rehydrate. Breaks can also be an opportunity to answer questions, talk about the work in general, refocus priorities or directions as work progresses, eat a snack, or highlight something cool encountered in the course of the workday.

Stewards are not required or expected to provide any kind of food or water for volunteers at their workdays. That said, stewards should always know where volunteers can acquire water or food or access a bathroom easily. Encouraging volunteers to drink water, even on the mildest days, is extremely important.

### ***Workday Wrap-Up***

Upon wrapping up the workday, be sure to thank everyone who attended. Ensure all supplies are safely stored in storage boxes or on-site facilities and consolidate all waste/debris from the event in a trash can or central location out of the way of any paths or roads. If a pickup is needed for larger debris, large volumes of trash, vegetation piles or anything else that requires special attention, contact the CSP Manager with a photo and location of the pile in question.

After cleanup has occurred, stewards need to report on the results of the stewardship day. For full details on what records must be kept and how to report workday results, see the Workday Reporting section.

There are many ways to view and define the success of a stewardship day. At the end of the day, a stewardship event where everyone was safe and the site was positively impacted was a successful day. It’s also important to note that positive volunteer experiences are as or even more important than the work itself. We want community members to return to volunteer again. This is much more likely when they feel good about what they did, understand the work’s importance, and have positive interactions with you and fellow volunteers. For example, if the group got a lot of work done but did not understand

the value of the task or felt neglected, they are less likely to return or build a meaningful connection with your natural area.

### **Canceling a Workday**

Occasionally, circumstances call for stewardship days to be canceled. If necessary, cancellations should be made before the workday begins. There are numerous reasons to potentially cancel a workday. While decisions to cancel should not be made lightly, stewards should feel empowered to make that decision at any time without question or judgement from volunteers or staff. Stewards will always be the best judge of what will make for a safe enjoyable stewardship event and what will not. Some examples of things that may lead to canceling a workday include:

- Weather—high winds, extreme temps, lightning, thunderstorm or tornado warnings
- Medical emergencies
- Large disrupting events
- Impaired access in or out of the park
- Threats of any nature that impact volunteers' ability to feel safe
- Inadequate supervision or team support
- Impaired volunteers
- Lack of available drinking water
- Holidays
- Planned tasks are no longer possible

If the decision is made to cancel, inform the CSP Manager and volunteers as soon as possible. If the cancellation was made late, it is best to remain on site, if possible, to inform participants who did not receive the information in time and still arrive.

## Stewardship Day Types

There are numerous activities that can be done as part of a stewardship workday. As varied as the sites themselves, the activities that take place are influenced by the skill level of the volunteer group, ecological management goals, season, community needs, volunteer interest, site specific flora/fauna, and much more. Each activity may require different instructions, supervision, supplies, and setup. Ultimately, which activities are conducted at any given workday is up to the Lead Steward in consultation with the CSP Manager and Natural Areas Manager. The following sections list the most common types of workday activities but are by no means exhaustive or limiting. All supplies mentioned here are available upon request from the CSP team.

### Litter Pickup

The pickup and removal of trash and debris is likely the most common stewardship activity. Trash is an issue in all CPkD natural areas to varying degrees that not only negatively impacts the aesthetics of the park but also poses threats to wildlife. This is the easiest and most accessible of stewardship activities and contributes greatly to the enjoyment and health of the natural area.

Litter pickup can be done by volunteers of all ages and experience levels at any park year-round. At minimum, garbage bags and gloves are needed to conduct a cleanup. Depending on the nature of the trash being collected, gloves can range from latex/nitrile to rubber palm to leather. Bags can also vary accordingly from thinner trash bags to contractor bags or demolition bags. Trash grabbers can also be employed.

When conducting a litter cleanup, note that there are some safety considerations. The primary concern is trash that can post a risk of injury. Examples include broken glass, sharp metal, wire, needles, containers with unknown substances, and sanitary products to name a few. Always remind volunteers to wear gloves, to note common hazards, and to avoid anything they are not comfortable picking up. Any trash that volunteers cannot or should not pick up should be reported to the CSP Manager as soon as possible.



Pulling weeds, root and all © Joel Zavala, The Nature Conservancy

### Weedy and Invasive Species Removal

Weedy and invasive species removal is a common stewardship activity at all CPkD natural areas and is aimed at reducing the impact of aggressive plants on the health of the natural area. There are numerous plant species that can become problems in need of management. Which species, as well as when and how to manage them, varies by site and season. Any planned removal should be discussed in advance with the CSP Manager and Natural Areas Manager.

All CPkD natural areas have weedy species to a greater or lesser extent. Best practices to manage each species are unique and often driven by the season. The CSP Manager and Natural Areas Manager can provide details on what species can be effectively managed by volunteers, as well as when and how. Generally speaking, weedy species removal involves either hand pulling or cutting with loppers, pruners, or saws. In all cases, volunteers should wear appropriate gloves (rubber palm or leather) and

appropriate clothing such as long sleeve shirts, pants, and closed-toe shoes. Cutting tools depend on the size and nature of the species being managed.

Removal of even the most mundane species can present safety hazards. Primary concerns are accidental harm to self or others when using cutting tools. Volunteers can also be injured when removing things by straining muscles, overheating, encountering hazardous plants, or accidentally striking other volunteers with plant material or tools. These injuries can be avoided by properly training volunteers in best practices, noting common hazards, and clearly delineating work areas.

### **Native Planting**

Planting native plants is an essential part of habitat restoration and a common stewardship activity. Depending on the habitat, hundreds of native species are available for ordering and planting on either spring or autumn workdays. A popular activity for all ages and experience levels, planting gives volunteers a meaningful, visible, and hands-on connection to their natural area.

