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Ball State University Opens New Environmental Education Center

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Abstract

Ball State University has opened its new Environmental Education Center and a newly expanded Conservatory at the Rinard Orchid Greenhouse. Teachers are invited to plan visits to the site for a variety of environmental education programs. Learn more about the facility and the activities the university hopes to host at the new facility.

Keywords: Environmental education, Rinard Orchid Greenhouse, Ball State University, Outdoor education

Figure 1. Rinard Orchid Greenhouse with new Environmental Ed Center (left)

Figure 2. *Maxillaria grandis* orchid

Ball State University has just completed work on a new Environmental Education Center adjacent to the newly expanded Conservatory at the Dr. Joe & Alice Rinard Orchid Greenhouse. The Ball State Field Station and Environmental Education Center (FSEEC) will begin hosting public events and classes at the facility in the summer of 2022.

The Rinard Orchid Greenhouse (ROGH) at Ball State University (Figure 1) is the largest collegiate orchid collection in North America. The collection is more than just orchids (Figure 2); it houses many species of tropical plants, as well as species native to the Midwest.

Full listing of authors & contacts can be found at the end of article.

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Figure 3. Preschooler walking in the tallgrass prairie.

The ROGH is also located on the south side of Christy Woods, which is an outdoor classroom for nature education. Located on the west edge of campus, Christy Woods also includes the Teaching and Research Greenhouse, forested areas, a tallgrass prairie (Figure 3), and soon a wetland to be constructed next to the new Environmental Education Center. This combination of habitats and spaces offers a variety of environmental education and research opportunities.

In 2021 construction began to expand the ROGH, which was built in 2014 to replace an aging facility from the early 1970s. Thanks to the generous support of benefactors, the university has doubled its conservatory space that contains examples of Central American flora as well as tropical frogs (Figure 4), Indiana-native aquatic turtles, and sculptures of various tropical wildlife. The adjacent Environmental Education Center includes a classroom designed to be a versatile space for many types of groups.

The expansion and new Environmental Education Center will allow us to greatly expand the programs and events that we offer. From the parking lot, visitors will walk through our Gateway Plaza, which will be an outdoor nature space accessible 24-7.

Upon entering the vestibule, visitors will have three directions to choose from. Going right will take visitors into the expanded Conservatory space (Figure 4),

Figure 4. View of the expanded Conservatory through the tree-of-life panel.

where they can observe a variety of tropical plants as they meander the path, as well as our red-eyed tree frogs, poison dart frogs (Figure 5), turtles, and sculptures. Going straight will lead visitors to the prairie, which will contain our newly built outdoor learning space. This space is inspired by the shape of an orchid, and will include permanent seating to allow educational programs to take place while surrounded by the prairie.

Turning left in the vestibule will lead visitors to our Nature Lab, a 1498-square-foot learning space. This room is intentionally designed to be a flexible learning space that brings nature indoors. A large over-head door can be opened to allow indoor-outdoor learning experiences as it connects to the outdoor learning space in the prairie. Large windows allow the prairie and forest to be easily observed. An observational beehive will be installed in the classroom, with a tunnel through the wall to allow the honeybees to exit the hive and pollinate our prairie.

Tanks will also be installed in the classroom to allow native frogs and a box turtle to live in the Nature Lab, so that visitors can observe some of our local wildlife year-round. Life-size bird silhouettes, skulls, furs, and other nature-inspired teaching tools will be displayed in the Nature Lab to provide additional learning opportunities for our visitors. Finally, the room is set up with a "wet lab" space, to allow us better resources to

Figure 5. Poison Dart Frog

Figure 6. Indiana Master Naturalists learn about songbirds.

do activities that can get messy, such as planting seeds, painting, and more.

From May 2021 through May 2022, the FSEEC welcomed nearly 15,000 visitors to our facilities. Visitors included BSU students, PreK-12th grade students, community members, and more (Figures 6 & 7). In our new ECC space, we look forward to continuing providing environmental educational opportunities for those audiences, and further expanding programs we offer to the community.

Each month, the ROGH offers a special "Second Saturday" program where visitors can come at their leisure and participate in scavenger hunts and other activities to learn more about a specific topic. Past topics have included pollinators, dinosaurs, Shakespeare, tropical edible plants, and more. We expect to expand the activities offered during these programs in our new space, and offer additional topics related to Indiana ecology.

Figure 7. Wildlife Warriors meet a native turtle.

Planning A Visit

Groups can contact our Environmental Education Program Coordinator, Erica Oliver, to learn more about scheduling field trips and programs with us. Her email is elforstater@bsu.edu. There is a field trip request form you can complete to help plan your visit to Christy Woods, the BSU greenhouses, and the Environmental Education Center. **Click here to download that form**.

Hours of Operation

The ROGH is open to visitors M-F from 10-4:30 pm, and Saturdays 10-3pm.

Christy Woods is open to visitors M-F from 7:30-4:30pm and Saturdays 10-3pm. Visitors do not need to schedule a time to visit our facilities unless they are a group such as school or community organizations.

Visitors can follow our social media accounts to stay up-to-date on events happening at our facilities.

ROGH social media

Facebook: Rinard Orchid Greenhouse – Ball State University

Instagram: bsurogh

Christy Woods social media

Facebook: Christy Woods and BSU Field Station Properties

Instagram: christywoods_bsu

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