

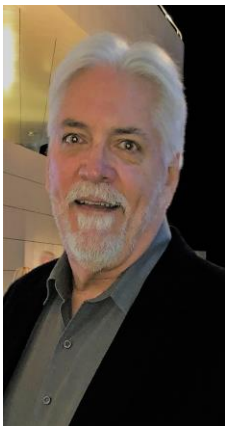
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Office: 402-731-3140 x1012
Cell: 402.850.7943

Fontenelle Forest welcomes new staff

Several staff promoted, departments re-imagined

Fontenelle Forest is proud to have three positions filled permanently with both new and familiar faces. The Land Stewardship team, which oversees more than 2,000 acres of land and the education department which educated more than 40,000 school students each year will have familiar management, with a new position “Properties Superintendent” bringing all departments together.



Dennis Merkel will start as Fontenelle Forest’s Properties Superintendent mid-January. A former resident of Bellevue, Dennis comes to us from Angeles National Forest in California where he served as the Supervisory Forestry Technician. He has spent 20-years as a civilian employee with the Department of Defense, working in locations all over the world and brings over 10-years of experience working for the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Forest Service.

Properties Superintendent is a new position that will oversee and strategically align the efforts of the Stewardship & Research team and the Facilities team to care for Fontenelle Forest’s natural resources and built assets. Both Dennis and his wife graduated from Bellevue High School where he was a football star and she was a Bellevedette.

Fontenelle Forest is tremendously fortunate to have recruited such a highly qualified professional seeking an opportunity to contribute his expertise in the community he once grew up in. Each of our recent hires have been critical to positioning Fontenelle Forest to strategically execute its strategic initiatives,” said Whitehall.



Michelle Foss has been promoted to Manager for Stewardship & Research. Michelle was serving as the Interim Director of Stewardship & Research and has been promoted from her position as Restoration Biologist. Michelle has been with the Forest since 2012, originally an Educator and then as Restoration Biologist. Michelle has been a great example of Fontenelle Forest’s staff committed to the community.

“As a Boy Scout leader and a Forest employee, she exemplifies our mission of encouraging the next generation to care for the natural world” said Whitehall.

Michelle’s new management functions include: ecological habitat maintenance and restoration; scientific research program management, plan development, and implementation; and, trail maintenance. The Manager of Conservation leads a team of staff, volunteers, and interns to advance the environmental health, longevity, safety, and usability of Fontenelle Forest’s natural areas.



Sally Otis will become the permanent Director of Education at Fontenelle Forest on January 22nd. Sally has served for 5 months as the Interim Director of Education.

“Sally has integrated seamlessly into Fontenelle Forest’s culture, established great relationships with the education team and across departments, and demonstrated a passion for environmental education and interpretation,” said Fontenelle Forest executive director Merica Whitehall.

With over 10 years of experience working in education and a Masters of Arts in Teaching degree with a focus in Museum Education Program from George Washington University, Sally will lead of team of educators at the Forest to lead facilitate field trips school programs, summer camps, lectures, and plenty of educational outreach to the community.

The Education Department is making further additions to the team. **Katie Leware** joined our Education team January 3rd as the Education Assistant, working on booking programs. We will also have three new part-time educators starting mid-January: Allison Montgomery, Amber Pearson, and Regina Jeanpierre-Bryant.



Dan Borgaila is our new Facilities Supervisor beginning January 8. Dan comes to us from the Mount Crescent Ski Area where he was the head of maintenance for a local outdoor attraction serving tens of thousands of visitors each year in Crescent, Iowa. Dan has been working in maintenance as long as he’s been able, and his skills have taken across the country from Colorado Springs, where he was raised, to North Carolina to Washington State, and eventually to his home state of Iowa, where he now resides with his wife and three children. Dan will be managing all building maintenance for Fontenelle Forest’s properties, and keep our structures safe and open for educational programs and events.

About Fontenelle Forest

Fontenelle Forest’s mission is to provide a place where people can experience and enjoy the quiet wild of nature. We want to inspire current and future generations to care for the natural world. Fontenelle Forest is one of Nebraska’s oldest conservation organizations and one of the largest private nature centers in the nation. With Fontenelle Forest Nature Center in Bellevue and Neale Woods in Omaha, FF encompasses nearly 2,000 acres of forest, prairie, wetlands, and Native American historical sites along the Missouri River.

Fontenelle Forest is the only organization in Nebraska permitted by the state and federal government to rehabilitate orphaned or injured raptors. Raptor Woodland Refuge, located at the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center, opened in 2016 and provides visitors with an opportunity to observe many species of birds of prey in a unique, tree-top environment.