

Willow Whispers

A publication of
Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic
State Parks

**Celebrating
33 Years!**

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

Fall/Winter, 2023



Rita Thofern

President's Column

Rita Thofern

What a remarkable group we have here! The Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks is a small group made up of willing volunteers who embrace the parks. From its beginning in 1990, the group has maintained a strong working relationship with the park staff and Wisconsin DNR. This long-standing relationship makes a real difference.

Much is accomplished thanks to skilled, hard-working volunteers and ongoing fundraising efforts. The Friends receive no funding from taxes or park fees. All of our funding comes from grants, donations, modest fees for some events, boat and snowshoe rentals, and sales of firewood, ice, and gift shop items. With these funds we have supported environmental education by employing two highly-skilled naturalists. We have also purchased significant earth-moving equipment over the years, provided playground equipment, built the fishing peers at the dam, and the firewood shed at the office. None of these could have come out of the parks' budgets. We provide funds and volunteer labor for a variety of trail building and trail maintenance projects at both Willow and Kinni.

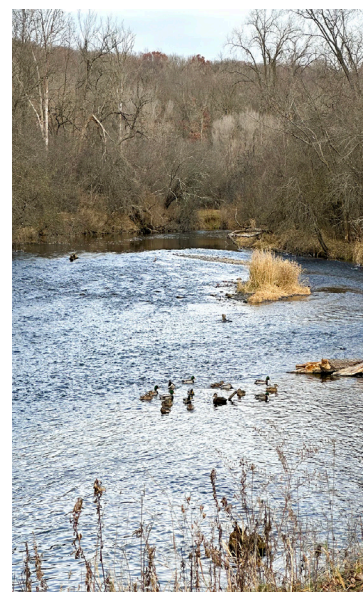
Individuals can show their support by participating in events, joining one of our many volunteer opportunities, donating, or becoming a Friends' member. Already a member? Consider upgrading your membership or make an additional donation. You can be proud to be a part of this. Together, the Friends make a difference for each of us, for our fellow park users, and for the environment.



Superintendent's Report

Aaron Mason

Deer season is already here with the holidays just around the corner. It has been another busy summer and fall at Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks. Visitation has returned to still high, but more normal pre-pandemic levels. The mild October made for an extended color season and an active fall. Park staff have been working on shutting down buildings and the water systems. Buoys and docks are stored. Trails are mowed and ready for the ski season. The



campgrounds are buttoned up for the winter.

The lake, three years past refilling behind the new dam, is returning to normal. It is a popular destination for kayaking, canoeing, swimming and fishing. DNR Fisheries has continued to restock the lake. There are multiple year classes of bass, panfish, and even a few walleyes out there. Anglers are returning as more fish reach keeper size.

Volunteers continued work on the new

mountain bike trails at both parks. Currently there are more than 17 miles open at Willow and 12 miles at Kinni. Trails are designed with varying levels of difficulty. More information is available at wikimountainbike.com.

Deer hunting, small game hunting, and trapping, are permitted in some areas of both parks. For more information about which areas are affected, and the start and end dates of various hunting and trapping seasons, check the signs posted at trail heads or ask in the park offices.

Thank you to the Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks and all 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.

River Rambles

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator

As we wrap up another busy summer season and prepare for winter, I'm excited to remind everyone that we do not shut down, slow down, OR believe in the wintertime blues here at the parks!

The parks provide a wealth of wilderness with countless miles of hiking, biking, skiing and snowshoeing. AND we are



Ashley Goldbeck and Albert

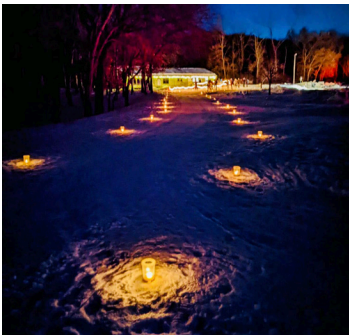
fortunate to have sledding hills so gnarly that even the too-cool-for-school teenagers can't help but test them out!

Alongside all of this, we continue to offer a variety of educational and recreational programs all winter long. Keep an eye on the calendar and join us for these major events:

- Sat., Dec. 16, 1:00–3:00 pm–Holly Jolly Scavenger Hunt
 - Sat., Dec. 30, noon–3:00 pm–Holiday Story Exploratory
 - Sat., Jan. 13, 10:00 am–1:00 pm–Frosty Falls Hike
 - Sat., Jan. 20, 1:00–4:00 pm–OUTWIGO Snow!
 - Sat. Feb. 17, 6:00–8:30 pm–Annual Candlelight Ski & Hike
- Stay up to date with our programs and never miss out on the fun!

