

# Willow Whispers

A publication of  
Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic  
State Parks



**FRIENDS**  
OF  
WILLOW RIVER & KINNICKINNIC  
EST. STATE PARKS 1990

Spring/Summer, 2021



Rita Thofern

## President's Column

Rita Thofern

Welcome back to the parks in a big way.

It's a wonderful thing to see spring arriving and to have so many fewer unknowns this time compared to the spring of 2020. Yes, there are still some COVID-19 accommodations in

place to assure that visitors and staff remain safe. But we are on our way back to normal.

At Willow River we have just received clearance for the nature center/trail center to be open to the public. There will be some restrictions, such as masking and capacity limits. Nevertheless, visitors will again be able to learn about the park and receive guidance about the trails and other activities within the park. The nature center will be open in time for Memorial Day.

At both Willow and Kinni, new mountain bike trails are being built. This is a major project and is coming to be thanks to the support of a dedicated group of volunteers in coordination with the Friends' group. The Friends group submitted successful applications totaling \$30,000 from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. This funding must be matched, partly in donated cash and partly with in-kind donations and volunteer labor. Lots of volunteer labor! Be sure to check out the related article for more detailed information about the new mountain biking trails.

Are you ever asked, "What does the Friends group do?" Several good answers are right in this newsletter. Read on.



Kinni Kayak Lessons

## Superintendent's Report

Aaron Mason

Here we are again with another quick jump from winter into our busy season. Park staff have been hustling to get buildings and water systems up and running, campgrounds open, and trails ready. Water is now on and all campgrounds are

open for reservations. The past few nice weekends have brought many visitors out to the park helping make up for February's cold snap. Spring flooding was mild this year and that has allowed us to get an early start on getting Kinni ready. Docks and buoys went in on the St. Croix during the second week of May.

The current pandemic still has us under some restrictions. Willow River and Kinnickinnic are open for all uses. Park admission is required and offices are open for drive-up service only. Hikers are welcome on the trails but are encouraged to maintain social distancing and avoid crowded areas. Park rest rooms and drinking fountains are open for use. The stairway and overlooks at the falls, and all playgrounds, have reopened. Campgrounds are fully open and available for reservation. All campers must make an advance reservation. Check-in at the park is no longer required. Same-day reservations are available.

We have also been busy with several other projects around the park. Over the winter, park staff, volunteers, and DNR fisheries staff assembled 93 timber fish cribs to provide habitat in Little Falls Lake for the newly stocked fish. Last fall Fisheries stocked largemouth bass and bluegills. Additional stocking is planned for this year. Repairs to the stairway at the falls have been made. A larger stairway project will likely happen this fall or next spring to replace the aging lower section.

Volunteers are now allowed back in groups of 10 or smaller. Bike trail volunteers have been working hard at both parks building the new mountain bike trails. Others have been removing invasive buckthorn and garlic mustard, and picking up litter. Contact the park if you wish to volunteer.

Thank you to all of the Friends and volunteers who help make these two parks such great places to visit. All of your help is greatly appreciated. I hope to see you out here soon.



Aaron Mason



Tired volunteers Jack & Ryan

## Bike Trail Trash Day

Rita Thofern

As the new bike trails begin to be developed in the northwest corner of the park, some interesting things are seeing the light of day. People who have explored in the area have encountered several concrete foundations. Prior to development of the park, there were a few small farmsteads on the north side of the Willow River and some cabins close to the water. These remnants serve as interesting documentation of previous activity. Not surprisingly, less enchanting stuff was also left behind by previous users, including large amounts of trash.

The folks behind the WIKI Bike Club decided to do something about the trash. They put out a call for volunteers and, on a sunny morning in April, 38 people of all ages showed up and got to work. They gathered up and hauled out quite a collection. It included rusty cans, sun faded aluminum cans, broken bottles, old barrels that had been used for target practice, quite a bit of rusty fencing wire, discarded shoes, and a pair of whitewall tires.



Much was accomplished and everyone had a great time.



## River Rambles

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator

In the spring and summer you will find no livelier place than a pond.

Water bugs skate over the surface of the water until swallowed up by a bullfrog.

Turtles bask in the sun, muskrats forage, ducks dabble, and deer visit the edge of the pond to grab a drink. Underneath the surface,

microscopic creatures strain plant food from the water and then, themselves, feed many important fish, amphibian, and bird species. The Hidden Ponds Nature Trail is a great place to see all of this and more! I encourage you to take a slow stroll on the trail at dusk or dawn, stopping at each pond along the way to count how many different species

of insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and mammals you see. You may be surprised by how many creatures rely on these small

water sources to survive. Not only are they important to countless species within the park, they are also very peaceful and healing to sit beside. Enjoy your time there, for you can never have too much of it!



