



# CONNECTIONS CAMP

## METROPARKS TOLEDO

## WE CONNECT CHILDREN TO NATURE

For eight weeks each summer, Metroparks Toledo partners with community organizations and local area schools to bring over 1,000 children growing up in historically underserved communities to nature camp, completely free of charge! The weeklong Metroparks camp provides immersive experiences which...

- Encourage critical thinking
- Build social-emotional skills
- Boost mental well-being
- Promote mindfulness
- Calm fears of being outside
- Establish life-long conservation values



## NATURE. GROWTH. JOY.

Morgan Sopko

As the Connections Camp Coordinator, I can honestly say it is one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had in a job. Whether it's watching campers light up with excitement as they try archery for the first time, exploring life in the water while searching for macroinvertebrates during our river study at Side Cut, or confidently building fires and carving soap at Pearson, every moment feels meaningful. Each park offers its own unique adventure, and every day I see the campers grow by learning new skills, overcoming challenges, and connecting with nature and each other. One of my favorite moments is learning about trees at Providence, where campers work together in teams to observe and identify them. One camper is blindfolded while their partner leads them to a tree to explore - an activity that turns out to be a perfect mix of fun, learning, and collaboration.

This year we started a bead recognition reward program. At the beginning of the week each camper receives a wooden "tree cookie" nametag on a cord necklace. Throughout the camp, campers earn colorful beads for positive behavior, participation, and trying new things. The beads come in fun tiers (Common, Rare, Epic, and Legendary), and every camper proudly displays their camp achievements. The bead system is a fun and inclusive way to recognize all the positive behaviors we love to see, giving everyone a chance to shine, no matter their strengths. It builds camp spirit, encourages teamwork, and gives each camper a meaningful keepsake they can take home and remember their experience all year long. Plus, we get to end each camp day with a bead ceremony full of songs and celebration, allowing campers the opportunity to reflect on their days experiences.



Campers with bead nametag necklaces show off their rewards for camp achievements

What truly stays with me are the heartfelt thanks from so many campers. More than one child tells me it's "the best week ever," and some don't want to leave when it's over. Hearing that from them while also seeing the smiles, hugs, and even a few tears on the last day, is the most meaningful part of all. As we wrap up each week with a campfire and s'mores, I look around at the campers laughing, singing, and sharing stories, and I feel incredibly proud of what we're building together. This camp isn't just about nature or activities; it's about connection, growth, and joy.



Connections Camp gives kids who don't normally spend time outdoors a wide variety of nature-based experiences that spark curiosity, build confidence, and create lasting memories.

-Morgan



Archery at Side Cut

## CAMP ACTIVITIES + ADVENTURES

Kids leave Connections Camp with new skills, confidence, experiences in nature, and treasured memories through experiencing things like...



Canoeing



Archery



Fishing



Animal Encounters



Nature Study & Walks



Art Projects



Roller Skating



Fire Building



Canoeing at Side Cut

## IMPACT OF SPENDING TIME IN NATURE

Outdoor activities have been proven to reduce stress and improve health across all age groups. Children who spend time in nature are...

- Sick less often. Mud, sand, water, leaves, sticks, pine cones and gum nuts can help to stimulate children's immune systems as well as their imaginations.
- More physically active and less likely to be overweight.
- More resistant to stress, have fewer incidences of behavioral disorders, anxiety and depression, and have a higher measure of self-worth.
- Able to recognize, assess and negotiate risk and build confidence and competence.
- Are more collaborative and have more positive feelings about each other.
- Less likely to show symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder, which are reduced after contact with nature.



Water balloon toss game at Glass City with reusable water balloons

## CAMP INCLUSION PROGRAMMER ASSISTANCE

One hundred six campers received Camp Inclusion Programmer assistance. Camp Inclusion Programmers are trained mentors to accompany students who benefit from adaptations attending Metroparks Toledo Summer Day Camps with their typically developing peers.

Mentors accompany 1 to 3 children per week at camp and provide as little or as much support as the individual campers require. This is helpful so that Summer Camp staff can focus on the additional campers.



Fishing at Pearson

## THANK YOU!

Metroparks Toledo's Connections Camp program gives children the chance to experience the outdoors, build friendships, and grow in confidence through hands-on adventures in nature. Donor support is vital—making up the majority of the funding that sends kids to camp. Contributions help cover transportation, program supplies, staffing and excursions, ensuring that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to discover the joy and wonder of nature.



Anonymous: On Behalf of  
the many individuals and  
cultural leaders who make  
up the East Side of Toledo

Cider Fest 419  
Carol and Dave Haddix  
Kelly and Mike Hart  
Sharon and Leo Knox

Lathrop Company  
Annette and Mel Wicks  
Susan Wilson  
Yark Subaru

Every gift matters. We warmly thank all those who gave at every level.