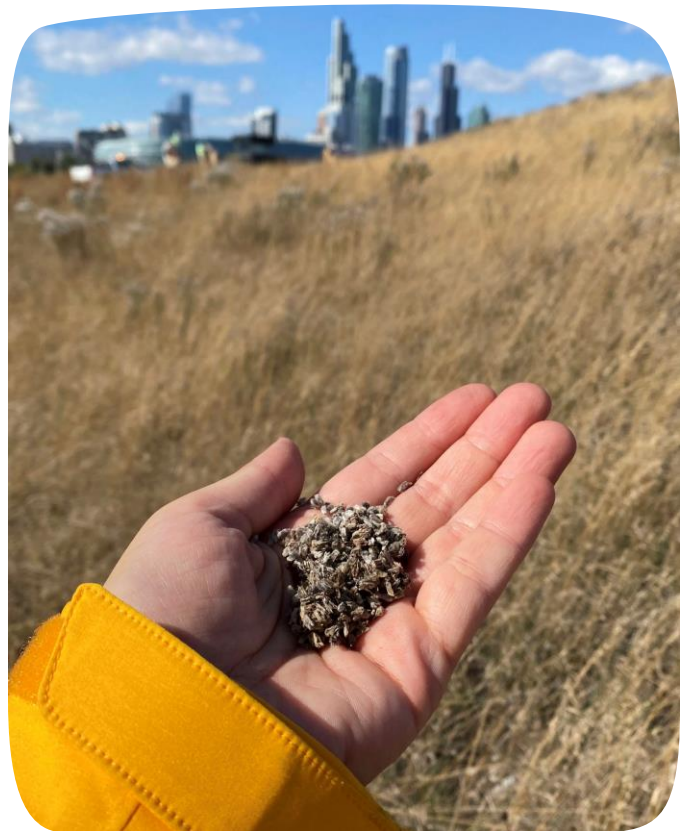
All natural areas are eligible for planting of native plants. The scope of plants eligible for a given site is determined by the habitat and management plan. Species selection is determined collaboratively by the Lead Steward, CSP Manager, and Natural Areas Manager. Plant material is ordered by the CSP Manager and delivered by the Park District or contractor. In rare cases, plants acquired by volunteers outside of the Park District can be planted but only with the approval of the Natural Areas Manager.

Planting is best done in the spring (April-June) or in the autumn (September-October). Some species are particular about season and have better survival chances at specific times of year. Best planting practices can vary by species and the CSP Manager and Natural Areas Manager can provide details.

Planting requires hand protection, digging tools, and watering equipment. Volunteers should wear appropriate gloves (rubber palm or leather) and appropriate clothing, such as long-sleeved shirts, pants, and closed-toe shoes. Depending on the size of the plants, digging tools can range from hand trowels to larger shovels. All plants

should be watered post planting with buckets or other water containers. Other gear, such as kneeling pads and rubber boots may also be useful, along with flags for marking planting areas.

Some safety concerns include injury by straining muscles, overheating, or encountering hazardous plants. These can be avoided by properly training volunteers in best practices, noting common hazards, and clearly delineating work areas.



Collecting native seed at Northerly Island Natural Area © cassi saari, Chicago Park District

### **Seed Collection and Dispersal**

Seed collection and dispersal is an important but often overlooked part of the stewardship process. It is also an easy and accessible activity for volunteers of all ages and experience levels. Proper and well-planned-out seed dispersal efforts can have dramatic impacts on site diversity.

All natural areas can support seed collection and dispersal. Where there are plants, there are seeds. Seed collection season is generally in the fall from roughly September through November, given that the vast majority of native plants go to seed in this period. However, seed collection can potentially happen any time of year, with some spring species going to seed as early as May and other late-growing species retaining seed well into December or January.

Seed dispersal generally takes place in the winter and early spring from roughly December through April. Timing for dispersing seed is affected by such factors as climate and temperature, winter precipitation and planned prescribed burns.

It is impossible and likely not desirable to collect seeds from every plant found at any given site. Which seeds are prioritized and collected is up to the discretion of the site's stewardship team based on volunteer interest, site management goals, desire to encourage certain species, desire to set back certain species, or requests from CSP staff or fellow site stewards. Seeds collected at a site can either be returned to that site or given to CSP staff for dispersal at other sites. If certain seeds are desired for the site but not already found there, CSP staff and the Natural Areas Manager can work with you to source suitable seeds for dispersal.

Seed collecting is an all-ages activity and is generally accessible to volunteers of varying experience levels and ability. Volunteers will need some instruction on which seeds they should be seeking, as well as how to identify them and recognize look-alikes. The only equipment required is receptacles for collected seeds. The most common is paper bags. Other possible supplies include buckets in lieu of or in addition to bags, gloves to protect against coarse or sharp seeds, and cutting tools, such as pruners for seeds that are harder to collect by hand.

While it is a relatively low-risk activity, seed collection involves directly entering natural areas and encountering the potential hazards of off-trail work. Some safety considerations include spraining joints while working in uneven terrain or tripping over hazards obscured by vegetation, encountering hazardous plants, eye injury

from poking plants/seeds, and "splinters" from collecting certain species of seed. These can be avoided by properly training volunteers in best practices, noting common hazards, and clearly delineating work areas.

## Mulching

Mulching is a key stewardship activity that helps maintain safe, accessible trails and supports tree health. Spreading mulch on designated paths or around trees helps to reduce soil compaction, suppress weeds and retain moisture.

Trail mulching can be done in any park that has existing mulch trails. Natural areas without mulch trails should not be using mulch on existing trails of other types, or creating new trails, unless the Natural Areas Manager has indicated a change in or addition of new trails.

In general, trees found in Park District natural areas are not mulched. The scope of the Community Stewardship Program does not generally extend beyond natural areas. However, we recognize that trees outside of natural areas impact the wider park and are linked in numerous invisible ways to the work that stewards already do. If stewards



Mulching in action © Edward Warden, Chicago Park District / The Nature Conservancy

wish to direct volunteer efforts toward mulching trees outside of the natural area, they are welcome to do so with prior approval from the CSP Manager and the relevant park supervisor.

Mulch and mulching supplies are not as readily available as other stewardship items. In order to acquire these things in a timely manner, stewards must request them at minimum two weeks in advance of the planned stewardship event. Generally speaking, the typical supplies include wheelbarrows, pitchforks, bow rakes, and gloves.

Best practices for mulching include spreading mulch in a 2-inch to 4-inch layer along trail surfaces or in a donut shape around tree bases, keeping mulch away from direct contact with tree trunks. Volunteers should be instructed not to create “mulch volcanoes,” which can harm trees by trapping moisture against the bark. For trails, mulch should be spread evenly and compacted lightly to create a stable walking surface.

