



RIDGEFIELD NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

# COMMUNITY NATURE CENTER

Opening Spring 2026

PROPOSED

## NATURE EXPLORATION AREA

PLANS FOR DEVELOPMENT

28908 NW Main Ave- Carty Unit & 1071 S Hillhurst Rd.  
River 'S' Unit, Ridgefield, WA 98642



A Project funded and supported by:



PLANS PREPARED & DESIGNED BY  
Jane Tesner Kleiner, PLA  
Vancouver, WA

**DRAFT**  
For Review 3.17.25

**A summary of comments have been received from numerous community and stakeholder meetings, forums and discussions. Below is a brief summary of key points to potentially reflect in the Nature Exploration Area (Discussions occurred from 2016 - 2022).**

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) - Visitor Services Mission:** Empower the communities of the Lower Columbia River to see themselves as part of the story of interconnectedness between humans and nature.

*"The Center will integrate community, culture, education, and nature through accessible sensory experiences and multi-generational engagement. It will serve as a hub for wellness, natural resource career planning, wildlife observation, cultural and environmental education, interpretation and nature play." - USFWS staff*

**PROGRAMMATIC NEEDS FOR THE NATURE EXPLORATION AREA (NEA):**

- **Welcome & Orient Visitors** - Layout and elements can direct visitors to the various areas on the campus. NEA can be a staging area for students to gather after unloading bus and/or waiting to load. Could also be a designated meeting spot for outings. The six uses on the site (interpretation, environmental education, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography). Welcome in multiple languages. Introduce people to Refuge who may not enter the main portions
- **What to expect on your visit to the Refuge** - Not all visitors will cross the bridge, so incorporate elements that they may expect to see, hear and experience. Introduce people to Refuge who may not enter the main portions....what to see, experience, overcome fears, an introductory experience for their next visit.
- **Accessible and Inclusive setting** - As the NEA area will be an introduction to the Refuge, use accessible surfacing, route layout and materials to ensure all visitors can access the features. Assume all ages as visitors, so include parking for strollers, wagons, wheelchairs, walkers, etc. Include benches and tables to set materials while visiting.
- **How to support visitors safety while at the Refuge** - Open views, minimal hiding spots, keep on trails, limited climbing options (not high risk), follow directions and key information on signs (i.e. tick area, stay on trail and stay off of hill)
- **Provide habitat close to NEA for exploration opportunities** - Add layers of habitat to encourage wildlife to visit, roost, nest
- **Natural Materials**– Use native boulders, basalt, logs and other elements for storytelling and educational. The site will not be designed as a “playground” but safety guidelines could be included to protect visitors safety. Consult with geologist to ensure appropriate storytelling can occur with locally significant materials.
- **Support educational programming - WISE Model:** Witness nature, Investigate issues related to nature; Solve a problem (plant, monitor); Educate their community about what they have learned about stewardship. Include gathering space for storytelling of features.

