

Willow Whispers

A publication of
Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic
State Parks

Celebrating
35 Years!



Fall/Winter, 2025



President's Column

Rita Thofern

Celebrating 35 Years of the Friends.

We had a party! In June the Friends celebrated 35 years of supporting the parks. Originally named the OWLS (Organization for Wildlife Learning), the

group focused on supporting Willow River State Park. The name was changed in 2015 to Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks. This expanded the Friends' mission to include support for Kinnickinnic State Park as well as adopting a name that better defines our organization.

As state funding to the state park system has been reduced, the work of Friends groups has increased in importance. A celebration of all things Friends was clearly called for. A committee of the Friends got busy making celebration plans. They dug into Friends' and park history, tracked down people, and arranged for food and activities for the event. Special guests included the family of Bill Killian,



Special Guests: Mark Kubler, Vera Killian, Nancy Killian, Doug Killian



Above: Board members Walt and Bob serve treats. Right: Planning Committee, Mike Wilcox, Walt Zuliani, LuAnne Spetcher, Bob Richardson & Mark Meydam

Willow's original park superintendent, and long-time superintendent Mark Kubler.



Superintendent's Report

Aaron Mason

Deer season is here and the holidays are just around the corner. Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks have been busy. A mild October made for an extended color season and high visitation. Staff have been busy working on building and water system shut down, getting trails mowed and ready for ski season, and removing the dock at Kinni in preparation for winter.

You may have seen the return of a familiar face. In June, Arik Feidt, previously a Park Ranger at Willow, returned as the new Park Manager. Arik spent the past year as a Park Manager for the Interstate Work Unit out of St. Croix Falls. We are extremely happy to have him back.

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This summer we constructed two new gravel parking lots on the north side of the park to primarily serve as bike trailheads. The larger lot on River Rd., now named "Hunters East," will accommodate 25–30 cars and connects to the old "Hunters West" lot by trail. These two lots are the main trailheads to the newest phase of bike trails and are very busy during peak season. A second lot was constructed on Troutbrook Rd. to access the Northern Traverse and Howlin' Coyote bike trails. The addition of new parking will help disperse users and reduce pressure on other trailheads.

Park staff have completed a major trail resurfacing project, placing about 2,000 tons of gravel on trails throughout the park. These repairs were necessary due to erosion and heavy use. Repaired sections will be in good condition for years to come.

You may notice many trees being cut down and removed. Park staff and contractors are removing hazard trees that resulted from oak wilt, emerald ash borer, and storms. Crews have been cutting and chipping along roads, trails, and in campgrounds. Removal will continue throughout the fall and winter.

Thank you to all the Friends and volunteers who help make these parks such great places to visit. Your help is greatly appreciated. See you out here soon.



Project Kickoff: Expanding Paddling Opportunities at Little Falls Lake to All

Bob Richardson

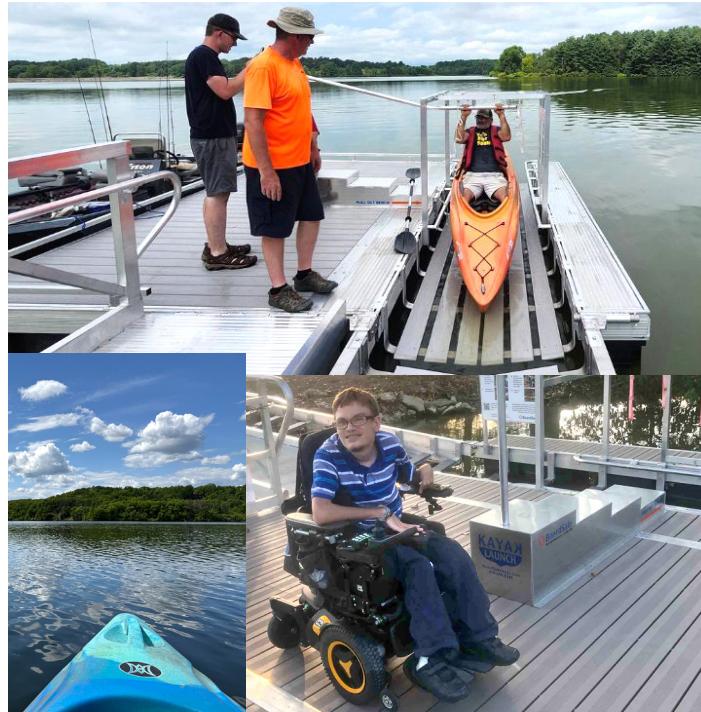
The Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks is thrilled to share the kickoff of an exciting—and much-needed—project at Willow River State Park. This initiative will open new opportunities for visitors of all abilities to enjoy the natural beauty and recreational treasures of our beloved park. At the heart of this project will be a new Universally Accessible Kayak and Canoe Launch designed to provide safe, stable, and convenient access to the spectacular 170-acre Little Falls Lake for all paddlers, physically challenged as well as able bodied. For many individuals with mobility limitations, the opportunity to glide across open water can bring a profound sense of freedom, independence, and connection to the natural world—an experience too often out of reach. A loading ramp, wheelchair transfer bench, overhead grab bars, and other key accessibility features, make this all possible with this launch system.

