

## SPOTLIGHT ON OUR PRESENTERS

# MICHELLE PRYSBY



Michelle Prysby was born in North Carolina and completed her undergraduate degree in biology at North Carolina State University. She then moved to St. Paul, Minnesota to pursue a Master's degree in Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior at the University of Minnesota. As a part of her Master's research, she started the Monarch Larva Monitoring Project and conducted studies of monarch population ecology. She next served as the Citizen Science Director for the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, an environmental education center within Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In 2005, she moved to

Charlottesville, VA, where her spouse had accepted a job, and where her sister lives. That year, she accepted the position of Virginia Master Naturalist Program Coordinator and Extension faculty member in the Virginia Tech Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation. She helped to establish the first ten Master Naturalist chapters in the state. In 2012, she left to work at UVA for two years, then returned to the VMN program in 2014 and now serves as the program director. This position has allowed her to travel throughout the State and work closely with our State agency partners.



### **When and how did you become interested in nature and the natural world?**

"I can't remember when I wasn't interested in nature," Michelle stated. "My parents recognized this interest and helped foster it in me through books, pets, access to nature, and trips to zoos." When Michelle was in fourth grade, her family took a six-week camping trip in the western U.S. They visited Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons, and many other natural wonders. She still remembers how much she enjoyed

experiencing those amazing places. Another influence that encouraged her to experience the natural world was a neighbor. "She would have been a Master Naturalist if the program existed back then," Michelle remarked. Her neighbor was a Master Gardener who also loved birds. "She developed a love of birds that I still have. I would constantly be watching the birds in our yard and learning how to identify them. I can remember seeing my first pileated woodpecker and running over to her yard to tell her about it," she recalled.

As an adult, her interest in the natural world led her to get a bachelor's degree in biology. She never considered any other major, unlike many college students who often consider several different majors before choosing one. "I always saw myself as having a career related to the environment, perhaps a park ranger or something similar," she explained.

**Describe what you do on your property to support a healthy ecosystem.**

"Our home is in a suburban environment, like many people who live near a metropolitan area," she stated. "We try to consider our environmental values when we decide what to buy, what to plant, when we do something to our house." They have installed solar panels to reduce the energy consumption of fossil fuels. Pawpaw trees grow in the front yard, which provides food for zebra swallowtails. "We are making an effort to balance the ecology of the yard by building on what was here when we first moved in - such as a large Chinese chestnut tree that provides shade-with the plants we install." They try to use primarily native plants on their 1/3 acre of land and have created a habitat for pollinators. "We have to balance this with the other uses we have for our yard," Michelle explained, "such as space for our dog to run and growing food for us to eat." Their garden includes strawberries, black currants, raspberries, and figs. "The birds get to eat a fair amount of what we plant as well, so it is serving as habitat for them, too," she said with a smile.

They are also trying to manage the invasives that are rampant in their community by aggressively removing them from their own property. "There are up to a dozen invasives including trees of heaven, porcelain berry along the fence with our neighbor, and English ivy to name a few," Michelle sighed. "It is an ongoing battle for anyone with land, regardless of the amount of acreage you have."

**What is the most amazing thing you have experienced in nature?**

Michelle had a theme for the four things she recalls as the most amazing things she has seen in nature. That theme was movement and migration. “When I was in graduate school, I had the pleasure and privilege of visiting several wintering sites in Mexico where the Monarch butterflies go,” she shared. “I went to Bracken Cave in Texas to see the free-tailed bats leaving the cave by the thousands at dusk.” And while at a conference in Portland, Oregon she visited a local park where hundreds of Vaux’s swifts emerged in the evening creating breath-taking swirls in the skies. She also has made two trips to East Africa, where she observed the mass migration of wildebeest on the Serengeti. Although these examples are all a bit exotic, Michelle also says she greatly appreciates the day-to-day natural wonders that are all around



us in Virginia.

**As the VMN State Director, what would you say have been your greatest achievements since you assumed this position – and what do you see as the challenges ahead?**

“Our achievements – and I am not attributing them to just myself – include expansion of the Virginia Master Naturalist program to 30 chapters. This includes a current membership of more than 3,000 volunteers. More than 6,000 individuals have graduated from VMN basic training courses throughout the State over the last fifteen years,” Michelle said with pride. “This wouldn’t have been possible without the leadership roles our volunteers take on,” she continued.

“Having Master Naturalists work in nature is vitally important and it is what attracts folks to becoming Master Naturalists.”

Michelle stressed the importance of having volunteers take on a leadership role. “This is the linchpin for success,” she emphasized. Michelle noted that over the years some chapters have shut down. Her observation was that it almost always is due to a lack of volunteers for the administrative work that is so vital to the success of a chapter. “In order to be successful in our efforts to conserve nature, we need to recognize the importance of having a cadre of volunteers willing to take on leadership responsibilities – be it a Board member, an officer like the President or Secretary or Treasurer or a committee chair,” she stated. “Without that support, the work of the work of Master Naturalists won’t be possible.”

*Interviewed by Charlene Uhl, July 2021*

Photos courtesy of Michelle Prysby

- *Michelle Prysby viewing the 2017 solar eclipse*
- *The Minnesota State Fair has been one of Michelle’s favorite events over the last quarter century, and she was excited on this visit to the fair in 2018 to see a display about the Monarch Larva Monitoring Project, a citizen science program she co-founded back in 1996!*
- *Observing the wildlife migration in Serengeti National Park has been one of many memorable moments in nature for Michelle*
- *Watching the mass congregation of Vaux’s swifts in Portland, Oregon was special not just because of the birds, but because the phenomenon draws in a huge crowd of community members, all coming together to watch an amazing natural show.*