

Willow Whispers

A publication of
Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic
State Parks



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

Spring/Summer, 2020

President's Column

John Collins



John Collins

Pandemic Spring

What a strange time we're living in. We can hope our grandchildren won't have to experience anything quite like it again. The park is getting lots of use, but offices and campgrounds are closed, the Nature Center is closed, volunteer activities are shut down, and there are no organized programs. On the other hand, the parks are being heavily used, especially on the weekdays that are typically very quiet. Small groups are finding the park to be a welcome respite from the four walls of their own homes. Unfortunately, some rather large groups have been gathering at the falls. But there are many interesting areas to explore without joining the crowds at the falls. Hike through the prairie areas on the south and east sides of Willow River, or the large, mostly trackless area on the north side of the park between Trout Brook Road and Nelson Farm Road. Take the trail east from the Nelson Farm Road parking area to the overlook and watch the birds on the lake as it slowly fills. Try the Mound Trail, starting from the parking area near the intersection of Cty A and Cty E. At Kinnickinnic State Park, explore the canyons on both sides of the Kinnickinnic River. Check our Facebook page or the notes on the door of the Nature Center for fresh ideas on what there is to see and do in the park. We have lots of cool ideas for families!

This is a difficult time for the Friends group. We have two part-time employees, including Ash, our Naturalist, and Lisa who is helping with our Paths to Discovery campaign. Most of our income to support them comes from selling firewood and ice to campers, and from renting recreational equipment like canoes, kayaks, and snowshoes. The rental income has been mostly curtailed while the lake was drawn down, and of course there are no campers and we don't know when the campgrounds will be reopened. We have applied for the Payroll Protection program to avoid laying them off, and they are both being useful from home. We don't know how long this lockdown will last; it probably depends on widespread availability of testing which seems far from ready at this point. In the meantime, your help would be more than welcome.

Superintendent's Report

Aaron Mason

It has certainly been an unusual spring as we get ready for another busy use season. Even under the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, park staff have been hustling to get buildings and water systems up and running, campgrounds prepared to open, and trails ready. Under the current Stay at Home Order, people are desperate for outside time and things to do. They have been coming out to the park in droves. Use at the park this past month has been busier than ever for this time of year.



Aaron Mason

I am sure many are wondering what is and isn't open. Currently, Willow River and Kinnickinnic are open for hiking. Park admission is required and only annual passes are available through phone sales. Visitors are welcome to come hike on the trails but encouraged to maintain proper

social distancing and avoid crowded areas. All buildings including all park restrooms are closed. Be sure to use the restroom at home and bring your own drinking water, as all water fountains are closed as well. Some parts of the park are closed including the stairway and overlooks at the Falls. Also, campgrounds and playground equipment are closed until May 26. We are poised for a quick campground opening when restrictions are lifted.

The Little Falls Dam project is also nearing completion.

The dam itself is complete and functional. Staff has been monitoring the refilling of the lake since mid-March. By the time this issue is printed the lake will already be at full pool. The contractor does still have some site work to complete this spring including the concrete observation plaza, railing installation, site restoration and planting, trail and parking lot paving, and final punch-list items. The dam picnic area should be open to the public in June. The beach restoration and habitat improvements were



completed last fall. Along with 1,000 tons of boulders, 26 fish cribs and more than 20 tree drops were added to the lake to improve fish habitat. This should also improve shore fishing once the lake is restocked this summer and fall. Later this year, DNR Fisheries is planning to stock bluegills, crappies, perch, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, and possibly walleyes.

Park staff have also been busy with several other projects around the park. Unfortunately, volunteers have not been able to work due to COVID-19 restrictions. We will have a lot of catching up to do once restrictions are lifted and volunteers can return. Please contact the park if you wish to volunteer.

Thank you to all of the Friends and volunteers that help make these two parks such a great place to visit. Your help is greatly appreciated. Be safe and I hope to see you out here soon.

River Rambles

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator

Spring. One of my favorite words!

This year more than ever, I greet each sunny morning with a sigh of relief.

We finally made it!

To sunshine and warm breezes, to a blanket of green bursting back into life, cloaking our forests and fields.

Hibernators emerge from their dens, many with curious young ones right on their heels, ready to learn about this new thing called life.

Perennials bound back to life, rising from rich soils, reaching for the sun and greeting pollinators, as old friends do.

The music returns, both morning and night.

The melody of our beloved songbirds returning from their winter sanctuaries.

The chirping of crickets and frogs tuning all else out from dusk till dawn.

This much we can rely on, this much we know for sure.

It has been a trying start to the year. For that, there is no doubt.

Not knowing what to expect from week to week, then month to month.

