

Outdoor Skills Instructor

Metroparks Toledo / Hans Rudolph

Metroparks Toledo

Where?

The Toledo Metroparks is a collection of 19 different parks spread throughout Lucas County. I was stationed within Oak Openings Preserve but travelled throughout the district depending on my program's location for the day. Oak Openings Preserve is a roughly 5,000 acre plot nestled between the towns of Whitehouse and Swanton, Ohio. The preserve is one of the last remaining tracts of Oak Savanna in the world and is home to an array of state listed rare/endorsed species. Oak Openings, commonly referred to as "Oaks", is part of a larger corridor that connects unique habitats such as Kitty Todd Preserve, Irwin Prairie State Nature Preserve, Secor Metropark, and Wiregrass Lake Metropark.



Oaks is home to the Outdoor Skills Department, with our office, gear trailers, and equipment garage interspersed throughout the park. Oaks also hosts a large maintenance staff and is the headquarters for our West Region Natural Resources Department. With so many personnel frequenting the park daily, I had ample opportunities to interact with staff from different areas of expertise. I always enjoyed speaking with our Natural Resources staff after they had completed a controlled burn. Or listening to the strange stories told by Rangers.

What?

The mission of Metroparks Toledo is to conserve the region's natural resources by creating, developing, improving, protecting, and promoting clean, safe, and natural parks and open spaces for the benefit, enjoyment, education, and general welfare of the public. My department was largely guided by the second half of this statement and was responsible for a variety of personal connections fostered within the Metroparks.

During my time with the Metroparks, we were successful in our mission statement and won the National Gold Medal Award earning the title of No. 1 Park System in the USA. This award was earned in the fall of 2020 while I was working maintenance at Farnsworth Metropark. The distinction is awarded annually, and thus almost my entire career with the Metroparks included the title of No. 1 Park System.



How?

I began my career with Metroparks Toledo at Farnsworth Metropark on the banks of the Maumee River. There I spent the summer renting, maintaining and hauling kayaks as a Kayak Concession worker. Once the kayak concession season ended, I remained at Farnsworth as a Grounds Maintenance Assistant (GMA). As a GMA I was responsible for a wide array of maintenance and custodial duties. I often worked alone on the closing shift and took great pride in making sure the park was in good shape for my coworkers the following morning.

Since my employment was seasonal, I had to stop working during the months of January and February. During this time, I volunteered for the Metroparks as a breeding raptor monitor and helped at our greenhouse.

As soon as I was able to work again, I started back at Farnsworth. However, during the off season I applied for the position of Outdoor Skills Instructor. I only worked at Farnsworth for a few weeks before I was offered a job with the Outdoor Skills Team and it was this position in which I spent my summer.



On the Job

Wait, you got paid for this?

Yes, I got paid for all of this. As an Outdoor Skills Instructor, I was responsible for facilitating a variety of programs including archery, tree climbing, kayaking, canoeing, stand up paddle boarding, mountain biking, fishing, fire building, nature hikes, camps, and more.

With such a varied degree of program options, a typical work week was non-existent. It was very common to wake up at 5 am to haul a gear trailer or stay until 11 pm hanging life jackets to dry. Despite the unorthodox schedule, I enjoyed it all. During busy weeks I could visit 4-5 different parks while teaching a different skill at each. Every day was truly different from the last and I never felt bored.

Although every day was different, there were a lot of consistencies as well. Preparing for a program typically involved emailing participants a few days prior to ensure they were prepared for the upcoming program. Most programs involved packing gear and hauling a gear trailer to the program location. During programs I typically served as an assistant to one of our full-time staff. However, as the summer progressed, I took on greater roles and began leading programs myself. As a program lead, I was the main teacher and facilitator of the program. I was given the freedom to personalize my programs and make them an extension of my outdoor passions. Although a lot of responsibility, I enjoyed leading programs and wish I could have done it more.



Trees, Trailers, and a Pool? Oh my!