The launch will also serve as a stable, user-friendly entry point for able-bodied kayakers and canoeists, ensuring everyone can enjoy a smooth start to their paddling journey.

To see a time-lapse video demonstration of the accessible launch go to: tinyurl.com/kayakvid.



Accessible launch video



If you're inspired by this effort, please consider supporting the project with a donation. Contributions can be made easily through our secure donation page at: tinyurl.com/btlncb or simply scan the QR code.



Donate to accessible launch project

Exciting New Bat Kits Arrive at the Nature Center!

Amber Rappl, Naturalist

Bats are probably the most misunderstood mammals that may be encountered by visitors to our state parks. However, bats are crucial for maintaining healthy ecosystems. They serve as significant predators of agricultural and forest pests, and biting insects that may transmit diseases.



Since its 2006 discovery in New York, a devastating fungal disease, white-nose syndrome (WNS), has seriously affected bats throughout North America. It's arrival in Wisconsin in 2014 has caused a rapid decline in cave-bat populations in our state. White nose syndrome presents a major threat to all four of Wisconsin's cave-bat species: the big brown bat, little brown bat, northern long-eared bat, and tricolored bat. You can learn more about WNS and efforts to save Wisconsin's bats here:

<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/Bats>

Here at Willow, we are excited to announce the launch of our brand-new bat kits designed to help visitors explore the captivating world of bats through incredible tools and resources. Each comprehensive kit is equipped with an echometer for detecting and identifying bat calls, red light flashlights for effective nighttime exploration, and a life-sized bat model and skeleton for anatomical study.

These kits were the cornerstone this fall for a new program that engaged participants in building wooden bat houses while gaining crucial insights into the growing importance of bat habitat conservation. Let's illuminate (with a red light!) the wonders of these amazing creatures together!



Northern long-eared bat

Tree Planting

W.O.W. (Willow Outdoor Workers), the newly renamed volunteer group, has started something big. They planted seedlings in the area of the purple trail that was clearcut in 2023. The area had been planted in red pines which were non-native and had become diseased. This time the woods will be a mix of trees. Oaks were planted this summer and white pines are expected to seed in naturally.

If you walk the purple trail it will be hard to miss the protective tubes that have been installed to help keep 100 or so of the new plantings safe until they grow, become stronger, and are less likely to be eaten or trampled by deer and other animals.



Tree guards protect newly-planted seedlings along the Purple Trail.

A Good Idea is Always Worth Borrowing

The bird feeder pole at the nature center has been updated. It was too easy for deer and bear to access. And when they did there was often damage to the feeder. A promising pole set up was spotted at another park and Bob Richardson, our go-to carpenter, fashioned a new pole and installed it at Willow. It can be easily lowered for filling and raised again to keep it out of reach.



Joey Filipiak at the extended bird feeder post.

River Rambles

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator



Ashley Goldbeck and Albert

Capable of capturing daytime and nighttime photos, the cameras were installed at four promising locations within Willow River State Park. This ongoing project will be monitored by Ed Heyes, one of the 2025 St. Croix Valley Wisconsin Master Naturalist graduates, and will be a part of the Snapshot Wisconsin project.



Ed Heyes installs new trail camera.

We've already gotten some great shots from the cameras! Be prepared for visual updates as we capture more photos of some of the park's wild inhabitants. To learn more or to get involved with the very cool Snapshot Wisconsin Project visit:

tinyurl.com/dnrsnp



A sampling of the many critters caught by the new trail cameras

Upcoming Events at the Nature Center

The naturalists offer programs and activities on Saturdays and Sundays and often during the week.

Here is a sampling:

December 12...Holly Jolly Scavenger Hunt

December 21...Nature Ornament Painting

January 1First Day of the Year Hike

January 3Frosty Falls Hike

January 10.....Woodpecker Program

Check our web page, willowkinnifriends.org/programs for details and for a full listing of programs.