How long will this go on? No one quite knows for sure.

But what we do know are the things that bring us joy.

For many of us, that thing is nature.

The malls, theatres, and restaurants are closed.

Our Nature Center is closed.

All concerts, car shows and sporting events are cancelled.

Our beloved park programs too are cancelled.

But the forests, fields, parks and trails remain open.



Ashley Goldbeck in front of a view of the dam you are unlikely to ever see again. This was taken as the new dam began refilling the impoundment we know as Little Falls Lake.

Open to roam, open to explore, and open to take your mind away from the worry of the unknown.

You're very own backyard remains open.

Open to gardening, to games, to projects, to soaking in the sun.

Open to spending extra time with your family, making memories that will undoubtedly outlast the current issues at hand.

Get out. Now more than ever. Get out and take it all in!

Grab a pair of binoculars, a note pad, camera, and your favorite hiking shoes.

Embark on a journey to your favorite outdoor refuge and enjoy all that Mother Nature has to offer.

Look for patterns in nature, identify tracks, sketch wildflowers, forage for fungi, place a new type of bird feeder in your backyard and monitor its new arrivals.

Go kayaking, cast a line, create your own fairy garden, prairie garden, or vegetable garden.

Come out to the parks to hike a new trail and rest alongside the lake and rivers with a good book.

There are so many things you can do.

Drink in this opportunity to head off on a new adventure, each and everyday.

But most importantly, stay happy, stay healthy, stay SANE.

I'll be seeing you soon friend.



Lovely spring hepatica flowers

The Lake is Back!

In 2015, Little Falls Dam was declared unsafe. The dam was breached and the lake drawn down allowing the formerly impounded Willow River to return to its natural flow.

Today, the new dam is complete and Little Falls Lake has been restored.



Above, while the dam was completely removed and the Willow was flowing freely August, 2019.



Left, long-serving volunteer coordinator, Ruwal Freese, stands at the Nelson Farm Trail overlook. Volunteers were working on clearing brush from the overlook. The photo shows the grassy former lake bed with the Willow River flowing in the background.



With the lake filled and plants and shrubs still standing May 4, 2020. Elizabeth Vargas, left, and Arely Mendoza enjoy a break at the Nelson Farm Trail overlook.

New Snowshoe Trail

Here is a flashback to winter. In December a brand new trail was inaugurated that allows ambitious winter visitors to travel by foot from the nature center to the falls. Until the opening of this trail, only skiers could make that trek.

This delightful trail is a single track that winds its way through intriguing areas far from the usual wide trails. It connects with additional winter foot trails and allows users to create their own loops rather than simply traveling out and back. It is designed as a "snowshoe trail" but much of the time winter boots are all that is needed.



A peaceful stretch of the new snowshoe trail

A family takes a break during Willow's OutWIGO activities



Katrina Larsen, Volunteer Coordinator

We are changing up volunteering at the parks. A very welcome volunteer has stepped up to assist with coordinating our volunteer involvement at the parks. Katrina Larsen will be looking for volunteers among the Friends and from outside groups as well. If you are interested in volunteering, she can be reached at volunteer@willowkinnifriends.org

There is always a need for volunteers. Katrina plans to focus on matching volunteers and tasks. Some activities are ongoing and require a match with someone who wants to remain involved, others are simple and quick but need a few pair of hands to get the job done. Some must take place at a particular day and time while still other tasks can be done by a single volunteer on their own time schedule.

Look for more information about specific volunteer opportunities in the near future.



A volunteer monitors the bluebird trail at Willow River State Park.

2020 OutWIGO Snow!

OutWIGO was a new event brought to Willow River State Park by the Wisconsin DNR. The Friends helped with a variety of offerings.

Activities included sledding, and trying out cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and fat tire biking. All equipment was provided along with mini lessons to get people started. Hot food was available courtesy of a local Boy Scout troop, and a campfire and supplies brought participants together to make and enjoy s'mores. Several interactive displays were available at the picnic shelter. Snow painting was popular and brought out the creativity of winter park users.



Don't have snowshoes? Get a free ride from those who do!



Who doesn't like s'mores, roasted or raw?



Friends' member, Julie Gujer, hosting fat tire demos.



Family fun at OutWIGO!



Willow Ski Club volunteers ready to assist people trying out cross-country skiing.

Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks, Inc.



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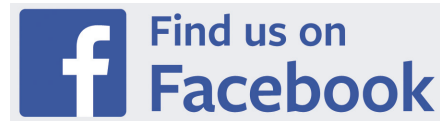
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Park Superintendent: Aaron Mason

Kinnickinnic Park Ranger: Eric Klumb

Naturalist Educator: Ashley Goldbeck



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