



# Expanding Nature Opportunities for People 55+ in Minnesota: A Summary Brief

Fall 2024

*Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.*

—Rachel Carson

## Introduction

There is growing awareness and evidence that nature offers benefits to humans over the life course, and that our collective and reciprocal attention and care of the natural world is required. In Minnesota, where the population of 55+ individuals continues to grow rapidly, and we enjoy so many beautiful and varied natural places, we have an important opportunity to expand this demographic's ability to be outdoors in nature.

[A Field Scan of Older Adults and Nature in Minnesota](#) (Field Scan), released in April 2024, highlights the benefits of nature-based activities for individuals 55+ and provides a framework for enhancing their access and participation in nature around the state. The Field Scan (see link and QR code to access the full report) is a 100-page-long

online document with links to many resources and models and is intended for anyone interested in learning how better to support and grow access to nature for people 55+. The purpose of this brief is to summarize key elements of the Field Scan. It also shares more about Phase 2 of the project, which focuses on raising awareness of this topic, supporting organizations doing this work, implementing Field Scan recommendations, and expanding opportunities for people 55+ in nature across Minnesota.

**To access the full Field Scan, use the QR code or visit <https://www.agefriendlymn.org/resources>**



Woman hiking. Photo credit: Wilderness Inquiry



## Demographic Landscape

Minnesota's demographic trends indicate a significant increase statewide in the number of individuals aged 55 years and above. In 2023, Minnesotans age 65+ totaled just over one million people. By 2025, this segment is expected to surpass Minnesota's school-age population. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of community resources and activities to accommodate the unique needs of people as they age, which can include such challenges as mobility issues, social isolation, health concerns, and more.

In recent years, Minnesota has seen great progress in expanding opportunities for children in nature through initiatives such as the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Leave No Child Inside grants. The state's abundant natural resources and support from a wide range of partners present a valuable opportunity to also improve the quality of life for individuals age 55+ through nature-based engagement and opportunities.

## Health and Well-being Benefits

Interactions with nature offer numerous physical, mental, and social/emotional health benefits vital to maintaining health, independence, and quality of life as we age. These include:

**Physical Health:** increased fitness and improved immunity, bone health, pain management/relief, and longevity

**Mental Health, Cognition, Vitality:** reduced stress, anxiety, and depression, improved cognitive function, including memory and attention; and enhanced mood and energy

**Social and Emotional Well-Being:** greater sense of purpose and fulfillment, enhanced relationships and community building, reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, stronger intergenerational bonds, environmental stewardship, and a sense of awe/appreciation of beauty.

For more on the human benefits of nature, visit:

<https://parkrxamerica.org/providers/human-benefits-of-nature.php>

## What People 55+ Seek in Nature

There is evidence that humans are biologically wired to seek connections with nature. People's desire to spend time in nature varies based on individual exposure, preferences, and abilities. Asking older adults what they want to do in nature is essential to providing meaningful and engaging opportunities. Two perspectives shared with the Loppet Foundation—located in Theodore Wirth Park in North Minneapolis—by nearby residents reveal the extremes: "I want the fresh air, sun, exercise, vitamin D, nature, sun sets sun rise, wildlife, exploring our waters, etc." and "Summer burns my skin. Winter hurts my bones."

When asked what they seek in nature-based opportunities, older adults typically mention one or more of the following reasons:

- Physical health and well-being
- Mental well-being
- Social interaction
- Connection with the environment
- Recreation and leisure
- Spiritual connection and restoration
- Preservation and conservation
- Sensory enjoyment
- Lifelong learning

*Nature is all around us  
in everyday spaces, including  
nearby parks and trails,  
our backyards,  
and even in  
the potted plants  
in our homes,  
or a bird at the feeder  
hanging outside  
our window.*



Florence Williams’ recommendations for time in nature, modeled after the Food Pyramid

In her 2017 book *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative*, Florence Williams shares a Nature Pyramid. This diagram can be helpful in thinking about the right amount of exposure for an individual or group.

