

GREEN ISLANDS

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Summit Metro Parks Bi-Monthly Magazine

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Naturalist Inspire People to Connect with Nature

Our parks are like green islands in an urban landscape.

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BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS

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The park district's governing body is appointed by the Summit County Probate Judge. Commissioners serve overlapping three-year terms and are assisted by the executive director, who oversees the work of full-time and part-time employees, seasonal workers and volunteers.

Lisa M. King Executive Director

Mike Greene Education & Recreation Manager

Lindsay Smith Marketing & Public Relations Manager

DESIGN & ART DIRECTION

Jennie Levy Graphic Designer

Karl Simonson Graphic Designer

Summit Metro Parks

975 Treaty Line Rd., Akron, OH 443□3-5837

Administrative Offices: 330-867-5511

F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm: 330-865-8065

Liberty Park Nature Center: 330-487-0493

Seasonal Information: 330-865-8060

Volunteer Information: 330-865-8047

summitmetroparks.org

Photos contributed by:

Kim Ardelian • Steve Ash • Jerry Cannon • Mike
Droppleman • Jeff Hill • Jennie Levy • JJ Prekop Jr. •
Karl Simonson • Robert Wilkinson • Ariel Wolford • The
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EDITORS

Stephanie Walton Chief of Marketing &
Communications

SHIELD ASSISTANCE DATES '21

The 58th annual Fall Hiking Spree ends November 30 and forms can be turned in for rewards through March 31, 2022.

Is attaching the hiking spree shield more challenging than actually hiking the eight trails? Summit Metro Parks volunteers will gladly attach it for you at no charge on the following dates:

Liberty Park Nature Center (9999 Liberty Rd., Twinsburg)

Saturday, October 9, 1 – 3 p.m.

Goodyear Heights Metro Park (2077 Newton St., Akron)

Sunday, October 31, 1 – 3 p.m.

F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm (1828 Smith Rd., Akron)

Saturday, November 6, 1 – 3 p.m.

Saturday, November 13, 1 – 3 p.m.

Saturday, November 27, 1 – 3 p.m.

Summit Lake Nature Center (411 Ira Ave., Akron)

Saturday, November 20, 1 – 3 p.m.

complete the 57th annual Fall Hiking Spree.

Approximately 17,000 hikers rose to the challenge and collected rewards, shattering previous records.

Tens of thousands of people have enjoyed autumn by participating in the Fall Hiking Spree between 1964 and today. Are you a “heritage hiker?” If you completed the spree within the first decade of the event, or if you’ve hiked for 50 years or more — even if they are not consecutive years — we’d like to meet you (and your hiking staff) and share a special reward with you.

Please contact us by:

- calling 330-867-5511
- emailing contact@summitmetroparks.org or
- sharing your story with us on our centennial website: summitmetroparks100.org/share-your-stories.

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WELCOME TO VALLEY VIEW

A park (almost) a century in the making

By Stephanie Walton, Chief of Marketing & Communications

In the heart of Akron lies a hidden oasis. Although it's only a short drive from the city center, once you arrive at the 200-acre Valley View Area, you'll find yourself transported to a land that feels miles away from civilization.

“Special” is the word most visitors use to describe this property, and this fall, you can experience this unique Summit County treasure for yourself. Beginning in September, Summit Metro Parks is opening a temporary “Celebration Trail” to mark SMP’s centennial year and invite visitors to explore the site’s rich natural and

DISCOVER YOUR BACK YARD Section

Then and Now

FALL HIKING SPREE

By Christy Counterman, Marketing Assistant

The first Fall Hiking Spree lasted just two months, from October 1 to November 30, 1964. That inaugural year, 1,530 area residents each completed seven hikes in six parks for a total of 9.8 miles to earn the inaugural hiking staff. Fast forward to 2020, when park visitors could choose eight hikes or more from a list of 12 trails to

cultural history as the park district continues to develop recreational amenities.

Originally identified in 1925 as prime land for preservation by the park district's first master planners, Valley View was the missing piece that now connects 1,800 acres of green space across Gorge, Cascade Valley and Sand Run Metro Parks. It was finally acquired by Summit Metro Parks in 2016 and since that time, park district biologists, planners, maintenance staff and cultural resource experts have been hard at work converting the manicured fairways and manmade water features of the former golf course into a natural landscape that supports diverse wildlife.

So, what will visitors see when they arrive at the park this fall? Immediately upon entering the site, guests are greeted by a 19-foot stainless steel sculpture by local artist Don Drumm. Granted to the park district from the Summit Metro Parks Foundation, the "Sun Tracker" sculpture has mechanical, geometric features that are reminiscent of the former farming equipment that at one time worked the land at Valley View. It also features Mr. Drumm's signature sun shapes with sun rays.