Ashley Goldbeck and Albert



# Mountain Bike Trails Are Coming to Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks!

Andrew Cook

After years of planning and working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and local park managers, the plan for the parks now includes mountain biking. New trails are being built by volunteers from the Willow-Kinni Mountain Bike Club (WIKI) and the Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks. These new trails are being built in previously undeveloped areas. Bicycles will continue to be prohibited on all unpaved hiking, snowshoe, and ski trails. In the winter, snowshoers will be welcome to use the new bike trails. This will help groom the trails for fat tire bikes.

The mountain bike trails project is a partnership between the WIKI Bike Club and the Friends. Funding is provided through public donations as well as grants from the DNR Knowles-Nelson Stewardship program. No funds from the Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks will be used.

By the end of summer, 2021, construction of three miles of new trail at Kinnickinnic State Park and six miles at Willow River State Park should be complete. The trails will be built in a loop style with beginner trails near the parking areas. More advanced options will be available further into the trail system. This will offer easy, fun trails for the beginning rider as well as exciting, challenging trails for experienced riders.



The new mountain bike trails have been professionally designed and are being built by volunteers with extensive trail-building experience. Modern trail design and construction techniques are used to mitigate erosion, avoid wetlands, and minimize maintenance.

Out of respect for the hunters who already make use of the parks, and to prevent damage to the trails, mountain biking will be closed at times. This will include being closed during the fall hunting season, usually November 15 to December 15 and the spring turkey hunting seasons beginning April 1. Winter fat tire biking will be dependent on conditions and, again, will not be allowed on cross-country ski trails. Many of the parks' volunteer ski-trail groomers also bike. They share a mutual respect for the separate activities having their own spaces to enjoy the parks.



To learn more, or become involved in this exciting project, follow the links below. Email the WIKI Bike Club or the Friends group with any thoughts, questions, concerns, or kudos.

Frequently asked questions about the mountain bike trails' project:  
<https://wikimountainbike.com/pages/faq>

Become a trail building volunteer:  
<https://wikimountainbike.com/pages/contact-us>

Email WIKI:  
[wikimtnbike@gmail.com](mailto:wikimtnbike@gmail.com)

Email Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks:  
[naturecenter@willowkinnifriends.org](mailto:naturecenter@willowkinnifriends.org)

Donate to the parks' mountain bike trails project:  
<https://wikimountainbike.com/collections/donate>



## Paths to Discovery: The Campaign to Replace the Nature Center

Many of you are aware of the excitement in the air as we plan for a beautiful and functional new building to house the



Willow River Nature Center. We're very pleased to report that the campaign is gearing up into a more active phase and we look forward to sharing more information with you very soon!



After much deliberation and planning, it was determined that the existing building is beyond repair. In addition, as annual park visits approach one million, the facility is much too small to accommodate the growing need!

Planning to replace the nature center has been underway for several years. The new facility will satisfy a number of needs.

- The area for interpretive displays and ambassador animals will be expanded.

- An improved gift shop area will be included.

- Enlarged instructional space will enhance programming. The new building will connect visually and physically to the nature right outside.

- Trail center support will be greatly improved with the inclusion of a space designed to be accessible to the public anytime the park is open. This area will include public restrooms and changing areas, gathering space, and, of course, trail information.



Work continues to secure significant funding. Stay tuned for more information about this enhancement to the beautiful parks we all love and enjoy.



## Winter Trail Recap

With more people seeking healthy, outdoor activities, heavy trail use by visitors continued throughout the winter season. Hikers and snowshoers have embraced Willow's new routes stretching from the nature center to the falls. This was the trails' first season of being fully open with plenty of signage to show the way. A variety of trailheads allowed for routes of varying difficulty and distance. Two things were accomplished. First, the hikers and snowshoers had a great experience following lovely, intimate trails. Second, cross-country skiers had a better experience with fewer hikers and snowshoers intruding on the ski trails. A win win!



Spring returns to the parks.

## Trail Improvement by the Friends

The terrific Green and Blue snowshoe/hiking trails to the falls have had a remarkable facelift. Two spots along that trail were extremely steep and treacherous. When wintery conditions became icy, those sections seemed to be more suited to a luge sled than to foot travel. No more! This spring the Friends received a donation that funded hiring a professional trail-building firm who redesigned and rebuilt those nasty sections making them much more user friendly.

# Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks, Inc.

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Nixon, Jim O'Connor, Jeff Roberts, Nick Schmit

Park Superintendent: Aaron Mason

Kinnickinnic Park Ranger: Eric Klumb

Naturalist Educator: Ashley Goldbeck



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# We Are Willow River