### Models and Opportunities

The Field Scan shows examples of individuals and organizations around Minnesota who are implementing innovative ways to facilitate access to nature for people 55+. Many parks, wildlife refuges, nature centers and preserves, arboretums, nature-education organizations, and other outdoor-based organizations offer programming inclusive of or targeted to older adults. Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), cities, senior housing, community centers, nonprofits, health and wellness providers, community education, and other organizations are also embracing the work of providing opportunities for older adults to be out in or near nature.

For a full summary of opportunities uncovered in Phase I of this project, refer to the Field Scan. Following are a few of the opportunities that are showcased:

The **Ely Field Naturalists**’ mission is to “develop science education opportunities and educational resources, facilitate communication through nature-related activities, and coordinate events and partnerships in community service and collaborative learning for northeastern Minnesota residents and visitors.” This informal group led by a community leader hosts a [Google group](#) that shares information and organizes regular field trips on a wide range of topics related to the natural world. While not exclusive of any age, the majority of participants are 55+, according to organizers.

**Let’s Go Fishing** is a statewide program that “brings nature’s healing and well-being to seniors, veterans, and the disabled.” Participants are taken on accessible pontoon boat and fishing outings, often paired with nature appreciation and education opportunities. Independent chapters of Let’s Go Fishing are located around the state and are supported by active volunteers—often older adults themselves.

The **Minnesota Master Naturalist Program**’s mission is “to promote awareness, understanding, and stewardship of Minnesota’s natural environment by developing a corps of well-informed citizens dedicated to conservation education and service within their communities.” The majority of the Master Naturalists are older adults, and the volunteer work they perform supports many opportunities for people of all ages.

**Northwoods Partners**, an Ely nonprofit organization that provides resources promoting independence and healthy aging, sponsors outdoor group exercise classes—some of which include nature-based exposure. For example, [Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance](#) classes are held at Semer’s Park overlooking Shagawa Lake.

**Silverwood Park**, part of Three Rivers Park District, is “devoted to supporting the practice, appreciation and awareness of creative interactions between people and the natural environment.” Each month the park offers a “Rooted in Art” program blending a seasonal nature topic and related art project each month, specifically created for, and marketed to, adults ages 50+. It also offers a free monthly art and nature program called Spark! for individuals

living with memory loss and their care partners to attend jointly. In addition, they deliver offsite art and nature programs through contracts with independent and assisted living sites.

**Tettegouche State Park** naturalist Kurt Mead visits older adults in a veterans' home and another senior living facility in Silver Bay, along Lake Superior's North Shore. He brings a wide range of educational nature programming in the off-season to people who aren't able to make it to the park.

**University of Minnesota's** Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's [Nature Heals Initiative](#) designs programming that engages nature's ability to heal, soothe, restore, and connect. Group classes offered at the Arboretum in Chaska include forest bathing, AWE (A Wonder-filled Experience) walks, nature journaling, and mindfulness.

**Whitewater State Park** in Southeast Minnesota hosts a monthly education group called the [Healthy Older People](#) (HOP) program organized by [Friends of Whitewater State Park](#) in partnership with the DNR. HOP offers a lecture series in the park that sometimes includes an outside activity.

Since the report was released, several additional opportunities have been shared, including the following:

**FamilyMeans** and **Belwin Conservancy** near Afton have partnered to create a [Community Connections–Nature Memories](#) program for people experiencing memory loss and their care partners. Each July for the past three years, the two organizations provide weekly nature-based programming for people with early-stage dementia. Programming weaves together poetry, nature, nature immersion, and social connections.

**Habitat Makers™** is a YouTube video series focused on people who are devoted to ecological restoration. A recent program focused on two older adults who experienced a life transition and discovered the restorative powers of nature. View Jim and Mary: Forces of Nature here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3zeV5kE9mE>



Fishing on Lax Lake.  
Photo credit: Kurt Mead, Tettegouche State Park Naturalist

In addition, connections with nature also occur as a result of what people do informally on their own or with family, friends, and neighbors. These independent activities that can be done spur of the moment, when a person wishes to, are often preferred to scheduled activities. How can we encourage and support these?

