



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Free Weekend Workshops Encouraging Up-Close Critter Encounters

EAST BRUNSWICK – They’re a few longtime Central Jersey residents, who’ve largely gone unnoticed – that is until now.

The Middlesex County Improvement Authority (MCIA) is inviting the public to an unofficial meet-and-greet with creatures like the damselfly, whirligigs and stoneflies Nov. 2, during several interactive workshops at the Ireland Brook Conservation Area in East Brunswick.

Understandably, Middlesex County residents may be entirely unfamiliar with their creepy, crawly neighbors, but that’s just what organizers of “The Stream and Its Critters” workshops are counting on.

“Now here’s a prime opportunity to give your children a greater appreciation and understanding of the environment that surrounds them,” said Freeholder Carol Barrett Bellante, a liaison to the MCIA. “This is more than just a hands-on lesson about bugs and wildlife. It’s also a way to underscore our impact on nature’s delicate ecological balance.”

The free activity, additionally sponsored by the Friends of the East Brunswick Environmental Commission, and led by the Middlesex County Office of Parks and Recreation, gives residents the option of attending one of four sessions that begin between 9:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.

Throughout the day, Eric Gehring, a naturalist with the Middlesex County Office of Parks and Recreation, will guide short tours to the nearby Ireland Brook, where participants will both safely trap and observe a few of the local inhabitants before releasing them back into their natural habitats.

“Using a sein net, we’ll collect macro-invertebrates from the stream, place them in a pan of water and examine them with magnifying glasses,” said Rick Lear, division head of the Middlesex County Office of Parks and Recreation. “Different types of insects need cleaner water than others, so what we find will be a good indication of the stream’s health.”

During these outdoor excursions, some of the “critters” that may cross any given group’s path include:

- **Damselfly:** Akin to the dragonfly, this blue-tinted, carnivorous, airborne beauty feeds on spiders, mosquitoes and other insects.
- **Whirligig:** A type of water beetle that can swim above and below the stream’s surface and proves difficult to hold, due to the waxy, water-repellent residue its body secretes.
- **Stonefly:** Another flying insect that acts as a barometer for water quality and is one of approximately 3,500 species of its kind found the world-over, with the exception of Antarctica.

The workshop is open to families and individuals, as well as youth, 8-years-of-age and older, who are accompanied by a parent or guardian. Participants and accompanying adults will be required to sign a “volunteer agreement and release” form. Only a few pairs of hip waders, or waterproof boots that extend above the knee, will be available for rotation to attendees, who wish to venture into the brook’s shallow waters; so participants are encouraged to bring their own, if feasible.

Planners recommend attendees dress weather appropriate, bring a water bottle and prepare for a 10-minute or half-mile walk to the workshop’s site.

These workshops are part of the Days of Fun on the Raritan River: Things to Do Learn and Share on Our Riverfront programming, an initiative aimed at highlighting the Lower Raritan River’s many access points and increasing public awareness on general estuary use and care. A New York/ New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program grant awarded to the MCIA and funding from the New England Water Pollution Control Commission have made this instruction possible.

Respectively, the 1.5-hour sessions will start at 9:30 a.m., 11:30 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. Visitors should park at the Riva Avenue entrance of the Ireland Brook Conservation Area.

To register and for detailed directions, contact MCIA Economic Development Senior Project Manager Denise Nickel at 609-409-5002 or by email at dn@mciauth.com.