W.O.W. Volunteers

The Buckthorn volunteer group has a new name: W.O.W. (Willow Outdoor Workers) meets Tuesday mornings on a drop-in basis. During the past year they have removed brush and invasives from several places and returned to other areas to maintain hard-fought progress. Due to W.O.W.'s work, visitors are greeted with big improvements around the boat landing, along the lakeshore, and heading up the hill. The formerly scruffy area near the dam and the land between the beach and the dam have been remarkably improved after W.O.W.'s major brush-clearing work.

W.O.W takes on many other tasks as requested by the park staff. They may take paint brushes in hand and refresh picnic tables, pick up litter after a busy holiday, or plant tree seedlings. A major project last summer was clearing brush from campsites and along park trails. A special task in the recently logged area along the Purple Trail involved installing protective sleeves on about 100 newly-planted white oak seedlings. The sleeves protect them from deer, mice, rabbits, and other hungry critters.

The W.O.W. Volunteers Will Look Sharp!

Thanks to the Friends, the W.O.W. volunteers will soon sport spiffy new vests making them readily identifiable as a volunteer group. Check out the sample vest. More are on the way.



Kevin Rust models the new vest in front of the panel of judges.

At their season wrap-up meeting, W.O.W. volunteers met over coffee to evaluate the season and make plans for next year.

If you are interested in volunteering for the W.O.W. group, or learning about other volunteer opportunities, complete the volunteer form by following this link: tinyurl.com/wkvltr. We'll get back to you.



Volunteer Form

News From the Bike Trails

Dave Thofern

Something new and exciting has been added to the bike trail system at Kinnickinnic State Park: A bike playground. Sometimes referred to as a bike park, a bike playground combines a number of fun and challenging features in a small area. Riders can choose their own level of difficulty and use the area either as a warmup for a longer ride or an opportunity to hone their riding skills. The playground is designed so riders can easily loop back around the circuit as many times as they wish.

Kinni's new bike playground was built by Pathfinder Trail Building and funded through grants from Athletic Brewing Co. and Public Lands, a division of Dick's Sporting Goods.



Features on the new Kinni bike playground



Parking Issues Addressed

Dave Thofern

The popularity of the new bike trails being developed on the north side of Willow River State Park has, at times, caused parking problems. During busy weekends, or visits by area youth bike teams, parking lots have been filled, often causing people to park on adjacent roads.

The WIKI Mountain Bike Club provided volunteer labor and used a \$5,000 donation from WESTconsin Credit Union to expand the Hunters West parking lot. Additionally, the Wisconsin DNR was able to fund the construction of a second parking lot on River Rd. as well as a smaller lot on Trout Brook Rd.

There are also plans to install vault toilets at the Nelson Farm Rd. and Hunters West parking lots.



Representatives from the WIKI Mountain Bike Club, Dave Thofern, Doug Helm, Tom Mayer, Dave Klumb, Kirk Jacobson, and John LeRoy accept a \$5,000 check from WESTconsin Credit Union presented by Maria Schmitt.

An Anonymous Donation

LuAnne Spetcher, Director

Steve Spetcher, Director

Recently, our Friends group received an unexpected and deeply moving gift—one that arrived quietly, without fanfare, from someone who chooses to remain unknown. The donation amount is \$300,000 and it is to be used as funding for the new nature center. It stopped us in our tracks! In a world where needs are many and time is short, this generous act of kindness felt like a warm light shining through the trees, reminding us why this work matters so much.

A Heartfelt Thank You to Our Anonymous Donor

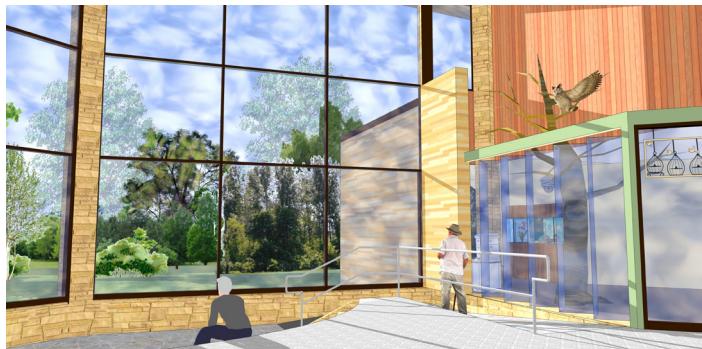
To the generous individual we will never forget: Thank you. Your recent contribution to the Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks touched us more than you may realize. Although we do not know who you are, we feel the care behind your gift—and we are profoundly grateful. Your generosity is more than financial support, it is encouragement. It tells us that the parks we protect are valued, that our mission resonates, and that our community believes in what these special places bring to people's lives.

