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Trail Stewards: Park lovers become eyes and ears of state parks



Jesse Chadderdon

Trail Watch volunteers chat as they walk a path in Blue Ball State Park. Michele Jennings and Stan Markwalder (right) are volunteers through the Delaware Greenways Trail Stewards program.

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By **Jesse Chadderdon**
Community News
Posted Oct 19, 2009 @ 08:18 AM

Brandywine Hundred, Del. — Stan Markwalder spends a lot of time on the trails of Brandywine Hundred parks.

Whether he's out for a lunch hour stroll in Bringhurst Woods near his office or embarking on a longer weekend hike through Blue Ball and Alapocas Run state parks, he's a regular on the trail network that makes up the Northern Delaware Greenway.

That love of nature, combined with an eagerness to help others, is all it takes to make Markwalder an ideal park watch volunteer -- one of a dozen in a new cavalry of folks committed to looking after the parks they frequent and their visitors.

"The interest was always there, but the opportunity wasn't until now," Markwalder said. "There's so much politics and so much effort into creating [Blue Ball State Park] and I just see this as a way to give back."

Delaware Greenways launched its Trail Stewards program this summer. An extension of the State Park Service's Park Watch program, the stewards' roles are simple: They are the eyes and ears of northern Delaware's 10-mile greenway network.

"It could be as simple as telling someone where the nearest bathroom is, or it could be giving someone information about the history of a particular attraction along the trails or information about the park," said Glen Stubbolo, volunteer coordinator for Delaware State Parks. "It's about being an ambassador."

Volunteers don't have regimented schedules, they simply don their "Park Watch" shirts whenever they're out recreationally on the trails, greet fellow park users along the way, and offer assistance to anyone who might ask for it.

"We love walking around the area and it's so good to just be on the Greenway, we figure we might as well be helping people out while we're at it," said Weldin Road resident



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Bill Christopher, who along with his wife Patti volunteers as a steward.

Michele Jennings, who coordinates the program through Delaware Greenways, said so far nearly 40 people have applied to become volunteers, though only about a dozen have been approved and gone through the required training.

"We want to use the program to build awareness about our trails but also to help people understand that there is so much nature right outside the door in northern Delaware," she said. "This is such an exciting ecological, natural and historic area we have here, but we have to use it and it's our job to make people comfortable coming out and doing that."

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