*Part of Phase 2 of this project is to continue to identify and catalogue the work that is underway across Minnesota. To share more and/or provide feedback on the Field Scan, refer to Appendix G in the report or follow this link: <https://rb.gy/9pbvp0>*

## Ageism and Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nature

Ageism, or the stereotyping of and discrimination against individuals based on their age, can impact older adults' interest and experiences in being outdoors in nature. Its effects, both direct and indirect, influence individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences.

The Field Scan shows some of the ways that older adults are accessing nature across Minnesota. To counter the impact of ageism and promote inclusive engagement with nature for individuals 55+, the following actions are highlighted:

**Challenge Stereotypes:** Raise awareness about the diversity of older adults and challenge stereotypes related to age and ability.

**Promote Inclusivity:** Encourage organizations serving older adults to develop inclusive programs that cater to a wide range of ages and abilities.

**Enhance Accessibility:** Advocate for the creation of accessible outdoor spaces and amenities that accommodate the needs of older individuals.

As the Field Scan explores, the first step for many people is creating safe and accessible spaces. Cultural contexts and exposure also strongly influence how people experience nature.

### Challenges and Barriers

As we age, we may experience such challenges as loss in physical abilities, including decreased mobility; social isolation; and health issues that can limit our ability to engage with nature without

adequate support. Attention must be given to the wide range and often diverse and individual needs of people who fall into the wide 55+ group. Frequently, the focus in providing nature-based opportunities is on able-bodied adults who are better positioned to advocate for their needs and interests. Far less attention is typically given to the needs of people who acquire new disabilities or experience other age-associated challenges.

Despite the many existing examples featured in the Field Scan of individuals and organizations creating such opportunities, older adults face barriers to engaging with nature, including the following:

**Transportation**—Limited access to transportation can prevent older adults from reaching natural sites. Solutions need to address both urban and rural transportation challenges.

**Mobility and Safety**—Physical limitations and concerns about safety can hinder participation. Programs must consider these factors and provide appropriate support and infrastructure.

**Awareness and Information**—People 55+ may not be aware of the available opportunities or the benefits of nature engagement with nature. Effective communication and outreach are essential.

**Accessibility**—Natural sites and programs must be designed to accommodate a range of abilities, ensuring that all older adults can participate. Access to bathrooms, places to sit comfortably, shade, and water are critical, and Minnesota winters raise unique challenges.

Nature Memories program at Belwin Conservancy. Photo credit: FamilyMeans



# Field Scan Recommendations

To encourage expanded opportunities for older adults in nature, the Field Scan outlines eight recommendations along with action steps:

## **1. See older adults and recognize their need for access to nature across the life course.**

- Adopt an Older Adults Outdoor Bill of Rights, as a companion to the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBOR), or create one for all ages.
- Add the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to the Governor's Council for an Age-Friendly Minnesota.
- Include older adults' access to nature in Minnesota's Multisector Blueprint for Aging.
- Showcase how programs such as Walk With Ease, Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance, and others can be conducted outdoors and in nature-based settings in the Minnesota State Plan on Aging and through the Juniper network.
- Ensure that the Senior Linkage Line (1-800-333-2433) and MinnesotaHelp.info include nature-based information and resources.

## **2. Seek out and listen to the varied and diverse voices of what older adults want with respect to nature and elevate their visibility and influence.**

- Share the Field Scan and summary brief broadly, including with partners who have relationships with underrepresented populations, and offer to connect more.
- Invite diverse voices to participate in the Advisory Council that has been convened to inform Phase 2 of this project.