**POTENTIAL FEATURES TO SUPPORT PROGRAMMING / VISITOR EXPERIENCES IN THE NEA:**

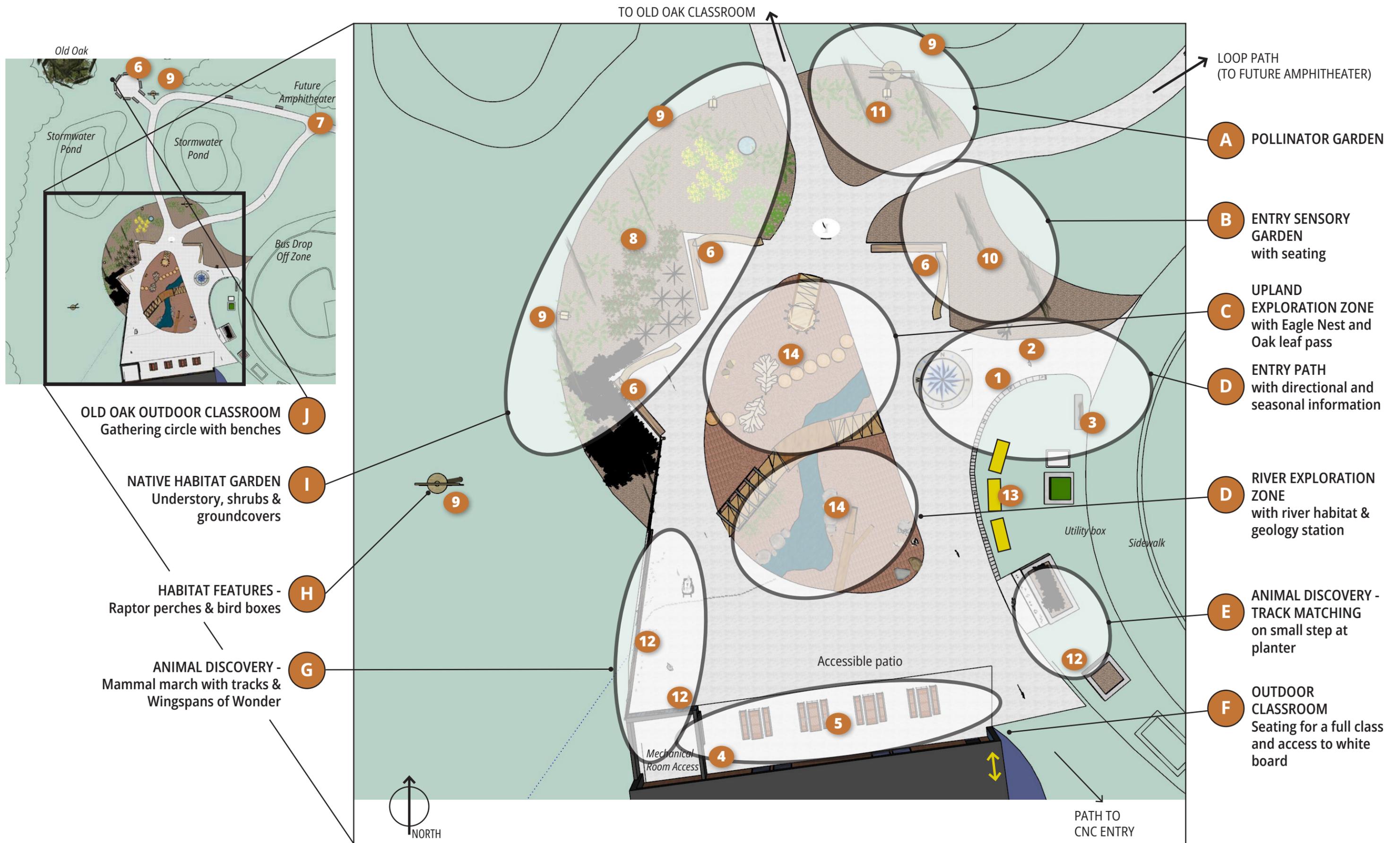
- **Welcome and Orientation** - Include a ground compass to orient visitors, as well as features list and directions. Sundial with seasonal equinox and solstice locations. Add boot brush and welcoming sign to the area, set expectations in positive tone
- **Gathering area** - Include seating for at least 2 classrooms as well as staging area for educators to set packs, materials and kits. Add benches around the space for other visitors to observe the NEA.
- **Amphitheater in hill** - Allow for performances, lectures and other educational programming.
- **Animal Discovery** - What animals can people expect to see & hear when visiting the refuge. Use art to help understand size and types of animals to may encounter. Use footprints, signage, etc. Historic and current species. Predator and prey story.
- **Habitat Garden** - Add plantings near NEA to showcase native plants and their role in the Refuge ecosystem. Locate as to not block view of Refuge or views from windows, but enhance experience. Elements of habitat (e.g. access to food, shelter, water and places to raise young. Also, could be a demonstration that others can do at their home.
- **Habitat structures** - Include a variety of habitat structures to encourage hawks to roost, owls to nest, songbird nesting, etc. Include intentional features that can be lift by staff to show the smaller critters (bug frame & panels)
- **Sensory Garden** - Add plantings that can be touched and reasonably harvested during programs to provide tactile experience for touch, smell, sight
- **Loose parts & natural play** - Area that students can arrange materials for program, art and play. Use ground level and elevated feature to support accessible use. Could include a sand/water table to replicate river, erosion, sediment movement, etc. Build a nest for different species (hummingbird vs. eagle)
- **Sign frame** - Use to provide seasonal messaging and information (case with lockable cover)
- **Sign post** - Add to direct folks where to go for features and adventures
- **“What did you see and hear” board** - Add a covered sign board to encourage students to share what they discover.