The next feature likely to catch the eye is the newly renovated Himelright Lodge. Named for the family whose farm on this property was the last dairy to operate in the city of Akron, the lodge was originally a bank barn dating back to the mid-1800s. When the property later became a well-known local golf course in 1958, the barn was converted to a club house enjoyed by golfers before and after hitting the links. Recent renovations highlight the building's soaring ceilings, historic barn stone foundation and scenic position on the property. In October, Summit Metro Parks will begin accepting reservations for dates beginning in January 2022.

Next, visitors will turn their attention to the incredible landscape itself. For many, it may not be immediately obvious that the land and river in this area have undergone a significant transformation over the past four years. As Chief of Conservation Mike Johnson likes to

say, "The best restorations are ones where you can't tell we've done anything at all." Because the area is now so well-naturalized, it can be difficult to know what has changed.

The first phase of the transformation was implemented with over \$1 million in external funding from the Clean Ohio Conservation Fund to remove non-native turf and trees and to restore streams and wetlands that had been covered to create the golf course. In fall 2017, park district staff and more than 500 volunteers executed an award-winning volunteer nut planting event to reforest the property with 120,000 ecologically appropriate trees.

"These improvements are not only critical to the Cuyahoga River itself, but they ultimately help protect water quality all the way to Lake Erie." ~ Executive Director Lisa King

Next, the park district embarked on a large-scale river restoration funded by \$3 million in grant awards from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Great Lakes Commission Regional Partnership. Restoring nearly a mile of the Cuyahoga River, the project included floodplain excavation and instream habitat improvements for fish and aquatic wildlife, as well as making the river more accessible for water-based recreation such as canoeing, kayaking and shore fishing.

The park district is already seeing the benefits of this land and river restoration as native wildlife return to the site and water quality indicators demonstrate a healthier river. Common wildlife sightings at Valley View include nesting bald eagles, white-tail deer, wild turkeys and more. During heavy rain events this spring, the reconstructed floodplain functioned perfectly, allowing fish to travel freely through the river.

Ultimately, these improvements not only help wildlife, but they also help connect people to nature and launch public access to the property. Once the park is fully developed, the park district anticipates it will attract two million visits a year and result in an estimated \$2.8

million in annual tourism spending for our local economy. Visitors will be encouraged to embrace the Cuyahoga River via the new four-county, 88-mile Cuyahoga River Water Trail, bike on trails including the nearly 100-mile Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail, connect to a 125-mile network of foot trails suitable for beginner or expert hikers, enjoy scenic beauty and wildlife viewing and use one of the all-season park facilities for a group or family event.

So come out and see Valley View for yourself this fall! Hikes along the temporary Celebration Trail are eligible for credit towards the “Hiker’s Choice” option on the Fall Hiking Spree, and interpretive signage will be installed to educate and inform visitors about the site’s past, present and future. For more information and park maps, visit summitmetroparks.org.

SIDE BAR

The ecological restoration and development of the Valley View Area has been made possible by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Great Lakes Commission Regional Partnership, as well as the Ohio Public Works Clean Ohio Conservation Fund.

Foundation support has been vital to the project and has come from the Akron Community Foundation / Capital Fund, Burton D. Morgan Foundation, Knight Foundation, and Summit Metro Parks Foundation, as well as contributions to the project by other foundations and individual donors that will have an enduring impact.

Important in-kind support has been provided by Summit Metro Parks volunteers and Friends of Metro Parks. Project partners include the Ohio EPA, Cuyahoga River Area of Concern and the Ohio Lake Erie Commission.

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Centennial Spotlight:

BERTALAN “BERT” SZABO

First Naturalist for the Akron Metropolitan Park District

Mike Greene, Education & Recreation Manager

Bert Szabo began his career with the Akron Metropolitan Park District in 1957. While working as the area manager for Goodyear Heights Metro Park, early on he started presenting programs for schools, churches and other organizations before being appointed as the park district’s first chief naturalist in 1963.

Among his many accomplishments at the park district, Szabo:

- helped launch the Green Islands newsletter, with its accompanying Woodland Trails nature page
- helped name and create icons for trails throughout the park district
- helped initiate the Fall Hiking Spree
- built both indoor and outdoor exhibits for the park district’s first nature center (today known as the F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm Visitors Center)
- designed the unique millstone portal sign at Deep Lock Quarry Metro Park
- presented special “School of the Woods” programs designed for leaders of youth groups to teach them best practices for leading nature study and field trips

As an early member and eventual president of the first professional organization for interpreters of nature and history, Szabo helped shape how naturalists connect people to the parks. Many of the methods used by Szabo and naturalists he hired to work with him through

his nearly three decades as chief naturalist are still being used today, with some modifications.