Mulching is a suitable activity for volunteers of all ages and experience levels. However, it is one of the most physically demanding and strenuous stewardship activities. As such, the most important safety consideration for mulching is ensuring volunteers do not overwork themselves. To avoid injury, stress, or exhaustion, demonstrate proper lifting technique, keep wheelbarrow loads light, ensure plenty of available water, and enforce regular breaks. Additional safety concerns may include uneven terrain, heat/sun exposure, dust and allergens in mulch, and sharp tools.

## **Nature Education Programs**

Nature walks are a great way to meaningfully connect volunteers and community members with your natural area. Guided walks offer opportunities to observe wildlife, learn about native flora and fauna, demonstrate the importance of stewardship, and ultimately build support for your work.

Nature walks can be hosted in any natural area no matter the site, trail condition, or features of interest. These can be scheduled and conducted as part of a stewardship day or the full focus of a scheduled stewardship day. The

route and focus of the walk are up to the discretion of the stewardship team. Walks can be led by any official member of the stewardship leadership team from Lead down to Nature Ambassador. External experts are welcome to lead topic walks, as well, but only with a member of the stewardship team present.

Walks can take place any time of year, depending on the topic or features being highlighted. Some examples are bird walks, wildflower walks, ecology walks, bat walks, history walks, and cultural connection walks. Generally speaking, walks should be suitable for all ages, but some topics may be a bit too advanced for younger audiences. Evening walks after sunset are allowed but require advance notice to the CSP Manager.

Generally speaking, there are no supply needs for a basic nature walk. However, depending on the subject matter, several items may prove helpful for enhancing participant experience, including field guides, binoculars, hand lenses, and other relevant monitoring tools if citizen science related. Field guides and other supplies can be requested from the CSP Manager.

As long as nature walks remain on established trails, there are not many safety concerns. Primary consideration should be given to trail conditions, as well as the impact of other park patrons not on the walk, such as bike traffic, other park activities impacting trail use, terrain changes, etc.

## **Themed Gatherings**

People are at the core of what we do. Therefore, providing opportunities for volunteers and community members to gather in a welcoming and low-pressure environment is immensely powerful. Gatherings are a great way to meaningfully connect people with each other and with your natural area, as well as to create positive perceptions and build communities.

Gatherings can be hosted in any natural area at any time of year. These can be scheduled and conducted as part of or as the full focus of a scheduled stewardship day. The focus and goals of the gathering are up to the discretion of the stewardship team. Generally speaking, gatherings should be planned in a manner that is suitable for all ages

and is welcoming to all backgrounds. Evening events after sunset are allowed but require advance notice to the CSP Manager. Depending on the nature of the event, a special event permit may be required.

Each gathering has its own unique circumstances that affect everything from timing to safety concerns, additional permissions, and much more. Best practice is to consult the CSP Manager to discuss any gatherings being considered and what they would involve—especially large events or those with food.

### **Community Science**

Community science, sometimes called citizen or participatory science, is an important piece of the stewardship toolkit that can advance both natural area management goals and community engagement goals. There are numerous projects that can be deployed at any given natural area, depending on the natural features present and parameters outlined by the projects themselves.

The Natural Areas program maintains a list of approved community science projects. For the list of approved projects and links to resources for implementing them, see the Community Science section below. Each project has its own unique circumstances that affect everything from timing, volunteer experience, level of commitment, safety concerns, and more. Best practice is to consult each project and follow their respective protocols. Stewards are encouraged to reach out to the CSP Manager to discuss projects they'd like to implement at their site.

### **Herbicide**

Herbicides can be an important part of the stewardship process in select circumstances. Lead and Assistant Stewards may apply herbicides at their site under very strict conditions.

#### ***Testing and Licensing***

To apply herbicide, stewards must have and maintain an Illinois Department of Agriculture issued Pesticide Applicator license. Pesticide Operator licenses will not be considered. In order to acquire this license, stewards must take a state-proctored test and pass the General



Preparing for a “sheetlighting” event (observing nighttime insects and other creatures at Park 565  
© cassi saari, Chicago Park District

Standards exam and the Rights-of-Way exam. CSP staff will assist in processing the license, as well as covering testing and license fees.

#### ***Use***

At the current time, stewards are only able to conduct cut stump applications of herbicide on woody plants or hand wicking of individual herbaceous plants. Foliar sprays are currently not allowed to be conducted by volunteers. All plans to apply herbicide must be approved by the CSP Manager and Natural Area Manager, and any herbicide used must be approved and procured by CPKD. At least a week’s notice must be provided regarding the intent to apply herbicides.

### **Aquatic Workdays**

Many Chicago parks connect to or contain bodies of water such as ponds, lagoons, rivers, and lakes. Some of these water bodies fall partially or fully under the management of the Natural Areas team and, as such, are managed primarily for ecological function. In these cases, volunteer stewardship activities can be conducted in the water as appropriate and in line with the corresponding

terrestrial site goals. This unique stewardship opportunity allows volunteers to expand their ecological impact and connect with a part of nature traditionally off limits to the public.

Management of and rules around use of these waters is highly varied and dependent on factors such as CPKD policies, local laws, outside agencies co-managing waterways, environmental factors, and much more. Natural systems do not recognize administrative boundaries, however, and do not stop at the waterline. We recognize that aquatic ecosystems directly impact their surroundings and are linked in numerous invisible ways to the work that stewards do. The CSP Manager can provide information and guidance on the nuances at your site and how stewards can work within this subset of natural areas.

Given the unique complexity and risks of water-based activities, if stewards wish to conduct aquatic workdays of any kind, they must first receive approval from the CSP Manager and Natural Areas Manager and provide a minimum of a week's notice prior to the planned aquatic stewardship day.

