

GREEN ISLANDS

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Summit Metro Parks Bi-Monthly Magazine

ON THE INSIDE

page 4 DISCOVER

Our Greener Future

page 8 EXPLORE

Programs and Events

page 16 ENJOY

Surveying the Summit County Home Cemetery

Our parks are like green islands in an urban landscape.

IN THIS ISSUE

Earth Day 2025

Keepers of the Forest

Our Greener Future

Programs & Events

Surveying the Summit County Home Cemetery

Rooted in Conservation

Mother's Day 5K '25

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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.

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page 2

Our Power, Our Planet

EARTH DAY IS APRIL 22, 2025

Did you know humans already possess the solutions needed to create clean, inexpensive and unlimited energy for the planet through renewable solar, wind and other technologies? This Earth Day, consider harnessing renewable energy to build a healthy, sustainable, equitable and prosperous future for us all. Join Summit Metro Parks for Earth Day programs or learn more about a powerful, renewable future at summitmetroparks.org.

page 3

DISCOVER YOUR BACK YARD Section

KEEPERS OF THE FOREST

By Dave Daly, Lead Naturalist

Forests are dynamic, ever-changing ecosystems. From tiny insects to towering sycamores, a healthy woodland is a welcome, inviting space for a wide variety of life. Our healthiest forest habitats are diverse in composition, including their tallest inhabitants: trees.

We have a wonderful variety of trees in Northeast Ohio, many of which are native. Native trees contribute greatly to the health and vitality of forest environments. Nut producers, like oaks and hickories, provide food for deer, squirrels and turkeys. Flower fluff from the mature seedheads of cottonwoods and willows is a desirable nesting material for hummingbirds and warblers.

On the other hand, non-native trees have little to no established relationships in our forest settings and may even be detrimental to them. Some non-native species have gained notoriety for being invasive, crowding out native species and even using allelopathic chemicals in the soil to stunt and kill off competition. Remember to

consider a tree's native range when choosing a species for planting.

When trees reach the end of their lives, their relationship with fellow forest dwellers doesn't end. Cavities and hollow spaces in old, dying trees make excellent homes for a host of birds and mammals. Detritivores like insects, fungi and bacteria promote decomposition and return fallen trees and branches to the soil, making nutrients and other resources available again.

pages 4 through 7

OUR GREENER FUTURE

By Michael Johnson, Chief of Conservation and Lindsay Smith, Chief of Marketing & Communications

More than 100 years ago, the citizens of Summit County created Summit Metro Parks and established a county-wide organization dedicated to conservation. We began as green islands in an urban and agricultural sea. Over time, we grew into an archipelago and became a chain of ecological diversity and protected cultural resources. With hard work and dedication, many of the islands are connected by an isthmus through which fish, wildlife and people can move, live and thrive.

Summit Metro Parks is still dedicated to our mission of conservation and a green future. But what does conservation mean and what does a green future look like? To address these questions, we first have to ask: Why we should care? What do these green islands do for you?

Ecosystem Services: Nature works for us

One of the most important reasons for conservation is that human society depends on the natural world. We rely on clean air and clean water, and the food we eat is ultimately a product of nature. Park biologists have determined that the forested areas of our district store

over 690,000 metric tons of carbon and annually sequester an additional 22,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide. Most of the medicines we rely on were not invented in laboratories, they were copied from chemical compounds found in nature. That little snail on the verge of extinction might just produce a chemical compound that is a cure for cancer. The term ecosystem services has been applied to this line of thought. We protect the services nature provides by conserving land and water.

Access to Nature: Nature is for everyone

Nature is our ancestral home. We are all hardwired to seek out nature. Medical science has proven time spent in nature improves our mental and physical health. This benefit can be enhanced further when people begin to understand the natural world that is around them. In the park business, we call this interpretation: being able to understand the complexities of ecosystems and our role in protecting the natural world. Access to nature is important regardless of where you live but many areas of Summit County have historically not had equitable access to nature. This year, count on Summit Metro Parks to continue providing programs, parks and trails that allow ALL people to experience nature and the individual benefits it provides.

Biodiversity: Nature benefits the human condition

But there is a larger reason to protect nature — one that is deeply connected to the human condition. Humans collect and conserve the things we value. Protecting nature is really no different than protecting art in museums or literature in libraries. Every species on planet earth is the culmination of millennia of biological perfection. Today, we use the term biodiversity to refer to all life on earth and the complex interactions and ecosystems that support them. Every species of life has value and extinction of even a single species is not acceptable.

Summit Metro Parks is in a unique position to address these issues. When we talk about conservation, it's in a

broader sense and encompasses managing natural areas to protect ecosystem services, provide access to nature and benefit human well-being. From the sandstone cliffs at Liberty Park to the huckleberry bogs at Springfield Bog Metro Park, our parks and conservation areas protect thousands of species. The wetlands in our parks help clean our drinking water. Our forests filter pollutants from the air and sequester carbon. Our parks are a refuge not just for wildlife, but for people seeking to connect with the natural world.

