

North Branch Survey Results

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Earlier this year, 39 North Branchers filled out a 40-question survey designed to find out about your background as a North Branch volunteer, how you feel about North Branch tasks, your thoughts about the importance of North Branch restoration work, and a few personal statistics about you. A summary of the results of the survey follow.

Briefly, those who responded to the survey are middle aged, white/Caucasian, highly educated, and prosperous individuals who love to cut brush and collect seeds. You feel restoration work is physically good for you and you love the organized North Branch structure because it is part of your social network. You feel a tremendous responsibility as a volunteer; you want to reduce your footprint on the earth. You are well aware of the challenges facing the North Branch, most importantly, the need to recruit and train more diverse and young volunteers for leadership positions. Your most memorable experiences include fire, wildlife, discovering new (to you) plant species, and social events. You are proud of the recovery of the ecosystems you are working on. Your work is important to you personally, and you feel it is also important to the Chicago region and to the world.

The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of responses received for that particular part of the survey question. Many questions required checking “all that apply.”

Your background as a North Branch Restoration Project volunteer

The year each of the 39 survey respondents joined the North Branch spans 21 years from 1977 to 2006. Ten joined between 1988 and 1991 and eight joined between 2001 and 2004. Twenty-seven respondents state they spend less than three hours a week volunteering for the North Branch. Ten respondents volunteer three to eight hours a week and two volunteer eight hours or more. Volunteers travel an average of 9.6 miles each way to attend North Branch workdays but some travel as many as 50 miles.

Somme Prairie Grove (9) and Harms Woods (6) are the favorite North Branch sites. Five respondents didn't choose—they seem to like them all. The other nineteen responses are scattered among all of the other North Branch sites. The reasons respondents give for their choices are varied and include:

- Beautiful quality of the site
- Variety of ecosystems at the site—always a surprise
- Site steward or responsibility for the site (people who said this combined it with a love of the site's ecosystems)
- Close to home
- Like the variety of people who volunteer at the site
- Love of prairies/savannas/river—a particular ecosystem type
- Longest history at the site—first introduced to restoration at the site
- Quality of leadership at the site

Sunday morning is the preferred workday (30) followed by Saturday morning (20), Sunday afternoon (10), Saturday afternoon (8), and Wednesday morning seed collecting days (6). Two people say they volunteer “whenever I can.” Most respondents checked more than one time.

In 2006 the respondents volunteered at one or more North Branch sites. Harms Woods (27) and Somme Prairie Grove (24) were the most visited sites. Sauganash Prairie Grove (3) and Glenbrook Prairie (1) were the least visited.

Nineteen respondents checked the “Other” category for the question “How did you find out about the North Branch Restoration Project?” These respondents first heard about the North Branch at symposia or conferences, newsletters or fliers from other organizations such as the Sierra Club, and university announcements. Fourteen heard about the opportunity to volunteer from friends. Three learned about it from the newspaper. One attended a North Branch event. And one joined after jogging by and asking what volunteers were doing.

Seventeen respondents attend North Branch workdays and events with their spouse or partner; the same number who attend alone. And the same number (17) shares their North Branch experiences with their children or grandchildren.

Nearly every respondent volunteers with other organizations in addition to the North Branch including: church activities, charity such as soup kitchen and Habitat for Humanity, local government such as park/school board, and community activism such as peace groups. More than 60 different organizations were listed, from nationwide organizations such as the Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, and Audubon, to local organizations such as Friends of the Cook County Forest Preserves. The level of involvement with the organizations was not assessed; however, there is a historic relationship of the North Branch and the Sierra Club and The Nature Conservancy that may help to explain a high number of memberships in those organizations. Also, local “Friends” groups can be expected to have more active participation by North Branchers since they have a direct impact on North Branch controversy-related issues.

The education, training, and experience of North Branchers in the area of ecological restoration are wide-ranging, from no experience to degrees in ecology and natural resource management to government natural resource policy makers. Nevertheless, the respondents bring many skills to the North Branch including:

- Ability to work with and communicate with people
- Positive/enthusiastic attitude
- Botanical skills
- Gardening skills
- Science/ecology experience
- University courses in ecology, botany, biology
- Certification in restoration by the Morton Arboretum or Chicago Botanic Garden
- Training in fire/restoration
- Writing/editing skills

- Stewardship/restoration practitioner skills
- Manual labor/hard physical work
- Love of nature and restoration work
- Organizing/planning ability

How you feel about North Branch Tasks

Seed collecting, processing and distribution (16) and cutting and burning brush (16) are the favorite tasks of North Branchers. Pulling weeds and prescription burns are listed as favorite tasks by two people each. Two people love all the tasks. Four people love: “being a steward,” “noticing/thinking/discovering needs, successes, opportunities,” “ant collecting,” and “finding new species.”

Ten people would not avoid any North Branch tasks. Eight respondents avoid seed tasks because bending over is hard on the back, more physical work is preferred, or allergies are affected. Five respondents avoid brush cutting because it is “HARD.” Five people avoid herbiciding and weeding. Seven others avoid writing or anything with the newsletter, tool upkeep, political advocacy, organizing, cutting re-sprouts resulting from inadequate use of herbicides, and the “second half of most meetings.”