While slightly different, aquatic stewardship activities are often similar to and overlap with terrestrial activities. Some typical examples are planting native plants, collecting seeds, removing invasive species, and community science. Generally speaking, the tools used to do equivalent terrestrial work also apply in the water. Boots and waders are available upon request from the CSP team. For each of these activities, see their respective terrestrial section above for more information.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, safety concerns related to water-based activities are numerous. Some of the biggest are uneven/unstable substrate, rough or active waters, low visibility, harm to aquatic animals, harm from aquatic animals, sharp or hazardous objects in substrate or the water column, loss of possessions or tools, and drowning. While all of these concerns can be mitigated by diligent planning, stewards should exercise extreme caution and selection of volunteers entering the water should be done with careful consideration.



Aquatic planting day at McKinley Park © Nicholas Efrosinis

## Safety

Working outdoors can present various environmental challenges, but with proper preparation and awareness, volunteers can stay safe and productive. This section outlines common safety issues encountered during workdays, as well as guidance on avoiding, managing, and reporting incidents.

### Emergency Contacts

Ambulance	911
Police	911
Fire Department	911
CPKD Public Safety	312-747-2193
CSP Manager	312-805-7862

### Reporting Unsafe Park Conditions

In the case of non-urgent but potentially dangerous conditions such as fallen trees or broken branches, collapsing banks, degrading structures, or other hazards, contact the Park Supervisor and the CSP Manager. If possible, re-plan your workday to fully avoid that area. If it is impossible to avoid the area, cancel the workday and contact the CSP Manager and the Park Supervisor.

### Dangerous Conditions

1. If there is an immediate emergency, pick someone (or yourself) to call 911
2. In the case of a fire, CALL 911 and evacuate the park.
3. In the case of a suspicious or dangerous person, evacuate the park immediately and CALL 911.
4. If you encounter illegal or questionable activities, call both Chicago Park District Public Safety and Chicago Police

### Managing Injuries or Emergencies

1. In the case of an immediate, life-threatening condition, CALL 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. Ask people to go to certain points on the main road, in the parking lot, at the

trailhead, etc. to direct emergency responders to the site.

2. In the case of a non-life-threatening or disability-causing condition, go to the nearest urgent care center.
3. For minor injuries, cuts, scrapes, or sprains, let the injured person know that first-aid supplies are available if they would like to treat themselves.
4. After any medical emergency, please contact the Community Stewardship Program Manager at 312-805-7862, and email [stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:stewardship@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

Further information, such as nearest emergency room and urgent care centers, can be found on your park specific Emergency Protocol.

### Incident Reporting Procedure

For any and all incidents that involve bodily injury to a volunteer or significant damage to a natural area, the CSP has an incident report form for documentation. This form includes what happened, who was involved, and what actions have been taken. Volunteers must use this form to report all workday related injuries, illnesses, or “near miss” events (which could have caused an injury or illness)—no matter how minor. This helps us to identify and correct hazards before they cause serious injuries.

After the emergency is addressed, but while all the details of the incident are fresh in everyone’s mind, fill out the Incident Report Form. The form is available in the CSP Google Drive or upon request from any member of the CSP team. This form must be completed as soon as possible and given to the CSP Manager for further action. Anything that requires an emergency room visit or 911 call must be reported to the CSP Manager as soon as possible.

### *Incidents Involving Minors and Youth Safety*

- Youths younger than age of 13 must always have a guardian or supervisor present at workdays.
- These youths must be closely supervised at all times to ensure they are safe and that activities are performed in designated safe areas away from any potential hazards at all times.

- Youths accompanied by adults should be supervised by those adults, who also should manage any safety issues.
- Youths who are 13 to 18 years old must have a guardian or supervisor present at their first workday at a given site. Subsequently, these youths may attend workdays at that site without a guardian/supervisor present.
- Provide adequate training for each youth volunteer.
- Extra attention on managing youth safety should be provided by a designated member(s) of the volunteer group.
- In the case of an injury/illness, medical emergency or other incident, make every reasonable effort to contact the named emergency contact.
- Do not allow youths to leave the workday without first communicating with the emergency contact, no matter how minor the injury/illness may appear. Youths may downplay or not realize the extent of their injury.
- Stay with youths until a parent or legal guardian arrives at the site.
- If you are unable to reach the emergency contact or stay until the parent or legal guardian arrives, contact the police for assistance.
- If emergency care is required, contact the named emergency contact as soon as possible.

## **Navigating Environmental Conditions**

### ***Sun***

Even when the temperature is cool or the sky is slightly overcast, sun exposure can be a hazard. Be sure to suggest that everyone apply sunscreen and wear a hat and sunglasses. Although you are not expected to supply sunscreen for people, it is good to have some available for those who forget theirs.

### ***Heat***

On hot days, you can work in shady areas and start the workday early in the morning so that the workday is done well before the hottest part of the day. If the temperature is above 90 degrees Fahrenheit at the time of the event, please consider canceling the workday. If the temperature is expected to be above 95 degrees, cancel

the workday immediately and contact the CSP Manager. Such high temperatures in addition to physical exertion can result in heat cramps and exhaustion, and potentially heatstroke.

Take periodic breaks throughout the workday—more often on warm or hot days. Encourage/invite folks to take breaks as they feel they need to. Pay attention to changes in skin color, heavy breathing, amount of sweating (or no sweating), etc. of all the volunteers, as these are warning signals.

### ***Dehydration***

Staying hydrated is always important, so water should always be brought out on workdays, and volunteers should be reminded to drink/sip often. All volunteers should be encouraged to bring their own water bottles.

### ***Fatigue/Exertion***

Take periodic breaks throughout the workday—more often on warm or hot days. Encourage/invite folks to take breaks as they feel they need to—this is not an endurance contest. Pay attention to changes in skin color, heavy breathing, amount of sweating (or no sweating), etc. of all the volunteers, as these are warning signals.

### ***Cold Weather***

Although most workdays do not occur during the cold months, if the temperature is below 30 degrees Fahrenheit at the time of the event, please consider canceling the workday. If the temperature is below 20 degrees, cancel the workday immediately and contact the CSP Manager. Such low temperatures are both unpleasant and dangerous. You can mitigate the effects of cold weather by working in an area that is sheltered from the wind.

### ***Other Adverse Weather***

Completing workdays in light rain is acceptable so long as all volunteers feel comfortable and are properly dressed. In the case of any flood, tornado, or other severe weather warnings, cancel the workday immediately and take shelter. Any detection of lightning or thunder requires an immediate cessation of workday activities and cannot resume until after a 20-minute delay.

