

# Willow Whispers

A publication of  
Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic  
State Parks



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

Fall/Winter, 2020



Rita Thofern

## President's Column

Rita Thofern

What an unusual time to become president of the Friends' group. Having been involved with the parks in various ways since the 1970s, I am pleased to assume leadership of the Friends. I am also pleased to follow in John Collins' footsteps. John invested

considerable time and energy in the organization and is handing it off in better shape than he found it.

I grew up in St. Paul, near the Mississippi River, and have been in this area since 1975, with the St. Croix, the Kinnickinnic and the Willow Rivers all nearby. My innate love of the outdoors has kept me close to nature all of my life.

Welcome to the next round of seasons at our favorite parks with continued adjustments to keep everyone safe and healthy. The Friends, supported by our amazing naturalist, are working hard to offer interesting and informative activities to park users while taking steps to keep everyone safe and healthy.

There is no way to pretend that things aren't just a whole lot different than usual, and there is no way to deny how precious time in the outdoors is, especially as we thread our way through this global pandemic.

Look throughout this newsletter for news on what's been going on and what will be coming up soon. And, keep showing up. Each visit provides a whole new experience.



Rita at Willow, 1986. Guess the location!  
Photo by Dave Thofern

## Superintendent's Report

Aaron Mason

Well it has certainly been a year to remember. The current pandemic definitely created its share of challenges. Both Willow River and Kinnickinnic were extremely busy all summer. We were finally able to open

campgrounds in early June. The park office remained closed all season, however we were able to open up the drive-up window the Friday before Labor Day. Having that personal contact with visitors made our job a lot easier. This fall, increased visitation continued into October. We are finally starting to see things wind down and get back to normal.

Park staff have been working hard getting ready for the onset of winter, which looks like it may come sooner than later. Water systems are shut down for the season and campgrounds will be closing in early November. At Kinnickinnic, the docks and buoys have been pulled, and boats are out of the water and stored for winter. Staff have been prepping trails for skiing and snowshoeing.

Some may be wondering what is and isn't open. Currently, Willow River and Kinnickinnic are open for normal uses including, hiking, camping, picnicking, etc. Park admission is required and both daily and annual passes are available for purchase at the park office windows and through self-registration. Visitors are welcome to come hike on the trails but encouraged to maintain proper social distancing and avoid crowded areas. Water is off for the season, but vault toilets are open at picnic and camping areas. Some parts of the park remain closed including the stairway and overlooks at the falls

*Superintendent's report continued on p. 2.*



Aaron Mason



Little Falls Lake  
Photo by Dave Thofern

*Superintendent's Report continued from p. 1.*

The Little Falls Dam project is finally completed! The dam is fully functional and the lake has been full since spring. The remaining site work was completed this summer and the area was opened to the public in October after the grass had a chance to get established. We have received a lot of positive comments about the dam and having the lake back. The lake was stocked with fingerlings this summer including bass and bluegills. There are plans to do additional stocking later this fall or next spring. Another 100 timber fish cribs will be constructed this winter. This will add more structure to the lake and provide places for young fish to hide from predators. This should provide great fishing opportunities in a couple of years.



Little Falls Dam  
Photo by Rita Thofern

Volunteer activity has been very limited due to COVID 19 restrictions. Volunteers are now able to work independently or in groups of fewer than 10. Working with staff and using Department equipment is still limited. We will have several opportunities for volunteers to help with trail prep and also with brush for fish cribs this fall. Please contact the park if you wish to volunteer.

Thank you to all volunteers. Your help is greatly appreciated. Be safe. See you out here soon.



Little Falls Lake view from the dam  
Photo by Arik Feidt, Park Ranger

## River Rambles

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator

Hi Friends,  
Ahhhhh.  
Fall is upon us!

This is by far the best time of the year to get out and enjoy all things nature-related! Many birds are packing their bags and heading south. Some are out strutting their stuff (we see you turkeys!) hoping to meet the mate of their dreams, while several mammals, reptiles and amphibians are packing in their last meals before signing off for the season.

Between the comfy, sweatshirt-friendly weather, crisp air and beautiful colors, I could stay outdoors from sun up to sun down just to watch all the wonders of the natural world, while ignoring all the tragedies of the rest. Don't you agree?!

Now, I know it's not always the greatest feeling knowing that the days are getting shorter and the nights longer. Before we know it winter will be here and that, for many people, means less time outdoors and more time cooped up inside.

But here at the parks we like to think otherwise! There are so many opportunities to get up and get out no matter the season! Hike, bike, snowshoe, ski, fish, hunt, sled, observe. Really, the sky's the limit!

Happy Trails!



Ashley Goldbeck and Albert



## AdventureCation! Where Education Meets Adventure!

If COVID's got your family feeling slumpy and grumpy, we're excited to announce that we are issuing a whole new way to enjoy Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks in a fun, safe and socially distanced manner.

Become a member of our Friends group at the Great Friend (\$50) level or higher and gain access to a diverse library of do-it yourself, nature-based articles and activities. With a variety of topics to choose from, there is something for everyone to enjoy! Don't let COVID coop your family up!

Enjoy activities and hikes you can embark on here in

the parks, or in your very own back yard! Provide feedback and share some of your favorite sightings and experiences through our user-friendly blog and complete activities anytime of the week instead of fighting weekend crowds.

Now more than ever we encourage you to enjoy all the wonders and benefits nature has to offer; when you wish, wherever you choose. Let us guide you on your next socially distanced adventure!