- **Discovery Station** - Include features to help students discover, such as spotting scopes, magnifier stations, etc.
- **River Bed** - Create an element that represents the river, watershed, story of the salmon, sturgeon and other key species and the role that it plays
- **Nature materials found in the region** - Use logs, boulders and “river bed” to help tell a story. If features are climbable, ensure 6’ clear zone around perimeter for safety.
- **Castings / Embedded materials for discovery** - Embed and include cast materials throughout the space for visitors to discover. Showcase size of animals, footprints, shapes, scat, feathers, etc.
- **Wildlife blind** - Add a blind to help visitors enjoy views of nature undisturbed. Include view holes at different heights.
- **Night life at the Refuge** - What happens at night.....what species to expect, etc.?

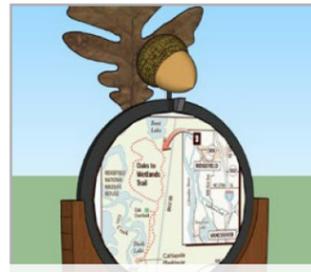
**DETAILS TO INCLUDE IN THE NEA:**

- **Use textures, tactile features, art, etc.** - To help guide visitors through the space. Use it to support story telling or guide them to a feature (i.e. follow the embedded goose or crane tracks to find the restrooms, elk tracks to the nature play, etc.). Include little bits of art throughout, little surprises like a scavenger hunt for all things nature. Use elevated edges on art for visually impaired visitors and braille.
- **Use art and signage to help explain** - Expectations (walk, listen, do no harm / leave no trace), what animals will I see? what do I hear (including the train)? Include signs with common animals that people may sign to help ID. Add mural of animal silhouettes to mechanical room surround. Use animal footprints to direct students to different features (i.e. goose, crane, deer, squirrel, raccoon, coyote, etc. Use Indigenous names and other languages.
- **Use a variety of low and medium plantings** around perimeter to encourage kids to view and touch plants, at their reach and eye level. Bring nature up close to visitors.
- **Native common animals found on the refuge to include** - deer, coyote, opossum, raccoon, rabbit, beaver, river otter, squirrel, mice, moles, sandhill cranes, geese, crow, eagle, songbird, butterflies, pollinators, bats, etc.





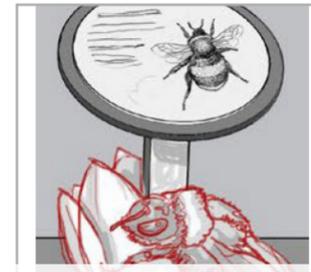
- 1 **Welcome and Orientation** - Accessible entry and directional compass
- 2 **Sign post** - Add to direct folks where to go for features and adventures
- 3 **Sign frame** - Use to provide seasonal messaging and information (case with lockable cover)
- 4 **"What did you see and hear" board**



USFWS ENTRY SIGN



WAYFINDING POST SIGNS



MEDIUM SIGNS



SMALL SIGNS



COMPASS & FEATURES

- 5 **Gathering area** - Include seating for at least 2 classrooms as well as staging area for educators to set packs, materials and kits.
- 6 **Benches** around the space for other visitors to observe the NEA.
- 7 **Amphitheater in hill** - Allow for performances, lectures and other educational programming.



LOG BENCHES



TIMBERFORM BENCH



BASALT BENCHES (12" & 18")



STONE AMPHITHEATER



TIMBERFORM PICNIC TABLE

- 8 **Habitat Garden** - Add plantings near NLA to showcase native plants and their role in the Refuge ecosystem. Locate as to not block view of Refuge or views from windows, but enhance experience. Elements of habitat (e.g. access to food, shelter, water and places to raise young. Also, could be a demonstration that others can do at their home.



OVERSTORY TREE



UNDERSTORY TREE



SHRUBS



PERENNIAL FLOWERS



GROUND COVER

- 9 **Habitat structures** - Include a variety of habitat structures to encourage hawks to roost, owls to nest, songbird nesting, etc. Include intentional features that can be lifted by staff to show the smaller critters (bug frame & panels)



WILDLIFE BLIND



BAT HOUSES



RAPTOR PERCHES



SONGBIRD HOUSES



INSECT HABITAT

- 10 **Sensory Garden** - Add plantings that can be touched and reasonably harvested during programs to provide tactile experience for touch, smell, sight. Use habitat logs and sticks to support growth for mosses, lichens and ferns. Use shrubs with different texture leaves, scented flowers, different shapes, etc. Use trees with cones and different textured leaves.



MOSSSES



LICHENS



FERNS



SHRUBS - MOCK ORANGE



TREES W/CONES - HEMLOCK



**11 Pollinator Garden** - Use a variety of small trees, shrubs and perennials as host and food source for a variety of pollinators. Use host plants for native butterflies, hummingbird food, native bees and other species of interest. Use small massing of diversity types, including flower shapes and colors. Include plants that vary with bloom cycles so there are blooms all year long. Add interpretive signage of most common species so folks know what they are seeing.