### ***Insects, Ticks and other Biting/Stinging Animals***

Using some sort of insect repellent is suggested from spring through fall. All volunteers are responsible for having their own, but it is nice to have a backup for those who forget. The CSP team can provide bug spray upon request. If it contains DEET, you should double-check with parents before letting youths use it.

Ticks can be anywhere on plants, so they can be found anywhere on the body. When the workday is done, encourage volunteers to check for ticks on any exposed skin or lightweight apparel. Ticks can take up to seven hours to find a spot to burrow, so remind volunteers to check for ticks before they leave and to take a shower when they get home.

Chiggers (tiny mites) are generally picked up from low grasses close to the ground. The best protection is to tuck pants inside your boots. If volunteers are wearing shorts or open-toe shoes, you may want to suggest they work away from shady areas with tall grasses.

### ***Allergies***

It is helpful to know if any volunteers have outdoor or food allergies (particularly insect allergies), as well as the location of their EpiPen, etc. just in case. Making a point to ask about insect and food allergies during the safety talk can prepare you to better deal with an emergency later. An allergic reaction to an insect sting or other allergens, even if an EpiPen or allergy medicine was used, is a 911 call or trip to an emergency room. Symptoms can return after the medication wears off.

### ***Poison Ivy***

If your work area includes poison ivy, part of your introductory safety talk should include identifying characteristics and pointing out specimens to show volunteers. Remind them that it is the oil that causes the reaction, so gloves can protect your hands. But rubbing your gloves or sleeves on your face or arms or touching your pants or socks can spread the oil. Avoidance is the best prevention. Wash your clothing after the workday to remove the oil. Tecnu is a product available at most drugstores that, when combined with cold water, removes the oil from your skin. It is best used as soon as

you know you have been exposed to poison ivy. Dish soap will also help remove the oil.

### ***On the Ground***

Be alert for vines or stumps that are in the work area. If possible, remove or flag such trip hazards before the workday starts. Alert volunteers about any slick spots or holes in the work area. For volunteers new to working in a natural area, suggest they lift their feet higher as they walk to prevent tripping. (Use the Woods Walk, not the City Shuffle!)

### ***From Above***

During your safety talk, mention that there are often hazards above your head that can come down because of work done at ground level. Remember to look up, especially when cutting down taller vegetation.



Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) © cassi saari, Chicago Park District

## **Other Reporting**

### ***Chicago Park District Office of Prevention and Accountability (OPA)***

The Office of Prevention and Accountability (OPA) supports the Chicago Park District's commitment to providing an equitable, inclusive, safe, and respectful recreation and work environment free from discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, sexual

misconduct, workplace violence, abuse and neglect of children and vulnerable adults, and retaliation.

If you are in immediate fear for your safety or in any other emergency, please call 911. If you witness or experience discrimination, harassment, sexual misconduct, workplace violence, or retaliation while volunteering, please report it to the Park District's Office of Prevention and Accountability (OPA) via one of the following options:

- **Online:** Submit online complaint
- **By telephone** (Confidential Hotline): (312) 742-50PA (312-742-5672)
- **By email:** OPA@ChicagoParkDistrict.com

***Chicago Park District Office of Inspector General (OIG)***

The Office of the Inspector General investigates allegations of fraud, waste, and abuse or misconduct by Chicago Park District employees, Board members, contractors, agents, or volunteers. This includes mismanagement of Park District resources, and theft, bribery, or ethics violations. Some examples of what should be reported to the OIG include:

- Misconduct - violation of Park District Code, ethics ordinance, etc.
- Waste or mismanagement of Park District assets or resources
- Contract or procurement fraud
- Criminal activity, such as theft or bribery, that involves employees, Board members, contractors, agents or volunteers (report any emergency criminal activity to the Chicago Police Department)
- Any individual who contacts the OIG can report information openly, anonymously, or confidentially. When filing a complaint, please provide as much information about the alleged incident as possible: who, what, when, where and how.

Submit a report to the Office of the Inspector General through one of the following options:

- **Online:** Submit online complaint
- **By telephone** (Confidential Hotline): (312) 742-3333
- **By fax:** (312) 742-9505
- **In writing:** Chicago Park District Office of Inspector General, 740 N. Sedgwick St., 3rd Floor, Chicago, IL 60654
- **In person:** 740 N. Sedgwick St., 3rd Floor, Chicago, IL 60654

## Policies, Rules, and Regulations

Community stewards are legally Chicago Park District volunteers and must adhere to Chicago Park District policies and procedures. They are also expected to adhere to The Nature Conservancy policies as well.

All park users, including volunteers, are expected to abide by the conditions stated in the Chicago Park District [Facilities Users Code of Conduct](#). For additional rules pursuant to all Chicago Park District parks and facilities, see [Park Policies](#) and the [Chicago Park District Code](#).

Responsibilities and guidelines for each stewardship role are found in the Volunteer Roles section.

### Discrimination

Chicago Park District has policies addressing discrimination (see above). We expect our volunteers to abide by those same policies, and we are also committed to ensuring that our volunteers are protected by those policies. If you experience or witness discriminatory behavior, report it to the CSP Manager immediately.

Each site in the CSP must have a transparent process for welcoming interested volunteers, such as a public-facing email or newsletter to sign up for. As a public agency, the Park District values inclusiveness; anyone interested in volunteering is to be fairly considered. Stewards may make decisions based on operational capacity, needs, or past behavior but never on personal characteristics protected by law.

### Natural Areas Rules and Regulations

The rules below are to protect plants, animals, and native habitats found in the Chicago Park District Natural Areas. **If you encounter someone violating the Chicago Park District rules or regulations, contact CPKD Public Safety at 312-747-2193. For emergencies, call 911.**

#### Hours

Natural Areas are open from dawn to dusk.