Follow us on Facebook: @WRSPKSP

Visit our website: willowkinnifriends.org/upcomingevent



The 2024 Candlelight and Ski and Hike will be held on Saturday, February 17.



Vehicle Stickers Now Available



The 2024 annual Wisconsin State Park vehicle stickers are now available and are valid from date of purchase through all of 2024. Consider getting your sticker now. You can affix it to your windshield when it's convenient and avoid waiting in line at a busy time. Remember, park

stickers make great gifts.

To purchase an annual sticker, just stop by the park office or visit: yourpassnow.com/ParkPass/wi

Snowshoe Rental

Winter and snow are on the way! Snowshoeing is a great way to enjoy the outdoors and allows you to explore areas you wouldn't normally reach during the winter.

Do you know you can rent snowshoes at both Willow and Kinni? If you've never tried snowshoeing, renting is a great option.

Snowshoe rental at the parks begins online where you reserve and pay for your rental, followed by email instructions on how to pick up your snowshoes from one of the self-service boxes. This means you can pick up and return snowshoes even when the park office and nature center are closed. For more information or to begin the rental process, scan the QR code or go to: tinyurl.com/rentss.



Snowshoe rental

Snowshoe Demo Days

Two snowshoe demo days have been scheduled. This is your opportunity to get some tips on choosing the right snowshoe, how to move efficiently on snow, proper clothing and more. You can bring your own snowshoes or use some of ours. You'll have plenty of time to try them out and to do some winter exploring.



Kinnickinnic State Park

Sun., January 14, 1:00–4:00 pm

Willow River State Park

Sat., January 6, 1:00–4:00 pm

The sessions are drop-in, first come first served and we collect a \$5.00 fee per person when you check in. A valid park vehicle admission sticker is required.

OutWIGoSnow!

This DNR sponsored event will be lots of fun with something for just about everyone. Participants will be able to sample a broad array of outdoor winter activities. Planned activities include: Fat tire biking, snowshoeing, skiing, ice fishing, sledding, and snow painting.

More is being planned so watch for updates.

OutWIGoSnow! will be held Saturday, January 20, noon–4:00 pm. Participation is free of charge and this is one of those rare days when park entrance fees will not be charged.



Eagle Scout Projects

Aaron Mason

This year's Eagle Scout projects are all great new additions to Willow.



Holden Stanek of Troop 168 rebuilt a boat dock installed at the boat launch.



Andrew Hanson of Troop 168 built a concrete patio area with benches and a built-in fire-ring adjacent to the picnic area and overlooking the lake.

Buckthorn Brigade

Katrina Larson

The Buckthorn Brigade is a group of dedicated volunteers typically meeting Tuesday mornings from March to November with occasional winter projects. As the name suggests, we remove buckthorn and other invasive plants but we also help out in many other ways.

During last February's Candlelight Ski and Hike, Brigade members set out candles, assisted during the event and tackled cleanup. Mark your calendars to pitch in during the 2024 Candlelight event on February 17.

A major Brigade project this year was removing invasive buckthorn and honeysuckle in the pet-area picnic ground near the boat landing. The culmination of two years' effort resulted in opening up lake views previously blocked by the dense, invasive shrubbery. Huge piles of brush were chipped, burned or hauled away.



Hardy volunteers work their way in. And then there was a lake view!

In March, members painted almost 400 4x4-inch campground posts and later helped with their installation as part of an ongoing effort to replace the many damaged campsite identification posts throughout the park. April 1, brought a huge snowstorm to Willow. Trees and brush suffered major damage. The Brigade pitched in with park staff in the massive trail cleanup. After snowmelt, Brigade members donned backpack leaf blowers and wielded rakes to clear small debris in time for the campgrounds' opening.

If you're looking for an opportunity to meet great new friends and make a real difference, consider joining the men and women of the Buckthorn Brigade. Call the park office, 715-386-5931 or email volunteer@willowkinnifriends.org and leave your contact information.



Anthony Wefel, Troop 168, built a new kayak rack at the boat launch.

Ben Weiskopf of Troop 148 worked on the Nelson Farm Road bike trailhead and added a new bike repair station.