All aspects of the job were great, but there were some that I particularly enjoyed. My favorite being our recreational tree climbing programs. My first official day of work was shadowing a tree climbing program at Wildwood Metropark. From that day forward, I was hooked. Metroparks Toledo has 10 different climbing trees located throughout 9 parks within the district. Each tree has a specific souvenir knot called a "Trophy Knot" that is earned after climbing the tree. Trophy knots are colored pieces of paracord tied into a Figure 8 Loop. After earning my Wildwood Trophy Knot, I was determined to earn all 10. I spent the summer with this goal in mind, eventually earning my 10th and final knot during my last week of employment. Along the way I also earned a special edition, glow in the dark Trophy Knot for spending the night 60 feet up in a black walnut tree.

Not all parts of the job were as glorious as tree climbing, but I still managed to find ways to make them fun. Hauling gear trailers was originally one of my biggest fears of the job. I hated backing them into spaces yet backing them in at the end of the day was a pivotal part of the job. As the summer progressed, my skills improved and backing up became an art form. Within our maintenance lot we have 5 gear trailers of varying sizes parked in the back. However, there are no permanent spaces marked on the ground. Thus, if one trailer is parked crooked it causes the whole lot to become crooked. My coworker Jessica and I had an unofficial competition as to whom could park their trailer the straightest. My trailering career culminated in me hauling a 32-foot-long mobile climbing wall to downtown Toledo and back, twice!

The mobile climbing wall was just one part of the Metroparks mobile expansion. We also purchased a mobile pool. Considering we are a parks district, a mobile pool seemed strange. However, it provided a comfortable paddling experience for those who were new to the activity or held anxieties toward larger bodies of water. It was a huge hit and fun to drain.

Reflection

High Standards

Moving forward, I plan to continue within the realm of outdoor education and outdoor recreation. Throughout my time with the park, I held 3 different positions and titles. Although I enjoyed and deeply appreciate my time spent at Farnsworth Metropark as a Kayak Concession and Maintenance worker, I felt most in my element as an Outdoor Skills Instructor. I hope to continue this path and truly feel that this position was just the beginning of a lifelong career.

My experience with the Metroparks was great, maybe even too great. Moving forward, I am sure I will find myself using the Metroparks as a comparison to any future employer. The Metroparks has set a high standard that will be hard to beat. Yet I am grateful, for now I will demand more from a job. And I know too, that if I were to ever return to the area, that I have an amazing community that would openly welcome me back.

The Metroparks has not only set a high standard for employment experience, but it has also set a standard for coworker community. My fellow coworkers were the nicest, most understanding, and overall, some of the coolest people I have ever met. Within staff, I was the youngest by about 10 years. Although jokes were made about my adolescence and missed 90's references, I was still respected, and I appreciated that. My boss recalled the term "YAM" from a previous work experience. YAM stands for Young Aggressive Male. Yet, my coworkers decided I did not quite fit this archetype. Instead, I was given the nickname "Sweet Potato". For sweet potatoes are closely related to yams (the vegetable that is), but still have some key differences. I am still in contact with several of my coworkers and look forward to seeing them at our end of year staff party. Moving forward, I am comforted to know that I have such a strong professional network to aide me.



Go For It!

My advice to anyone interested in a similar experience is to just go for it! The outdoors may seem intimidating, but the community is amazing and willing to help. We all have to start somewhere. When I was hired, I had little experience in outdoor education. Yet, within a few short months I was teaching classes myself.

At the onset of my experience, I told myself to never turn down an opportunity. This mindset quickly had me out of my comfort zone. Whether it be dangling from a tree, flipping into freezing water, backpacking 30 miles, towing a massive trailer, or even running in a triathlon, I was constantly pushing myself beyond my normal boundaries. This not only exposed me to a greater variety of skills and opportunities. But it grew my confidence both within the workplace and in my personal life.

I would recommend the Toledo Metroparks to anybody, regardless of their interests or passions. The Metroparks have a variety of divisions including marketing, strategic planning, natural resource management, outdoor education, maintenance and more. I would urge anybody that is considering a job with the Metroparks to go for it. Everyone I encountered during my time was passionate and willing to help in any way possible. Despite knowing that I would eventually be returning to school, the Metroparks still invested in me, in hopes that it will help me succeed in the future. Their investment and belief in me were worth more than any pay grade.