Perhaps most of all, your kindness inspires us. It strengthens our resolve to work even harder, dream even bigger, and continue stewarding these remarkable parks with the passion they deserve. Your generosity will echo throughout our parks and our community for years to come.

With Deep Gratitude,
The Friends

Looking For a Great Holiday Gift?

How about finding the perfect gift and helping your parks at the same time? Stop by the nature center at Willow and browse through the Friends' gift shop. You'll find t-shirts, sweatshirts, guidebooks, toys, park souvenirs, and much more. The gift shop is generally open every day from noon–4:00 pm. Call ahead to make sure, 715-386-9340.



Proposed new nature center conceptual drawing

New Nature Center Update

Mark Meydam

As you may have heard, the 2025–27 Wisconsin State Budget provides \$250,000 to begin the planning and design process for a new nature center at Willow River State Park. This was the result of extensive efforts to tell the story about what the Friends do for the park. In addition, many folks in the community contacted their legislators explaining the need for new facilities to carry on our good work.

Although funds have been included in the state budget for planning, there are numerous additional steps that need to be accomplished before the actual construction can begin. Here is a brief timeline for what will happen next:

- January 2026: Architect/Engineering Selection
- October 2026: Building Commission Approval of Plans
- March 2027: Bidding Date
- September 2027: Start Construction
- May 2028: Substantial Completion
- June 2028: Final Completion

In the state budget, the projected cost of the building is 7.6 million dollars. Some have asked whether the funds to build the building will be included in the next budget. That will be up to the legislature and our next governor. Previous experience says that once planning money is provided, the construction funds will follow. We will need to continue to advocate for construction funds and again seek support for the project in the next biennial budget process.

In the meantime, the Friends will continue to work on raising capital construction funds for our required portion of the construction cost which is estimated to be approximately 1.2 million dollars.

Please contact a Friends' board member if you have questions or would like to be involved.

Twelve Month Financial Report: Operating Funds

Rita Thofern

Looking back at the twelve months ending October of 2025 provides a good representation of where our funding comes from and how it is used to accomplish the mission of the Friends.

Revenue

Donations are the number-one source of our income. These donations come almost entirely from individuals.

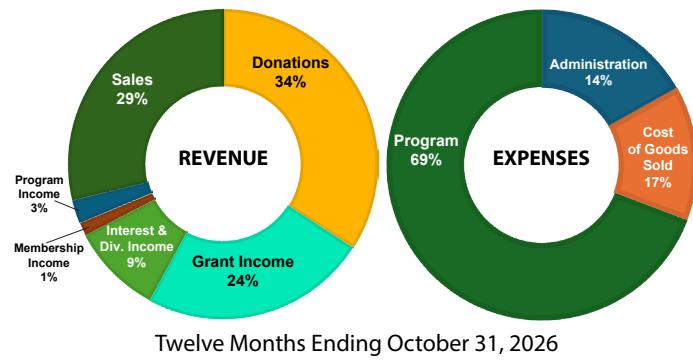
We seek donations by doing things like the year-end appeal and through our online donation site. We do our best to make it easy for people to donate at any time and in many ways. Along the way, some very nice surprises appear. While most donations come from individuals, in 2025 the Friends were surprised to receive three unsolicited business donations.

They came from Big Guys BBQ Roadhouse, Hudson Grocery Coop, and PGA Tour Superstore.

Grants provide the second-most important source of funding. The Friends has an active Grant Research Team that works to find grants matching our needs and fitting grantors' goals. Check out the Thank You page to see which businesses and foundations have provided support.

Expenses

Most of the revenue is spent on programming. This mainly pays for the wage-related expenses for the two Friends' naturalists. Other program expenses include guest speaker fees, supplies and materials for class offerings, and equipment. Some examples are sketch pads, fishing poles, laptops, lumber for bat houses, trail cameras, and new kayaks.



Members' Social and Annual Meeting



Watch for the Friends at community events. Friends' tables are at quite a few events, staffed by board members, volunteers, naturalists, or conservation wardens. Stop in to visit and stay to learn about what they have brought along.



Thank You Business & Foundation Supporters



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Northern lights over Little Falls Lake, Willow River State Park,
Nov. 12, 2025

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LuAnne Spetcher, Steve Spetcher, Mike Wilcox

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Naturalist: Amber Rappi

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