Following his retirement in 1991, Szabo has become one of the park district's most committed volunteers, contributing more than 7,000 service hours to date.

In honor of the park district's first naturalist, Summit Metro Parks celebrates his December 4 birthday each year by declaring the day "Bert Szabo Day," and for the month of December, temporarily renaming Sand Run Parkway as "Bert Szabo Parkway." Szabo turned 100 on December 4, 2020, roughly a year before the park district's 100th birthday.

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ENJOY Section

NATURALISTS INSPIRE PEOPLE TO CONNECT WITH NATURE

By Mike Greene, Education & Recreation Manager

Over the nearly 60-year history of naturalists working for the park district, starting with our first naturalist Bert Szabo (see article on page 8), we have deployed diverse tactics to help park users understand and appreciate the full value of their parks.

NATURE CENTERS: FROM RANCH TO UNDERGROUND

I have had the privilege of seeing the transformation of the park district firsthand since I was a child. During the 1960s, I was a regular park visitor to the newly opened Seiberling Nature Center. It had been a small farm that included a recently built ranch-style home. That home was converted to become the park district's first nature center, which was filled with exhibits handmade by the naturalists of that era. Today, we have three centers with core exhibits designed and fabricated by specialty

exhibit firms, although some exhibits are still hand-crafted by our naturalists.

Each center has rescued wildlife unable to be returned to the wild, and these creatures are displayed for public education. When I first began visiting as a youngster, the center had a variety of rescued wildlife outdoors, including an owl, raccoons and even a skunk. When I was hired as a park naturalist in 1991, the old nature center had just been replaced by an underground visitors center. Our education animals included a venomous copperhead snake and a barred owl. Both lived to be over twenty years old in captivity. The last rescued mammal we kept during my tenure was a bat, and last bird was a screech owl. Times have changed, and today due to modern regulations we house only turtles, snakes, frogs, salamanders and fish.

INTERPRETIVE SIGNS: FROM GUTENBERG TO GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Early in my career with the park district, one of my duties was to create small interpretive trailside signs for people to read to learn about history, plants, wildlife and conservation while out hiking. The information was printed onto paper using a hand-operated Line-O-Scribe printing press. After the ink dried, I dipped the signs in melted wax to help them withstand outdoor conditions. Today we still write the text for our outdoor interpretive signs, but the very attractive colorful signs you see in the parks are created in a totally different way using graphic designers and companies that specialize in taking the digital output and encapsulating the words and pictures in hardy plastic resins that can be enjoyed for years.

PROGRAMS: FROM ART TO ZOOM

From the beginning of naturalist programming in the park district and continuing to this day, we have led interpretive nature and history hikes on our trails. Since the 1990s, we have greatly expanded our specialty recreational programming. In the first half of my career, we started naturalist-led cross-country skiing, fishing,

bicycling and canoeing programs. More recently, we added kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, archery, snowshoe and yoga programs (among others) to connect with the outdoors in different ways. We also established a variety of nature art programs, created and presented by an artist who is also a naturalist.

For nearly 20 years from the 1970s to after the start of my SMP career in the 1990s, the naturalists rented 16mm nature and science films like those that were shown in school classrooms. We set up the projector in the lodge at Goodyear Heights on Friday nights to show two or three of the films. Today, we use a giant inflatable screen with special projection equipment to present educational programs and movies outdoors for large audiences to enjoy.

Starting in the 1960s, the naturalists had created more than a dozen 35mm slide programs to give illustrated talks. I helped create even more new slide sets and updated others in my first few years here. We carried our slide projector, slide carousel and portable screen with us to programs in schools, churches and even in the homes of the hosts of garden club meetings. Today, naturalists carry a laptop and a portable projector to display presentations, which can be created with embedded video clips and wildlife sound recordings. Most recently, to better connect with people during the pandemic, naturalists pivoted to present virtual programs via Zoom and other platforms. We plan to continue to offer some of this form of programming to provide better access to those who may not be able to get to a program in the parks.

We continually strive to improve and come up with innovative methods to reach as many of our current visitors and potential future park patrons as possible. To see upcoming naturalist-led program opportunities, please visit summitmetroparks.org or check the Programs & Events section of this magazine.