#### Pets

Pets are not allowed within Natural Areas. Birds and other animals see dogs and cats (even small or friendly ones) as



Rainbow Beach Dunes welcome and rules signage  
© cassi saari, Chicago Park District

predators, and pets have been known to bark at, chase or even kill wildlife. Studies have shown that the presence of a dog, even if it is well-behaved and on a short leash, can alter wildlife behavior more than a human walking through the same space alone. Wildlife may run or fly away, stop feeding or even be deterred from entering areas where dogs have left their mark. And people see more wildlife in areas where dogs are not allowed. Leashed pets are welcome in most areas of the parks, other than beaches and Natural Areas. [Visit the dog-friendly areas page](#) to find a park space that permits off-leash dogs.

#### Trails

Stay on paths and trails, and do not enter fenced-off areas. Avoid using wet trails; if you leave footprints, you

are damaging the trail. You can also reduce your likelihood of encountering ticks by staying on trails.

### ***Collecting***

No collecting, hunting, trapping, removing, or damaging plants, animals or other park features is permitted. This includes, but is not limited to, individual organisms, wood, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits/seeds, fungi and inorganic material. Fishing from designated areas, in compliance with state licensing requirements, is permitted (see [Fishing Areas](#) for more information). For scientific research projects that propose monitoring or collection, see the [Research Permit](#) page.

### ***Feeding Wildlife***

For the protection of animals and visitors alike, feeding wildlife is prohibited. There are many reasons for this. Certain types of food can be harmful to different types of animals. Animals that are habituated to humans are more vulnerable to harm and may react unpredictably, such as by biting or scratching. Young animals that learn to rely on human food may not be able to feed themselves effectively when older. When people feed animals, animals often gather in unusual concentrations and are at higher risk of spreading diseases to each other, as well as to humans and pets. Urban raccoons, for example, are at high risk for rabies and roundworm, which can spread to humans, as well as distemper and parvovirus, which can spread to dogs. The best ways to support local wildlife are advocating for conservation and research, as well as volunteering to expand and improve native habitats by planting native plants and removing invasive species.

### ***Wheels***

Motorized vehicle use, bicycling, skating, skateboarding, or using any other recreational pedestrian conveyance devices is not allowed within Natural Areas. Mobility devices used by individuals with physical limitations are welcome.

### ***Fires***

Fires are not allowed in Natural Areas. Grilling is allowed only in [designated areas](#). Please use dedicated red “used-coal” receptacles and do not dump coals on the ground or at the foot of trees. This will damage or kill trees and may

start wildfires. For information about the Chicago Park District’s prescribed burn program, see [Prescribed Burns](#).

### ***Swimming***

Swimming and wading are not permitted in Natural Areas. For a list of permitted swimming locations, see [Beaches](#).

### ***Fishing***

Fishing in designated areas, with annual compliance with state requirements, is permitted. Please fish from hard surfaces, and do not stand on vegetation. Standing at the shoreline edge causes damage to native habitat, as well as erosion. Learn more about fishing in the parks at [Fishing Areas](#).

### ***Smoking and Alcohol Use***

Smoking (including e-cigarettes) is not permitted on Chicago Park District property. Alcohol is not allowed except as part of a permitted event or if purchased from licensed Chicago Park District concessions/vendors.

### ***Trash and Recycling***

Pack in, pack out. Help keep the parks clean by using designated trash and recycling bins. If a bin is overflowing, contact the Park Supervisor listed on the Chicago Park District webpage for each park.

### ***Event Permits***

Some outdoor activities and events require a permit. For example, amplified sound, tents, stages, and events with 50 or more people require a permit. Photography and/or videography for special events, commercial projects, documentaries, or school projects also require a permit. For a more detailed list and information on how to apply, see [Do I need a permit?](#)

## Continuing Education

The Community Stewardship Program is invested in the continuing education and development of stewards and stewardship volunteers. With that goal in mind, a variety of classes, trainings, and other professional development opportunities are offered on a regular basis for free or as special access.

### Volunteer Stewardship Network

The Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN) is a Nature Conservancy program that offers grants and scholarships to support groups and individuals doing stewardship work across the state of Illinois. The three primary funding vehicles are the class scholarships, community convening fund, and stewardship fund. CSP volunteers have access to all of these funds. To take advantage of these, stewards can contact VSN staff directly at [vsn@tnc.org](mailto:vsn@tnc.org), or the CSP Manager.

### Conferences

The CSP currently covers registration fees for two local conferences: Wild Things Conference and the Chicago Wilderness Congress. Both conferences occur every two years, usually on alternating years. The CSP Manager will provide a registration sign-up form ahead of each

conference. To take advantage of this benefit, stewards must fill out the form provided by the CSP Manager.

### Internal Resources and Trainings

A variety of internal trainings and classes are available to stewards via The Nature Conservancy's internal training portal. These classes are free, virtual classes that are completed at your own pace. To take advantage of this benefit, stewards must contact the CSP Manager to set up an account.

### External Resources and Trainings

There are many excellent courses and certifications on a variety of environmental topics offered in Chicagoland. The Community Stewardship Program does not currently offer direct scholarships, payment, or reimbursement for classes offered by external organizations. The CSP team is happy however to assist stewards in identifying opportunities, seeking resources, providing letters of reference, and other support to ensure success.



Site walk at Northerly Island Natural Area © Leisl Helminiak

## Community Science Projects

The Chicago Park District serves as a “living laboratory,” with dozens of [research and monitoring projects](#) occurring throughout the parks annually. Findings help researchers and land managers better understand our local ecosystems and can directly inform the district’s management practices. Some research projects involve members of the public collecting and/or assessing data, called community science (also called “citizen science” or “participatory science”). An overview of some of these programs is provided below.

Unstructured, self-directed projects are ones that do not require any prior training, have no barrier to entry, and can be done by anyone at any time. Coordinated, protocol-based projects are more centrally managed and directed toward specific questions or taxa. These often require some kind of training before monitoring can be conducted.