When asked how they feel about individual tasks, respondents love seed collecting (28), brush cutting (25), prescribed burning (23), seed processing (17), gardening (14), pulling invasive plants (12), plant monitoring (11), greeting visitors and orienting new volunteers (9), and bird/mammal/amphibian/insect monitoring (8). In the “it’s OK” category, pulling invasive plants (20), herbicide application (15), greeting visitors and orienting new volunteers (15), newsletter writing (13), speeches to local groups (12), and event planning (11) top the list. Herbicide application (12) and event planning (11) lead the “not my favorite” category. Twenty-one respondents have never monitored birds/mammals/amphibians, insects. Sixteen have never given speeches to local groups. Fifteen have never monitored plants or written for the newsletter. Fourteen have never helped plan an event. Twelve have not participated in wild gardening.

“Rewarding” is the term that respondents chose to describe most of the tasks. Brush cutting (16) and seed collecting (14) are the most rewarding tasks. Speeches to local groups (15), pulling invasive plants (13), plant monitoring (13), newsletter writing (13), and event planning (12), are viewed as “challenging” tasks. The most “social” tasks are, predictably, event planning (18), seed processing (17), and greeting visitors and orienting new volunteers (16). Brush cutting (18) is described as the most strenuous task, whereas seed collecting is both restful (12) and spiritual (12). At the end of a workday, the majority of respondents (25) feel “fulfilled.”

In answer to the question “Which restoration tasks do you feel you are best suited for?” brush cutting (32) and seed collecting (30), are favored followed by pulling weeds (25), prescribed burning (23), seed processing (19), and gardening (19). Herbicide application (16), plant monitoring (15), and animal/insect monitoring (10) formed a third tier. Ten respondents would like to try bird/mammal/amphibian/insect monitoring.

What are the major challenges facing North Branchers? There are many but four categories emerged. First, recruiting new and younger volunteers and maintaining their involvement over time; second, dealing with the political and cultural opposition to restoration work; third, information overload; and fourth, prioritizing work with the limited amount of volunteer time available.

Jane Balaban is considered to be the foremost North Branch leader followed by John Balaban, Steve Packard, Kent Fuller, Larry Hodak, Laurel Ross, and Linda Masters. All other master stewards and the seed “czar” Joan Meersman received votes. Several non-stewards received a vote each, including Duke Riggins, deemed the “wise and venerable fire tender” by one respondent. Overwhelmingly (30), these North Branch stewards and leaders are the source of information for volunteers. In addition, volunteer newsletters and publications are considered very useful (19) or useful (15) to North Branch work.

Memorable North Branch experiences focus on four major themes. Fire, particularly brush piles (thanks, perhaps to Joe Walsh and his Dutch oven) elicit many memories. Animal sightings, including snakes, bald eagles, and deer, and discovery of rare plant species seem to remind respondents why they volunteer. Social events such as the North Branch campout at Nachusa Grassland, the Bobbi Sutton Retablo art event at Somme Woods, and Solstice celebrations are traditions and events that bring North Branchers together in a social setting.

Your thoughts on the importance of the North Branch Restoration Project

Why do the respondents volunteer with the North Branch? The two favored answers are: “I enjoy being outdoors and active—the physical work makes me feel good” (25), and “I like being part of an organized group that is helping the recovery of a diverse ecosystem” (21). In a second tier of responses, are the following statements: “I like meeting and interacting with others who have similar interests” (13), “I believe it’s my responsibility to help preserve the diversity of native species and natural communities” (13), “I think nature should be protected from human-caused extinctions and restoration is one way to do this” (13), “I appreciate learning about nature from others” (11), and “I think I should help balance my own ecological footprint on this earth” (11).

North Branchers are most proud of the recovery of the lands they have worked on, the part they have played in increasing personal and institutional knowledge about the sites, educating the next generation of restorationists, and, “Being a part of it all.” What have North Branchers learned as volunteers? First, how ecological systems work—learning to read the landscape. A second theme is that one person can make a difference but we’re all in this together. Several stated that they now understand the need for management and the importance of fire. And finally, it is difficult to build a culture (of restoration) because it needs innovation, responsiveness, and patience.

Thirty-seven respondents state that volunteering for the North Branch is either very important or important to them personally. As well, respondents feel the work of the North Branch Restoration Project is very important (32) or important (6) to the health of Chicago ecosystems. Twenty-one respondents feel the work of the North Branch

Restoration Project is important to the health of ecosystems globally. One respondent stated the project is, “Not important in terms of geological scale, but very important in terms of establishing and maintaining a successful restoration organization, which has set a world-class standard.” Eighteen feel the project is very important because, in the words of one respondent, “We are all connected.”

What would respondents like to see changed? The top comment: recruit more diverse and younger volunteers. Many would also like to increase the number of courses or training available. Better public relations in the face of the current restoration controversies are an important stated action. And finally, several respondents would like to better educate the Cook County Board about restoration.

Statistics about You

And here are the final personal statistics. Out of 39 people who responded to the survey, 24 are between the ages of 46 and 65; nine are retired, six are educators or teachers, six are engineers or scientists; 23 have graduate school education or beyond; 35 are white/Caucasian; 20 earn more than \$50,000 a year; 22 are married and ten are single; and 20 are male and 19 female.