***Your generosity truly makes a difference!***





Campers play bat and moth game at Providence learning how they hunt at night using echolocation

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Thank you so much for having us! We look forward to returning again!



Archery at Glass City

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Every day and activity was well organized and the Metroparks staff were very friendly.



Climbing Wall at Glass City

“

Exceeded my expectations. Loved all of it.



Students work together to build shelter in a survival scenario at Side Cut

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I love that the kids get to experience outdoors in many ways they might never have done with their families.



While enjoying activities inside the Lamb Center at Side Cut, campers got to meet Ranger Michael and Timber

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Metroparks staff were very prepared with first aid, sunscreen/bug spray, water, and even sensory items that were immensely helpful for our kids!



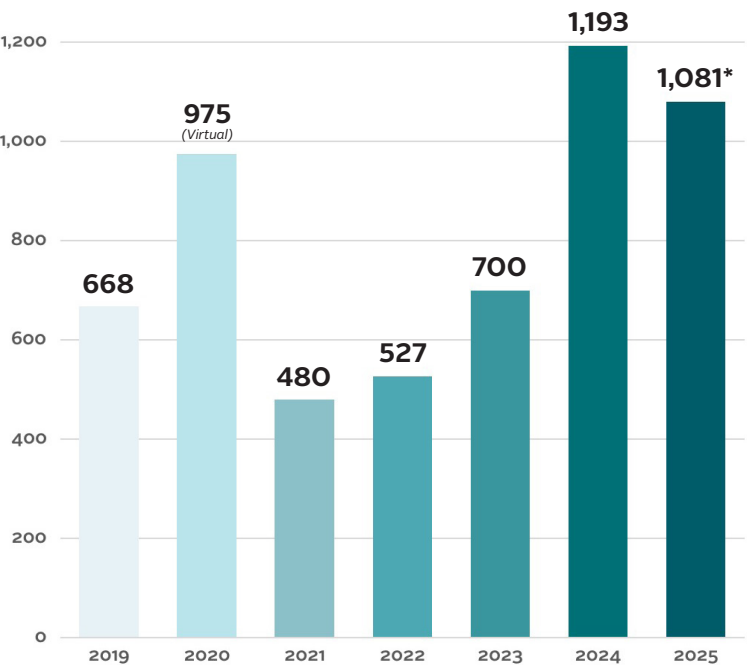
Campers explore river life and macroinvertebrates in the Maumee River at Side Cut

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I enjoyed seeing the campers get out of their comfort zones and participate in things like canoeing and the river study.

# PROGRAM GROWTH

## CAMPERS WEEKLONG CAMP EXPERIENCE



Beginning in 2024, the Glass City Enrichment Center began serving as Connections Camp headquarters. This allowed for:

- Reaching the upper limits of our weekly camper capacity because we had a large, consistent dedicated home base for camp
- Extending camp to 8 weeks during the summer (previously 6-7 weeks)
- Adding new partner agencies
- Flexibility for our partners and campers – the ability to provide half-day camp experiences for our partner agencies allows us to serve more children
- Glass City Metropark opened and was available for additional programming which brought new camp opportunities

\*Reservations for 2025 were 1,259 children, however only 1081 attended likely due to the extreme heat we experienced this summer.

## PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS 2025

Glass City Behavioral Health, Sofia Quintero Art & Cultural Center, SunBridge, Boys and Girls Club, East Toledo Family Center, Catholic Club, Grace Community Center, Magic Moments Daycare, Kiddie Kollege Childcare, Save the Youth, Padua Center, Art Tatum Zone, Believe Center, Unison Health



Campers from the East Toledo Family Center gather for a quick photo in front of the bus that brought them to Providence Metropark, ready to kick off a day full of nature, exploration, and fun

## CAMPERS EXTENDED PROGRAMS

Extended programs serve partner organizations who are unable to attend the traditional weeklong camp experience, instead providing 1 to 2 day long camp experiences at various Metroparks like Glass City Metropark and Pearson Metropark.

2022	2023	2024	2025
473	293	307	345
CAMPERS	CAMPERS	CAMPERS	CAMPERS

## ACCESSIBILITY MATTERS

Connections Camp opens the door for children from historically underserved neighborhoods to experience the joy of summer camp and discover our Metroparks—often for the very first time.

## CAMPERS LIVING BELOW OR AT DOUBLE THE FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL

2022	2023	2024	2025
70%	93%	87%	95%



Campers put their fire building skills to the test as they safely create a small flame