### Unstructured, self-directed projects

#### *iNaturalist*

iNaturalist is a website and mobile app where anyone can easily share their nature sightings, whether it is plant, mammal, fungus or any other life or signs of life. Snap a photo or record a sound, and your observations become

part of the global database. Data from the iNaturalist platform are frequently used in academic research and to better understand our parks. Search for your local park on the iNaturalist map to see what kinds of wildlife live and grow there. [www.inaturalist.org](http://www.inaturalist.org)

#### *eBird*

eBird is a bird-focused project where participants share more than 100 million bird sightings annually. These sightings become detailed data about bird species distributions, abundance, habitat use, and annual trends. [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org)

### Coordinated, protocol-based projects

#### *Bat Tracker*

Bats use ultrasonic (higher than human hearing) echolocation to navigate their environment. One method to study bats is to record those calls, which are unique to each species. Community scientists collect bat acoustic data using a standardized protocol that consists of walking with an iPad and ultrasonic microphone on set paths that span key urban habitats. This initiative is hosted through the Lincoln Park Zoo’s Urban Wildlife Institute. [www.lpzoo.org/science-project/monitoring-bat-diversity-in-and-around-chicago/](http://www.lpzoo.org/science-project/monitoring-bat-diversity-in-and-around-chicago/)



Using iNaturalist to identify a gall on an oak leaf © cassi saari

### ***Plants of Concern***

This Chicago Botanic Garden's Plants of Concern program trains volunteers to monitor population trends in rare plants across northeastern and southern Illinois.

Volunteers are trained in plant identification, the use of GPS equipment, and the use of plant survey methods and the program protocol. Online training modules make getting started easy. [www.plantsofconcern.org](http://www.plantsofconcern.org)

### ***Budburst***

Budburst is a community-focused, data-driven approach to plant conservation housed at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Whether in a park or your own backyard, make observations of plant life cycles and plant-animal interactions to help researchers address important environmental questions about climate change and ecology. Several different activities and curricula are available for groups, educators, individuals, and families. [www.budburst.org](http://www.budburst.org)

### ***Bird Conservation Network***

In partnership with the Bird Conservation Network, local ornithologists and volunteers conduct point counts of birds at several parks citywide throughout the breeding season. Data from this program are used in ongoing studies about long-term trends in local bird populations. [www.bcnbirds.org](http://www.bcnbirds.org)

### ***Project MartinWatch***

Volunteers monitor purple martin nesting towers at several Chicago Park District locations: Bill Jarvis Migratory Bird Sanctuary, Jackson Park-Columbia Basin, Hegewisch Marsh, Lincoln Park-Montrose Harbor, and South Shore Cultural Center. Data from this program are submitted to the Purple Martin Conservation Association. For more information, contact [nature@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:nature@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

### ***Chicago Nighthawk Project***

This citizen science program focuses specifically on the nocturnal birds called Common Nighthawks. The project aims to collect information on where these birds are found, what factors determine their presence, and how to slow their nationwide decline.

[www.chicagobirder.org/chicago-nighthawk-project](http://www.chicagobirder.org/chicago-nighthawk-project)

### ***Calling Frog Survey***

Housed at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, this program trains volunteers to identify frogs and toads by sound, and to collect data on these species at sample sites in and around Chicago. The purpose of this survey is to collect baseline data on calling frog populations in the region, and to better detect significant changes in the future. [www.frogssurvey.org](http://www.frogssurvey.org)

### ***Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network***

The Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network trains volunteers to identify butterfly species and survey populations at sites across the state. This initiative is housed through the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum. [www.bfly.org](http://www.bfly.org)

### ***Illinois Odonate Survey***

The Illinois Odonate Survey trains volunteers to identify dragonfly and damselfly species, and to collect population counts at natural areas across the state. This initiative is housed through the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum. [www.illinoisodes.org](http://www.illinoisodes.org)

### ***Singing Insects Monitoring Program***

This citizen science program trains volunteers to recognize the calls of native singing insects including crickets, grasshoppers, and katydids. The purpose of this survey is to collect baseline data on calling insect populations in Chicago. [www.singinginsects.net](http://www.singinginsects.net)

### **Looking for more?**

Even more citizen science projects, including online-only options, are listed at [www.scistarter.org](http://www.scistarter.org).

## FAQs

### What is a Natural Area?

Throughout Chicago, our park system is filled with nature. The Chicago Park District contains nearly 2,000 acres of Natural Areas, critical habitat for local and migratory wildlife. Natural Areas encompass a rich diversity of ecosystem types, ranging from prairies and savannas to woodlands, wetlands, rivers, lakes, and dunes. These unique places also provide opportunities to explore nature, hike, volunteer or simply enjoy the richness and beauty of nature in its many forms.

### What time are Natural Areas open?

Chicago Park District Natural Areas are open to the public from dawn to dusk daily unless otherwise posted.

### Where are the Natural Areas?

Visit the Chicago Park District [Natural Areas homepage](#) to view a map and webpage for each Natural Area. To view the boundaries of Natural Areas, view [this map](#).

### What are the rules and regulations in Natural Areas?

The rules and regulations that pertain to Natural Areas and protect plants, animals and native habitats can be found [on this page](#). If you encounter someone violating the Chicago Park District rules or regulations in Natural Areas, please contact Chicago Park District Public Safety at 312-747-2193. For emergencies, call 911. For additional rules pursuant to all Chicago Park District parks and facilities, see the [Chicago Park District Code](#).

### How can I get involved with or volunteer in a Natural Area?

Community stewardship of Natural Areas can include litter pickup, trail maintenance, invasive plant removal, and native plant installation, as well as nature-based activities such as birding and plant identification walks. Please visit our [Community Stewardship Program page](#) for more information on volunteering in Natural Areas.

### Why aren't pets permitted in Natural Areas?

Birds and other animals see dogs and cats (even small or friendly ones) as predators, and pets have been known to bark at, chase or even kill wildlife. Studies have shown that the presence of a dog, even if it is well-behaved and

on a short leash, can alter wildlife behavior more than a human walking through the same space alone. Wildlife may run or fly away, stop feeding or even be deterred from entering areas where dogs have left their mark. People also see more wildlife in areas where dogs are not allowed. Leashed pets are welcome in most areas of the parks, other than beaches and Natural Areas. Visit the [dog-friendly areas page](#) to find a park space that permits off-leash dogs.

### What should I do if I encounter an issue with a wild animal?

If you find a wild animal that seems sick, injured, or alone, the best thing to do is often nothing. Illness and death are natural parts of the food web and young animals are rarely abandoned. Its parent is often nearby and providing proper care and it may be a normal part of development for a young animal to be alone. Handling wildlife is unsafe for yourself, often harmful to the animal, and may be illegal without permits. If there is a wildlife related emergency, including car/animal collisions or animal bites, call 911. For detailed information on managing wildlife situations, please visit the Illinois Department of Natural Resource's [Wildlife Illinois website](#).