## **3. Plan for and create spaces addressing the specific needs of older adults at all levels of ability and in all seasons, including the following considerations:**

- Surfaces, trail conditions, amenities, and differences in pace
- Transportation, nearby nature, safe places to walk, and bringing the natural world indoors
- Adaptive classes and equipment
- Removing financial barriers
- Minnesota winters

## **4. Recognize and promote the opportunities nature presents for connecting with others and ourselves.**

## **5. Engage with older adults as adult learners and embrace the power of sharing stories with others.**

- Plant a seed with media, including podcasts, radio, television, and others who have an opportunity to elevate the voices, stories, and experiences of individuals 55+ in nature.

## Field Scan Recommendations (continued)

### 6. Invest in opportunities that support older adults' access to nature.

- Present on the opportunities offered by the Finish Strong Funders collaborative and other funders.
- Work with DNR and/or lawmakers to explore financial support for local initiatives to expand older adult access to nature, similar to the state's Leave No Child Inside grants.

### 7. Consider and support those caring for older adults.

- Explore ways to expand and support caregiver access to nature, despite the inherent challenges related to the caregiving role (e.g., ability to have time away, few opportunities for respite, financial constraints).

### 8. Build the emerging field supporting individuals 55+ to access nature.

Respondents to a statewide survey expressed strong interest future field-building opportunities, including especially the following activities:

- Building awareness of the field;
- Disseminating knowledge, best practices, and models;
- Convening organizations (in-person and virtually) for shared training and learning; and
- Catalyzing partnerships.

This is the focus of Phase 2 of this work which will continue through March 2026. Through stronger communication, coordination, and collaboration with those seeking to support and expand older adults' access to nature, we can collectively begin to identify shared priorities and amplify the importance of access to nature for older adults in Minnesota.

Enjoying Lyndale Park Rose Garden. Photo credit: Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board





The Mermaids of Lake Nokomis. Photo credit: Diane Pearson

[A Field Scan of Older Adults and Nature in Minnesota](#) shows that there are many ways to grow opportunities across the state for people 55+ to participate more fully in nature. Whether informally, through people creating opportunities for themselves, friends, and community, or grandparents building intergenerational connections kids and grandkids, or more formally through health promotion or art classes in or near nature, volunteer fishing programs, parks

and trails programming, conservation and much more, there is much to build upon. Individuals 55+ have specific needs and desires when it comes to being in nature, but the benefits of doing so are clear. There is much we can do to together to intentionally build age-friendly nature-based opportunities in all parts of the state. If we do, we all will benefit from the profound effects on health, wellness, social connections, and quality of life.

## What You Can Do to Support Greater Access to Nature for People 55+

- Make a point to see older adults, in general and in nature, and ask what experiences are most important and meaningful. Listen to their responses and act, considering what it will take to make nature accessible.
- If you are a person 55+, speak up with others about your wishes and preferences. The benefits of being outdoors in nature in all seasons are great, even if they may require extra efforts to access and enjoy.
- Be a nature mentor. Invite and support family, friends, and neighbors to take indoor activities outside and/or find ways to bring nature indoors.
- If you run programs that reach older adults, consider ways to integrate nature or outdoor-based experiences into what you are already doing and/or explore partnerships with others doing this work.
- Learn about, be inspired, and seek to replicate all that is going on for people 55+ across our state. [A Field Scan of Older Adults in Nature in Minnesota](#) offers a place to begin. You can help expand our collective understanding by sharing information. Visit Appendix G of the Field Scan or [click here](#).
- Think big and small. Expanding our thinking and imaginations about what is possible can support growing opportunities across our state. We can also act in smaller ways in our own neighborhoods, backyards, or even out our windows to better access, steward, and nurture nature.
- Get involved in the Phase 2 work (details below), considering steps to take individually and with others.

## Feedback and Inquiries

The Field Scan and Phase 2 work are supported through an Age-Friendly Minnesota community grant. Joelle Hoeft, a Twin Cities–based consultant who works with nonprofit, philanthropic, and government partners, is its author and project lead. For any feedback or inquiries about the Field Scan, summary brief, or this work, please email her at [joellehoeft@gmail.com](mailto:joellehoeft@gmail.com).