Mountain Bike Trails Update

Walt Zuliani

More than five miles of mountain bike trails were added at Willow River State Park this year with the recent opening of Diggin' Badger, along with the Rubber Chicken and Hawkeye trails. The latest trails are all located on the north side of the park and can be easily accessed from the Nelson Farm parking lot, or the small trailhead off



John LeRoy & Walt Zuliani

Trout Brook Road. These new north side trails have joined Rabbit Run and the Howlin' Coyote and have quickly become rider favorites, attracting users from throughout the local and metro community. All of the new trails are rated blue level, intermediate trails, and are popular with both newer riders and experts, with

optional challenging features like "Skinnies" and "Drops." No doubt they'll be well-liked by the winter fat bike crowd as well!

All the trails in the system are being well used throughout the year. The biking community has shown its continued support by eagerly



Riding a "Skinny"

volunteering to help with new trail construction, on-going maintenance and financial donations. These new additions bring the Willow River State Park mountain bike trail total to nearly 20 miles of world-class trails, with even more planned for next year. And if that's not enough, Kinnickinnic State Park also has ten miles of trails covering varied terrain, from prairie to woods. Grab your bike and check them out!



Willow trail crew



The bike trails offer great beginner and intermediate riding with optional features and trails to challenge more advanced riders.

Visit the Nature Center and Gift Shop

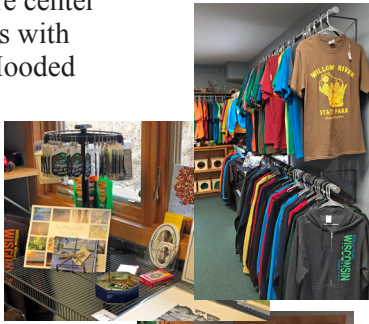
The gift shop at the nature center continues to provide visitors with souvenirs of their travels. Hooded sweatshirts, t-shirts, hats, guidebooks, and small items like embroidered patches, stickers, note cards, and plush animals—each representing an animal that lives in the park, are all available.

The gift shop is open daily from noon to 4:00 pm. Remember, as a



Volunteer nature center host, Karen Swisher, welcomes visitors with a big smile and loads of park information.

member, you receive a 10% discount on all gift shop purchases. Whenever you stop in at the nature center, all of the amazing interpretive displays and live-animal exhibits are available to you, as well as great conversation with the volunteer host or naturalist.



Kayak Fun



After a kayak program, naturalist Rae Skog loads a kayak into the Friends' trailer.

This summer the Friends' fleet of kayaks was put through its paces. The naturalists offered Let's Go Kayaking sessions on weekends throughout the summer. Summer Naturalist classes also made good use of the kayaks.

Overall these activities brought delight to a large number of paddlers,

beginner to experienced. Paddling toward the falls virtually guaranteed amazing views of wildlife on the water, in the water, along the shore and in the air.



Boat Rentals



The Friends' boat rental fleet includes both canoes and kayaks.

In addition to the kayak programs led by the naturalists, the Friends' rental canoes and kayaks were well used throughout the season. We logged nearly 400 boat rentals. That's a lot of smiles.



Timber Harvest Comes to Willow

It's jarring to arrive at the park and be greeted by huge stacks of pine logs and, in the case of the Purple Trail, several acres of few pines remaining. But this process is good for the trees.

At long last, several stands of non-native red pines that were planted at Willow River State Park in the 1960s have been thinned. They were planted close together with plans for thinning as they grew. However, harvesters find it much easier to clear-cut an entire stand than to carefully remove individual trees. Over recent years, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was unable to

find anyone willing to bid on harvesting these trees. This resulted in the trees becoming overcrowded and led to unhealthy growth and the spread of disease. Finally, this summer, a harvester was found and work got underway.



The crew of two that performed the work did a remarkable job of cutting and removing the trees designated for thinning, without damaging the other trees. The remaining trees should become healthier. They will not be competing so intensely for sunlight and nutrients, and disease is less likely to spread from tree to tree.

