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Virginia Begins Master Naturalist Program Emphasizing Volunteer Training

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A new partnership in the state, the Virginia Master Naturalist Program, is a grass-roots effort to train a cadre of volunteers who will work in their local communities to improve the environment. Virginia is basing the program on a model that is proving highly successful in other states and that is similar to the Master Gardener Program.

Partners include Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Virginia Department of Forestry, and the Virginia Museum of Natural History.

“The Master Naturalist Program is all about citizen participation, and we are honored to serve as the home for such a program,” said Harold Burkhart, head of the forestry department at Virginia Tech’s College of Natural Resources. Virginia Tech’s forestry department serves as the host department for the program.

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

Program participants become Certified Virginia Master Naturalists by first completing a 40 hour training course and then completing 40 hours of volunteer service.

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

This year, the program is starting chapters in ten communities across Virginia. Additional chapters will form in 2007. Each chapter recruits participants and trains them in natural history and natural resource management. The chapters work with local partners needing volunteers to assist with conserving, managing, and educating about natural resources.

Persons interested in becoming a Virginia Master Naturalist volunteer should visit the program’s Web site at www.virginiamasternaturalist.org, or contact Michelle Prysby, program coordinator, at 434-872-4580.

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