### What are invasive species?

Invasive species are a subset of non-native organisms that pose a threat to native ecosystems, the economy, and/or human health. Because of their aggressive growth or lack of natural predators, they can be highly destructive, competitive, and difficult to control. Invasive plants may change the structure of a plant community, alter the physical and chemical nature of the soil, or cover or shade native plants trying to grow. The Chicago Park District manages invasive species in natural areas to restore and maintain native habitats.

### Why was the Natural Area mowed?

Mowing is a common management tool, particularly in the early years of a habitat restoration project. Mowing reduces the pressure of weeds, particularly annual and biennial species, that grow very quickly and can outcompete native perennial seedlings, which grow much more slowly. While mowing can be jarring to see, the overall goal is to increase the odds of success of native

plants to improve the long-term ecological quality of an area.

### **Why was a tree cut down? Will it be replaced?**

Trees and shrubs may be cut down for several reasons, including disease, structural instability, damage from storms, when they pose a risk to public safety, or if they are weedy or invasive species. The Park District aims to replace removed trees when possible, but they may not always be replaced in the exact location where a tree was removed.

### **Can I grill or have a bonfire in a Natural Area?**

Fires are not allowed in Natural Areas. Grilling in parks is allowed only in [designated areas](#). Please use dedicated red “used-coal” receptacles, and do not dump coals on the ground or at the foot of trees, as that will damage or kill trees and may start wildfires.

### **Is foraging or other collection of plants, animals, mushrooms, firewood, or other natural materials allowed?**

Foraging, collecting, hunting, trapping, removing or damaging plants, animals or other park features is not permitted. This includes, but is not limited to, individual organisms, wood, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits/seeds, fungi and inorganic material. Fishing from designated areas, in compliance with state requirements, is permitted (see [Fishing Areas](#) for more information). For scientific research projects that involve monitoring or collection, see the [Research Permit page](#). If you see someone damaging or removing natural materials from a park, contact CPKD Public Safety at 312-747-2193.

### **Do I need a permit for my event in a Natural Area?**

Some outdoor activities and events require a permit. For example, amplified sound, tents, stages and events with 50 or more people require a permit. Photography and/or videography for special events, commercial projects, documentaries, or school projects also require a permit. For a more detailed list and information on how to apply, see our [Do I need a permit](#) page.

### **To whom should I direct people with questions or concerns about a Natural Area?**

For questions regarding Chicago Park District Natural Areas, email [nature@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:nature@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

### **Why does the Chicago Park District conduct prescribed burns?**

Prescribed burn management is used in Chicago Park District Natural Areas to achieve several objectives:

- Reduce the spread of weeds and undesirable woody vegetation
- Promote the growth of native plants
- Enrich and return nutrients back to the soil by burning off dead vegetation on the ground
- Encourage plant germination by allowing sunlight to warm the dark soil

This management technique is used widely by land managers throughout the Midwest and globally in similar habitat types. Without fire, Chicago natural areas can become dense thickets of weeds with little variety of plant and animal life.

### **Does the Chicago Park District notify the public of prescribed burns?**

The Chicago Park District notifies neighborhood groups, city officials and park advisory councils at least two weeks prior to the burn season if a burn is planned in their district. In addition, signs are posted at the natural area entrances prior to the burn. On the day of the burn, the Park District notifies the fire departments and city officials. Fire departments are called at the beginning and end of each burn.

### **What is the process for a prescribed burn?**

The Chicago Park District Department of Natural Resources carefully assesses the needs of each natural area to determine the management needs of that site. Once the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the City of Chicago grant a permit to the Chicago Park District to carry out the prescribed burns, a professional prescribed burn manager prepares a burn prescription plan specific to each individual site. The burn plan includes areas targeted for the burn, ignition patterns and the location of firebreaks. A firebreak can be a road, a mowed path or a burned strip of land, which will stop a fire and contain it to a controlled area. The burn plan also specifies ideal weather conditions, number of staff, and

type of equipment needed and the ecological goals of the burn. Only professional, well-equipped, fully trained burn crews carry out the prescribed burns under the supervision of the prescribed burn manager. On the day of the burn, the crews carry cell phones and two-way radios. Ample portable water tanks and a water truck are also present the day of the burn.

### **What happens to the plants and animals during the burn?**

Fire does not harm native herbaceous plants because their root systems extend far into the ground—often more than twice the length of their foliage above ground. Native grasses have buds that are located beneath the soil surface, where they are not harmed by the flames. Some trees, such as oaks and hickories, grow a thick bark that protects them from fire. Animals stay safe by retreating to burrows, flying away or simply moving to another area. Burns are also scheduled to occur before spring bird nesting season.

### **Does fire cause air pollution?**

Prescribed burns temporarily produce some air pollutants; however, a healthy native ecosystem adapted to fire will remove more carbon dioxide and produce more oxygen in the years following the burn because the vegetation becomes fuller and more productive. To put it into perspective, fewer emissions are produced from a prescribed burn than are produced from frequently mowing a comparable area of turf grass.

### **When do burns occur?**

Burns are conducted in the early spring and late fall. To ensure safety and to minimize smoke emission, trained crews carefully time the burn for a specific range of temperature, wind direction, wind strength, humidity, barometric pressure and ground moisture conditions. The exact date and time are subject to change, depending on whether optimal conditions for a safe yet effective burn are available.

### **How will the area look after a burn?**

Recently burned areas initially have blackened earth, but the sites green up very quickly in the spring. In the season following a controlled burn, the vegetation is lusher, the

flowers are more radiant and seed production is more plentiful.

### **Can members of the public be involved in the burns?**

All burns in Chicago Park District natural areas are conducted by trained and licensed professionals. Natural areas volunteer stewards are notified when a prescribed burn is scheduled for their site. Natural areas stewards may assist the Chicago Park District in notifying and educating the surrounding community about prescribed burning.



CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT  
**NATURAL AREAS**

The Nature  
Conservancy 