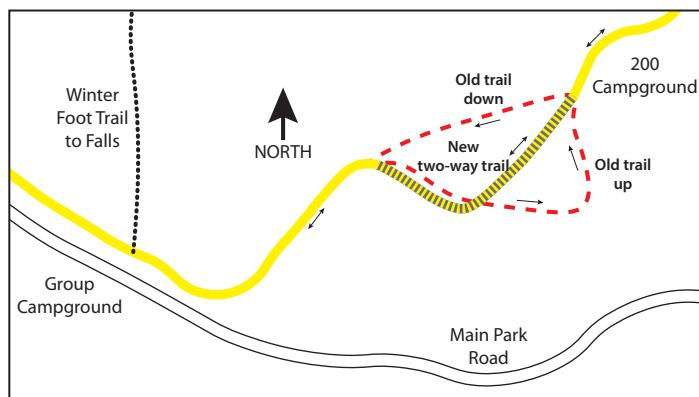
The timber is steadily being loaded onto a truck and hauled off; most likely to be turned into pallets and used as pulp wood. By next summer the slash (remaining branches) should be settled on the ground and new plants will begin to sprout in the thinned areas.

An exception to this is the loop at the end of the Purple (Trout Brook) Trail. The red pines there were heavily diseased and infested with insects. They would not recover by being thinned. The area needed to be clear cut. All red pines were removed. A few white pines remain. Replanting is planned for 2025. While this area looks devastated, Mother Nature and replanting by the DNR will begin the process of recovery.



Thinning the Red Pines Creates a Trail Improvement Opportunity

A new revision to a stretch of trail through the pines between the group camp gravel parking lot and the 200 campground is very good news. The trail through the pine plantation area had been split into separate up and down trails for winter skiing. The downhill section was legendary for its steep descent and challenging runout. Unfortunately, both sections of trail have deteriorated over the years leaving eroded gullies, and exposed tree roots and rocks. We had a problem.

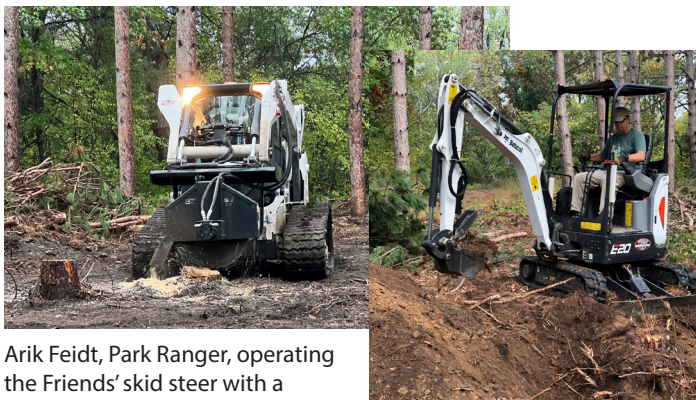


Detail of the Yellow Trail rebuild between the Group Campground and the 200 Campground.

Thanks to the red pine thinning that took place in that stand of pines, a new route was able to be built. Collaborating with park staff, the Friends were able to build a new section of trail thanks to volunteer labor and the use of earth moving equipment purchased over the years by the Friends. The new trail will have a gentler grade with wider turns. Once the ground freezes and snow arrives, the old trails will both be retired and the new trail will be open as a two-way ski trail.



New Yellow Trail reroute



Arik Feidt, Park Ranger, operating the Friends' skid steer with a stump grinder attached. About a dozen stumps were removed in only a few hours.

Bob Richardson, Friends Board Member, operating the Friends' mini-ex to rough in the trail.

Eagle Watchers

For everyone who had been keeping an eye on the bald eagle nest near the far end of the Purple (Trout Brook) Trail, there is good news and bad news. Their nest was blown down during one of last summer's strong windstorms. Fortunately, the single chick was old enough to fly and the entire eagle family escaped injury. As a result, they had relocated before the logging took place and were unaffected by the timber harvest.



Clear cut area at the end of the Purple Trail

Woodland Winter Foot Trail Upgraded

A significant portion of the Blue Woodland winter foot trail received a major upgrade this fall. This popular trail connects the beach area with the falls and allows winter hikers to reach the falls without trespassing on any ski trail.

The stretch of trail between the 300 campground road and the "T" intersection with the Green winter foot trail coming from the 200 campground needed work.

Volunteers used the Friends' mini-excavator, a chain saw and hand tools to perform welcome upgrades. Several severe side slopes were reduced making the trail safer and more enjoyable during icy winter conditions. Narrow spots were widened just enough to allow snowmobile or small UTV access in an emergency.

Walking these trails will continue to be an intimate experience in nature best traveled single file to limit the impact of passing boots and snowshoes.



A section of the recently upgraded Woodland winter foot trail

Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks, Inc.

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Park Superintendent: Aaron Mason
Kinnickinnic Park Ranger: Eric Klumb
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