



What is the Youth Naturalist Program?

Students in grades 6-8 who are looking for a great outdoor adventure this summer are invited to participate in the Youth Naturalist Program from June 8-11, 2026. During the Youth Naturalist Program, students spend time actively exploring natural areas along the Platte River in Hamilton County and nearby. Through time spent hiking and exploring in the prairie, netting for aquatic life in the river and wetlands or observing and learning about wildlife, students develop an appreciation for where they live and a care and respect for wild places. This is an excellent opportunity to gain valuable knowledge about Nebraska ecosystems and participate in outdoor recreation activities such as kayaking and hiking. Students also have the opportunity to interact with professionals in science, natural resources, conservation and habitat/wildlife management careers. These activities will open new doors for students interested in these topics and help them find exciting new ways to enjoy the outdoors.



Who sponsors the Youth Naturalist Program?

The Youth Naturalist Program is a project of Prairie Plains Resource Institute - an educational land trust based in Aurora, NE since 1980. We focus on maintaining and restoring Nebraska ecosystems and create opportunities for education, research, stewardship and community development. You may be familiar with SOAR (Summer Orientation About Rivers), our nature day camp for kids in grades 3-6. SOAR campers explore the Platte River and other outdoor environments around Hamilton County. The Youth Naturalist Program is built as a continuation of SOAR and focuses on developing naturalist skills, outdoor recreation skills and introduces youth to more in-depth topics relating to the natural world.

Who can get involved in the Youth Naturalist Program?

Any student presently (2025-2026 school year) in grades 6-8 is eligible for the Youth Naturalist Program. You will need to apply to be a part of the program. We will accept up to 20 students. In most cases we have been able to accept all students who apply, however if there are more applicants than we have space for in the program, we will select students based on their expressed interest in participating in the program (by reviewing their statement of interest).

When is the Youth Naturalist Program?

The Youth Naturalist Program runs June 8-11, 2026.

The dates and times are:

Monday, June 8 - 8:00am - 3:00pm
Tuesday, June 9 - 8:00am - 3:00 pm
Wednesday, June 10 - 8:00am - 3:00pm
Thursday, June 11 - 8:00am - 3:00pm



Where is the Youth Naturalist Program?

This year we will be visiting the following amazing sites:

Gjerloff Prairie and Sherman Ranch
Bader Park
Grain Place Farm & Local Pawnee Corn Garden
Kayaking trip - location TBD

We are providing van transportation to the sites. Students will be picked up in the band parking lot to the east of Aurora High School. The van will depart from this location promptly at the start time listed for each day of the week to travel to the various field sites. The van will return to the same location at the end time listed for each day.



Why participate in the Youth Naturalist Program?

The Youth Naturalist Program uses an active, hands-on approach to learning about and enjoying nature. You will spend time exploring and learning about the life present in the Platte River and on the prairie. You will have the opportunity to go on a kayaking trip as a part of this program.



You will develop many naturalist skills, from learning about animals and plants on the prairie to gaining an understanding of grassland and Platte River ecology. You will meet people that work in the field of conservation, natural resources, habitat/wildlife management, the arts and science communication. You will view the area where you live in a new and exciting way. Students interested in natural sciences, agriculture, conservation or outdoor recreation are strongly encouraged to participate. Any students interested in spending more time outdoors, hiking, kayaking and exploring these incredible natural areas should participate!

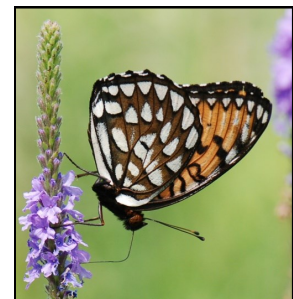
How do I participate in the Youth Naturalist Program?

To apply to the Youth Naturalist Program, visit <https://www.prairieplains.org/education/youth-naturalist-program.html> Scroll down and click the “Register Online for YNP 2026” button OR print the application form and mail it in to the Prairie Plains address printed below. Students will need to complete the application, including the “Statement of Interest”, and have a parent/guardian complete the release information/signature. The registration fee for this program is \$175.00. Financial assistance is available to students that qualify. Scholarships will help cover the registration fee of the program and are based on expressed financial need. If you feel you may qualify for financial assistance, please contact the Youth Naturalist Program coordinator, Sarah Bailey, and request a scholarship application (see email and phone number below). Please don’t hesitate to reach out with any other questions about the Youth Naturalist Program.

Application Deadline: May 1, 2026

Contact: Sarah Bailey
Youth Naturalist Program Coordinator

Prairie Plains Resource Institute
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Aurora, NE 68818
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We hope to see you this summer!