Learn more or get started at: [www.willowkinnifriends.org/join-adventurecation](http://www.willowkinnifriends.org/join-adventurecation)



John Collins

### Past President's Column

John Collins

Eight years ago, I was down in the park on snowshoes and came across Dave and Rita Thofern grooming the ski trail. We had a good talk and I became involved with the Friends. It's been a very

interesting and enlightening experience. Six years ago, our former president, Tom Falkofske, stepped down and I became president. Now it is time for someone else to take charge, and we elected Rita Thofern as our new president. Congratulations to Rita!

Much has happened, in the park and within our organization, over these past six years. My life has been enriched by getting to know many wonderful people who understand the value of our parks and are putting their time, energy, and resources into making them better. This includes park staff, people in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), other board members, our employees, and a wide variety of volunteers who have helped improve the parks and introduced thousands of people to the wonders of nature through our educational programs. We take pride in providing a highly qualified, energetic, and engaging naturalist who provides programming for visitors.

One of our ongoing activities over the last six years has been the Buckthorn Brigade and other park improvement projects, enabled by Ruwal Freese and the volunteers he has recruited and organized. Six years ago, the Purple trail downstream from the dam was so overhung with invasive buckthorn it was becoming impassable after snowstorms as the branches drooped over the trail. You could not see the river, even when it was less than six feet from the trail. Now we can see the river along with the native cherry,

oak, maple, basswood, aspen, pine, and the occasional locust, along the bank. We've also worked in other areas including campgrounds and the nature trail. To help with this work, the Friends purchased a skid-steer tractor and a commercial-size wood chipper. A volunteer crew can now clear and treat long stretches of trail-side buckthorn and other invasives in a morning's work.

Our most exciting project is to build a new nature center. The existing building needs to be replaced. It is far too small for many of the programs we offer, especially school field trips, and it is deteriorating badly. Since the DNR is not in the business of building such facilities, the Friends group is working to make it happen. In 2017 Jim Sharer made a contribution to fund a study into options for adding the needed capacity. That evolved into our Paths to Discovery campaign to raise roughly \$4 million to build a new facility. We look forward to at least doubling the instructional and interpretive space and providing year-around access to indoor gathering space and bathrooms. We are currently pursuing several large grants and hope to begin the public phase of the fundraising process sometime in 2021.



John Collins, far left, working with the Buckthorn Brigade.

## Willow River Trail Challenge 2020

Rita Thofern

This year the Willow River Trail Challenge was a show stopper. To comply with COVID-19 guidelines we needed to spread it over a period of days with no set start time and with no volunteers on site. It was an amazing experience. As



Photo by Trail Challenge participant

participants sent in photos they took during their event it became clear that Mother Nature won the day. The fall colors were so spectacular that, for quite a few participants, the focus shifted from running to appreciating the experience of being outdoors in truly extraordinary circumstances. Take a look.

## Snowshoe Trails and Rentals

Rita Thofern

We have already had one taste of winter. Real winter cannot be far behind. Some of us believe that the only thing to do is get out there and enjoy it!

To help bump up the enjoyment this winter there is a new foot trail route that allows hikers and snowshoers to travel from the beach/nature center area all the way to the falls without trespassing on the ski trails. The trail was opened last December, without fanfare, and has been a big hit with non-skiers. You can access this trail from the nature center, the boat landing, group camp lot, or the 200 campground.



Photo by Dave Thofern

New signage will be posted to help visitors understand the difference between a ski trail and a winter snowshoe/foot trail.

Snowshoes are available to rent at both parks. Renters can sign up online to rent and then be provided with the combination for the lock on their snowshoe trunk for their day. Snowshoes can be picked up and returned at any time during the rental day. No staffing or contact is needed. Rent snowshoes at <https://friendswrk.square.site>. For more information go to [www.willowkinnifriends.org](http://www.willowkinnifriends.org), call 715-869-3695 or email [wrsnowshoe@gmail.com](mailto:wrsnowshoe@gmail.com).

This is such a great way to get outdoors!

## Why The Change in Color?

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator



Photo by Trail Challenge participant

There is argument that the color change is due to weather, lack of light, dropping of nighttime temperature. All of which play a role in the changing of the color. However, what most people don't know is that the leaves on deciduous trees were actually this color all year long. That's right, they were there, trying to let their true colors shine. But they were being covered up by the dominant green of their good friend, Chlorophyll. Summer time just so happens to be chlorophyll's time to shine due to all the sunshine and long, warm days. But as temperatures drop and the days get shorter, providing less light to the leaves, the chlorophyll begins to break down, revealing the strikingly beautiful fall colors beneath!

Once trees stop producing chlorophyll, it is usually the striking yellows, and oranges that reveal themselves first. As the days get shorter and nights grow colder the veins connecting the leaves to trees start to close, trapping sugar in some of the leaves. This creates a beautiful variety of vibrant red colors in leaves. Some years colors are brighter than others. This is where weather comes into play. The brightest colors are seen when late summer is dry and autumn is filled with sunny days and cold nights.

## Know the Difference!



**Ski Trail**  
Wide, groomed, skiers only



**Snowshoe/Foot Trail**  
Narrow, not groomed

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

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## Board Officers

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Vice-President: Tim Sass

Treasurer: Dave Thofern

Secretary: Colleen O'Brien

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Jerry Bauer, John Begin, John Collins, Joe Folsom,  
Theresa Gibson, Dan Marchand, Cathy McDonald, Tim  
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