LOW PERENNIALS



TALL PERENNIALS



NATIVE BULBS



TALL EVERGREEN SHRUBS



LOW EVERGREEN SHRUB

**12 Animal Discovery** - What animals can people expect to see & hear when visiting the refuge. Use art to help understand size and types of animals to may encounter. Use footprints, signage, etc. Historic and current species. Predator and prey story.



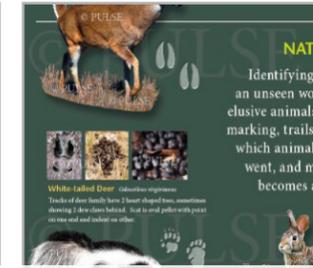
SMALL INTERPRETIVE SIGN



LARGE 3D DISPLAY



REPLICA TRACKS



LARGE INTERPRETIVE SIGN



NEARBY HABITAT STRUCTURES

**13 Loose parts play & discovery** - Area that students can arrange materials for program, art and play. Create tables to sort and arrange natural materials. Program staff can supply materials for a class or students can sustainably harvest materials from nearby.



NATURAL MATERIALS TABLE



HARVEST OPTIONS



LEARNING KITS



MAGNIFIER STATION



INSECT DISCOVERY

**14 Natural exploration** - Use ground level and elevated feature to support accessible use to replicate natural settings to be explored. Important features are rivers, plants and wildlife interactions.

- Could include a sand/water table to replicate river, erosion, sediment movement, etc.
- Build a nest for different species (hummingbird vs. eagle)
- Shoreline interactions (species that thrive in along the edge)
- Upland life with trees



