We Are DNR:

Meet a Natural Heritage Biologist

Story and Photos By Joe McFarland

Some people have the uncanny ability to notice the slightest change as they enter a familiar room: a chair has been moved a few inches; a desk drawer is opened slightly. For Department of Natural Resources natural heritage biologist Jody Shimp, the ability to recall exactly how our world is supposed to appear comes in handy, especially when it comes to the natural world—where none is better at this memory art than Shimp.

As a native plant expert for the Department of Natural Resources, Shimp surveys the flora along roadsides and parks wherever he travels and quickly spots the insidious invader, the botanical threats-in-waiting to the nature of Illinois. Early detection can save entire plant communities from being crowded out, yet such interventions are all in a day's work for this plant professional.

The title of natural heritage biologist might not immediately come to mind when one thinks of specific occupations within the Department of Natural Resources. Often people think of a park ranger, or a Conservation Police officer as the face of DNR. Yet this state agency that manages, protects and sustains Illinois' natural and cultural resources—that's our mandate—necessarily employs a diverse range of staff, from Conservation Police to fisheries biologists and office managers. A natural heritage biologist might be a specialist in reptiles and amphibians, or, in Shimp's case, a native plant expert.

DNR Natural Heritage Biologist Jody Shimp often is the first to spot non-native plants invading Illinois.

Surprisingly, it's a career path Shimp almost overlooked.

"When I was an undergraduate (at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale), I had no interest in plants," Shimp recalls with a laugh. "I was really into fish."

But a chance meeting with a botanist changed his life. Suddenly the young college student was fascinated by the complex interdependence of plant communities in nature. He changed his major, devouring everything he could read on the subject. Eventually, he would earn a master's degree in plant ecology and in 1996 a position with DNR.

"For me, one of my greatest challenges is invasive species," Shimp said, while quick to add that increased public awareness is encouraging. "I'm really hopeful about the future," he said. "More of us have common goals than ever before."