

School forest unites volunteers, watershed



Left: An erosion-control blanket was visible after work on a stormwater inflow was complete at the Scenic Heights School Forest restoration site on the grounds of Scenic Heights Elementary School in Minnetonka. The Riley Purgatory Bluff Creek Watershed District project restored a 7-acre oak savanna and woodland. **Middle:** After a winter clearing, part of the restoration appeared more open as spring undergrowth took hold. **Right:** A gravel bed tree nursery was part of the project. Partners included the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Minnetonka Public Schools, Hennepin County, Three Rivers Park District, the City of Minnetonka, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. **Contributed Photos**

MINNETONKA — Riley Purgatory Bluff Creek Watershed District (RPBCWD) staff seized an opportunity to stack the benefits of their conservation work by partnering with Scenic Heights Elementary School, where a large-scale habitat restoration that started in 2018 will improve water quality and wildlife habitat, reduce soil erosion and revive a healthy ecosystem.

More than 1,000 students and 40 volunteers dug in. The 7-acre oak savanna and woodland restoration benefits Purgatory Creek.

Michelle Jordan, the RPBCWD's education, outreach and cost-share coordinator, credited the project's success to a community of stewardship surrounding the school and its forest learning center.

For more than 10 years, teacher Dawn Christesen has organized lessons, as

Riley Purgatory Bluff Creek Watershed District staff builds upon a Minnetonka elementary school's flourishing stewardship to improve Purgatory Creek's water quality, habitat via restoration

well as volunteers and Scouts' work in the forest — including invasive buckthorn removal, planting and construction projects. The project allowed RPBCWD staff to support and expand upon that work.

Learning activities bring nearly 1,300 students to the spot each year.

The \$260,000 restoration project started in 2018. Funding sources include a \$50,000 Hennepin County grant plus \$45,000 from Minnetonka Public Schools.

Two separate Eagle Scout projects centered on the nursery bed and trail stabilization.

The restoration created distinct ecological zones

based on plant species, tree canopy density, soil conditions, and proximity to water bodies. It also addressed gully stabilization and stormwater infrastructure where culverts had collapsed.

Work focused on removing non-native plants such as buckthorn — an effort that began in 2003— and Tatarian honeysuckle. Both have led to soil degradation and downstream erosion. Some rapidly spreading native trees such as boxelder and black walnut were removed to allow other desired species to establish. Key native species that will be protected include white oak, bur oak, black cherry and American plum.

About 1.3 acres of the restoration will feature open prairie and flowering plants historically more common in the region. That variety will support a range of habitats for pollinators, small mammals and amphibians

Continuing work will involve monitoring the vegetation to manage invasive plant species and ensure native plants take hold. Without intervention, invasive species can dominate the landscape and the soil can continue to erode. Many native plants can be lost — resulting in less habitat for birds, mammals, frogs and pollinators.

Work planned for 2019 includes seeding 7 acres with native plants in late spring, and rounding up volunteers to plant more than 2,000 native flowering plants. Students will design signs and educational materials.

The project runs through 2020.