EAGLE NEST REPLICA



LEAF HOPPER PATH



LARGE SCALE OAKS



SOIL EROSION TABLE



LOW BRIDGE

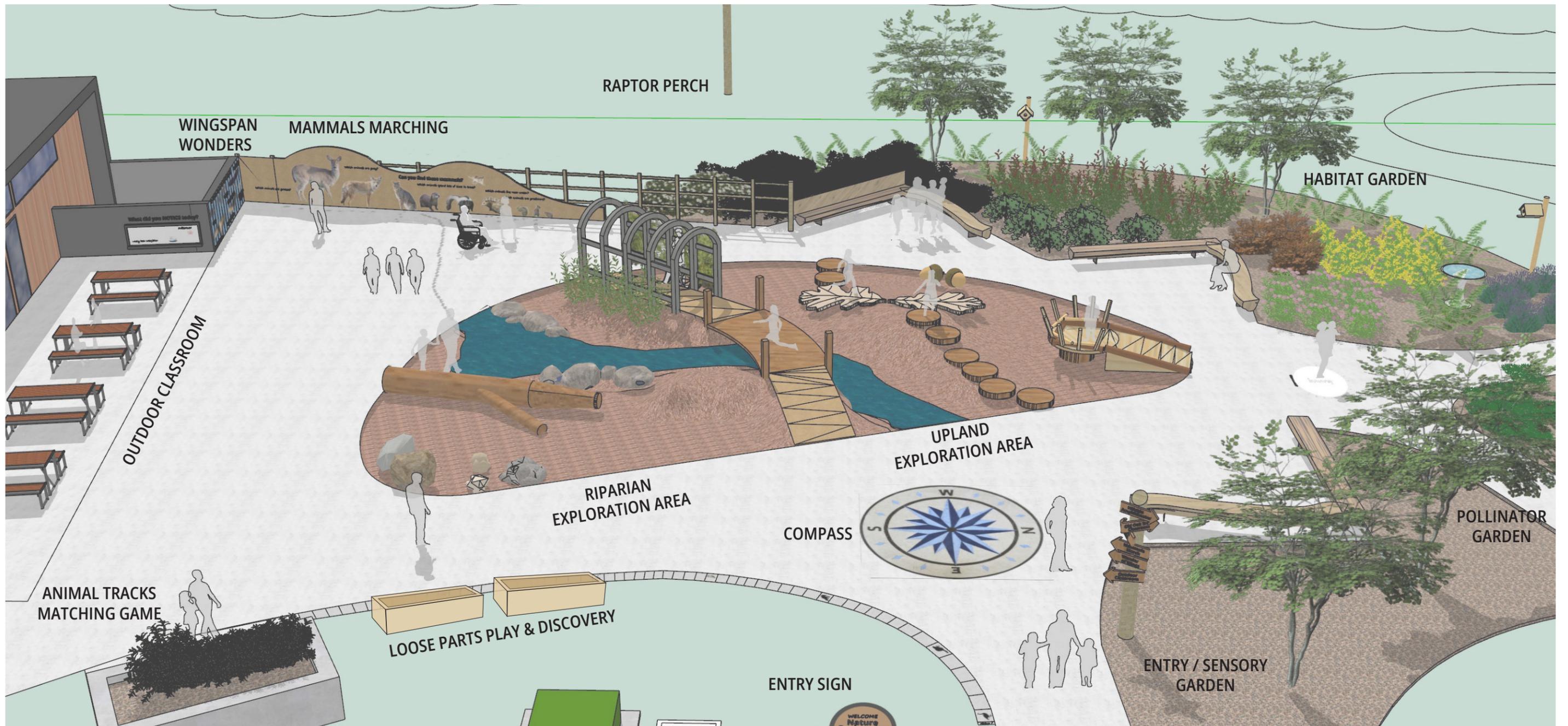


DOGWOOD TUNNEL



ROCK CYCLE DISPLAY





The Nature Learning Area (NLA) is a complimentary space to the Community Nature Center (CNC) interior spaces. The layout supports taking lessons outdoors for hands-on experiences. There are a variety of “stations” to promote learning and support for students and visitors, especially if they will not be visiting the full refuge over the train tracks.

Right outside the north classroom CNC door is a series of durable picnic tables to stage classroom materials, learning stations and group gathering point. This are fixed & secured tables to support a wide range of programming needs.

The entire NLA is accessed on accessible paved surfacing to accommodate all visitors and their needs. The loop path allows for a variety of learning stations around the central Exploration area. The space is also aligned to keep visitors north of the CNC and not go down the steep slope to the west.

Smaller gathering spaces are arranged for other groups to gather, whether it is family groups, programmed outings or school classes. There is room for several groups to enjoy and visit the variety of spaces. Habitat features and plantings encourage visitors to get up close to nature, including wildlife that will thrive in the spaces.

The central exploration area is approximately 2,200 square feet of exploration space. The south end is meant to replicate riparian areas while the north half tells the story of oak lands upland area. A short accessible footbridge connects both sides.

Surrounding the exploration area are a series of gardens, learning stations and hands-on activity opportunities.

Future loop paths will connect to the Old Oak Classroom, a destination for learning about Oak Tree habitat, as well as a hillside amphitheater in the northeast corner of the site.







White Board - What did you find?

Paint maintenance wall and add 1' increments - Add full sized cutouts of common birds found on the refuge

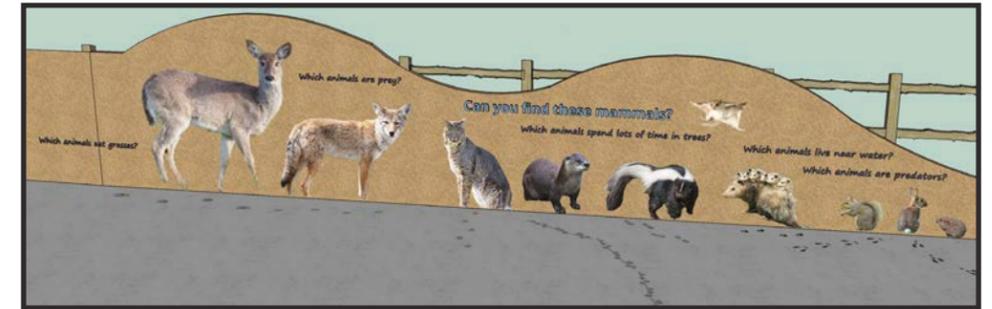
Add split rail fence to keep people from wandering down the hill . Add wood panel with full size cutouts of mammals paint or impress tracks in front of each mammal. Paint otter's prints to "River" area.



VIEW LOOKING WEST TOWARDS THE ANIMAL DISCOVERY - WINGSPANS OF WONDER AND MAMMAL MARCH (All animals are cutouts to provide visually impaired sense of scale)



NATURE LEARNING AND EXPLORATION AREA - LOOKING NORTH - LOW MOUNDS, LOGS, BOULDERS, PLANT TUNNEL, BRIDGE, LOG ROUNDS AND LARGE OAK LEAVES & ACORNS



ADD LOW STEP FOR ANIMAL / TRACK MATCHING GAME AT THE BASE OF PLANTER