Through our focus on these principals of conservation, this year we will share more about what we are doing to protect our local resources and ensure a sustainable future. We will be sharing our conservation and restoration work as well as actions you can take to reduce impacts to the natural world.

We have done a lot over the past 100 years.

But it's not enough.

We're just getting started.

pages 16 & 17

SURVEYING THE SUMMIT COUNTY HOME CEMETERY

Multiple Techniques for One Goal

By Russell Pier, recent graduate of The University of Akron

Within the Tallmadge Meadows Area of Munroe Falls Metro Park lies a cemetery, surrounded by woods and maintained by the park district. The cemetery served as the final resting place for residents of the Summit County Home, which housed those who were impoverished, in need of mental care or physical rehabilitation, or had nobody else to care for them. The home operated from 1921 to 1970 and was razed in 1978. Some records from the Summit County Home suggest there are 900 or

more burials in the cemetery. While we only know the names of a handful of the people buried there, there are methods available to help determine the precise boundaries of the cemetery (which have become blurred over time), how many graves there are and where the residents were buried.

To obtain some of this information, the cemetery was the focus of a minimally invasive archaeological survey in 2024 that used three overlapping techniques. The use of multiple survey techniques over the known boundary area of the cemetery garnered more reliable and precise results than using any single technique. The first was human remains detection (HRD) dogs. As their name suggests, these highly trained dogs can detect the scent of human remains. The second was ground penetrating radar (GPR), which can help reveal disturbed soil, indicating a possible burial. GPR is effective in covering large areas, ideal for the mowed area of the cemetery. The third was subsurface soil spectroscopy (Subterra Grey), which can also help detect disturbed soil as well as fatty acids from human remains. Once the data was collected, it was mapped to coordinate different collection techniques and display the results.

The survey showed that rows of currently unmarked graves line the cemetery area. Potentially, these rows extend into the woods to the north and east. This is shown by rows continuing outside of the area surveyed, suggesting a larger cemetery than the current boundary. The exact number of graves has not yet been determined, however, knowing where the graves are can help the park district in the continued preservation of what remains of the cemetery. Though we can now identify where burials are most likely to be, unfortunately, it is not possible to match names and burials with the archaeological and historical information available.

[Pier is a recent graduate of The University of Akron. This article summarizes Pier's project for his MA in Applied History and Public Humanities, done in collaboration with Summit Metro Parks.]

pages 18 & 19

ROOTED IN CONSERVATION

Claire Merrick, Marketing & Public Relations Manager

Within the scenic expanse of Liberty Park lies a vital hub for conservation and sustainability: the park district's 4,000-square-foot nursery. Managed by Biologist Christopher Chaney, the nursery is more than just a space for cultivating plants; it is a cornerstone of the park's ecosystem restoration efforts and community engagement.

Chaney's passion for plants began when he was a teenager, nurturing cacti and succulents and eventually studying botany at Kent State University. His early forays into native plant horticulture made him the ideal fit for the biologist role at Summit Metro Parks, which involved developing the park's native plant nursery. What began with 1,500 seedlings has grown into a thriving operation supporting thousands of plants and over 150 species.

Sustainability is at the heart of the nursery's operations. Shade cloths conserve water, and a programmable sprinkler system ensures efficient watering. Chaney and his team repurpose pots and recycle planting media, reducing waste while maximizing resources. All seeds are ethically sourced, with a focus on local native species to maintain ecological integrity. Managing the nursery is a year-round endeavor. Winters are spent preparing seeds for cold stratification (exposing seeds to cold, moist conditions to help them germinate and grow), while springtime means watering, transplanting and pest management. Challenges abound, yet Chaney finds joy in witnessing the transformation of seeds into thriving plants — a process that sometimes takes years but is well worth the wait.

The nursery engages the community not only by contributing to the overall park visitor experience, but also through plant giveaways at park events and partnerships with local organizations. These initiatives encourage residents to transform their yards into thriving habitats by incorporating native plant species and reducing non-natives, part of the Wild Back Yards initiative. The constant challenge of weeds blown into the nursery from surrounding natural areas serves as a reminder of how interconnected our landscapes are. Some of those seeds originate in local parks, but what grows in the parks often comes from nearby back yards and landscapes. This is one of the many reasons why cultivating a Wild Back Yard is a crucial step in supporting our shared environment (learn more at bit.ly/wildbackyards).

Through thoughtful conservation efforts and a commitment to sustainability, Chaney and park district staff are creating a legacy that will take root for generations, illustrating the ways in which the quiet power of plants can transform the world around us.

page 20

14th Annual
MOTHER'S DAY 5K

May 11, 2025
Start Time 8 a.m.

RUN, JOG OR WALK IN CELEBRATION OF MOM!

Munroe Falls Metro Park
Lake Area: 521 South River Road, Munroe Falls

Jogging strollers are welcome at this family-friendly course.

Register online: summitmetroparks.org

Proceeds benefit Summit Metro Parks Foundation