

Willow Whispers

A publication of
Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic
State Parks

Celebrating
35 Years!



Spring/Summer, 2025



President's Column

Rita Thofern

We Waited 35 Years for this Party!

Come celebrate 35 years of the Friends organization, formerly the OWLs, on Sunday, June 8. We'll gather near the nature center at Willow River State Park. The

party will start at noon and run to at least 3:00 pm. There will be a brief program at 1:00 pm.

Mindful Fork and Willow River Saloon will be on hand near the beach shelter with food items for sale.

Along the trail between the nature center and the beach there will be several stops:

- A sign-in table with tickets for a free drawing;
- The Friends' tent with offerings about the Friends' history on display, and a base for catching up with friends and making new ones;
- A photo-op station where you can be "Framed";
- Snacks, cupcakes and pretzels, courtesy of County Market and Brueske's Bread;
- A craft tent for making animal masks and nature crowns;
- Kayak demos! Try out the Friends' brand new rental kayaks for free.

Inside the nature center a slide show will take you back to the early days of the park. The nature center will be open until 4:00.

SPECIAL NOTICE: June 8 is an Open House Day at the park. Entry to all Wisconsin State Parks is free that Saturday and Sunday. That means no waiting in line as everyone will be waved through at the entrance station. If you don't have your annual pass, you can get yours that day, but it will not be required.



Governor Tony Evers Visits Willow River State Park

In celebration of Earth Day Week, Governor Tony Evers visited Willow River State Park. His first-time visit to the park included hiking down to the base of Willow Falls. He then opted to hike the stairs to the overlook to appreciate the spectacular view down into the gorge and out across the St. Croix Valley to the bluffs of Minnesota.

The group invited along for the hike included five Friends' board members. This was a fine opportunity to enjoy a good hike and help answer questions that the governor had about Willow River State Park and Wisconsin state parks in general.

Governor Evers was especially interested in the history of dams formerly located in the Willow Falls gorge.



Aaron Mason, Park Superintendent, points out highlights to Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers.



Gov. Evers poses with his hiking companions at Willow Falls.

River Rambles

Ashley Goldbeck, Naturalist Educator



Ashley Goldbeck and Albert plot in front of the nature center.

Nature Center Garden Renovation

We're happy to announce we received funding support from the St. Croix Valley Master Gardeners Association to purchase over 70 native prairie plants. This will help us revamp and restore the diversity of plants needed for the important pollinators who visit our rustic native prairie

With the help of ambitious volunteers Gloria, Ed, and

David, we were able to get the plot cleared of invasives, weeds and thatch, and get the plants merrily tucked into their new home in only two days!



The list of species we planted includes Prairie Smoke, Rough Blazing Star, White and Purple Prairie Clover, Prairie Coreopsis, Ohio Spiderwort, Culver's Root, Leadplant, Butterfly Weed, Whorled Milkweed, Prairie Phlox, Anise Hyssop, Sky Blue Aster and more.

Be sure to stop in and check out both of our beautiful pollinator plots this summer!

Nature Center Replacement Update

The project to replace the Willow River Nature Center, an enumerated project in the capital budget, is moving through the Wisconsin state budget process. As this newsletter is being prepared, the budget draft includes significant funding for preliminary planning and design. The expectation is that in the following biannual budget, major funding would be allocated to carry out the construction of the building. Approximately 20% of the total project costs would be designated as coming from grant and donation sources secured by the Friends' organization.

This can change as the budget process unfolds. As we learn more, we will keep our membership up to date through email messages.

Superintendent's Report

By Aaron Mason

Here we are at the start of summer. What a busy spring it has been! Spring started early spurring an increase in visitation. Beside normal start-up tasks, we have been working on cutting the many ash trees that have died due to emerald ash borer. Many more trees still need to be removed. Several construction projects are underway or recently completed. The falls' stairway replacement project is now complete. Crews wrapped up the upper section in May with the lower part finished last summer. Demand for north-side parking has increased since the bike trails have opened. Two new north-side parking lots are being constructed. Volunteers continue their work on the mountain bike trails, invasive species removal, tree planting, litter cleanup, and other tasks.

Park staff have readied both parks for the busy summer season.



The project to rebuild the stairs at Willow Falls is complete.

Due to budget constraints, we will be operating with fewer summer employees until operational budgets are adjusted. Willow's vacant Park Ranger position has been upgraded to a Park Manager and is expected to be filled by mid-June.

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



Proposed new nature center conceptual drawing

The Willow River Nature Center is Popular

Rita Thofern

The nature center is open seven days a week all year round. The Friends accomplishes this by employing two naturalists and engaging willing volunteers to serve as nature center hosts. Thanks to their availability, over 14,500 visitors were hosted at the nature center in 2024. This represents a 20% increase from visits in 2023. Notably, 2023 visits were up 14% from the previous year.



This young visitor was nose to nose with ambassador snake, Clementine.

Local Legislators Visit Willow River Nature Center

Rita Thofern

Our local state legislators, Senator Rob Stafsholt and Representative Shannon Zimmerman visited Willow River State Park and toured the nature center this spring. They were each invited to meet with Friends' board members to learn about the need to replace the aging nature center.

Both legislators serve on the Joint Finance Committee and can play key roles in shaping the Wisconsin State Parks' budget. The Friends are hopeful that this budget will include significant funding for the nature center replacement project.



Rita Thofern, Mark Meydam, Sen. Rob Stafsholt, Steve Spetcher



Mike Wilcox, Rep. Shannon Zimmerman, LuAnne Spetcher, Aaron Mason, Rita Thofern

Chainsaw Safety Training

Dave Thofern

Have you ever been hiking, skiing or biking on one of Willow or Kinni's many great trails and come across a tree that has fallen across the trail? It happens all the time. You probably don't even think about how these fallen trees are cleared off the trails. You may think that the park staff takes care of this never-ending task. Well, you'd be partially correct. While the parks' hard-working rangers and maintenance staff have trail clearing on their lengthy to-do list, many of the fallen trees that block trails are cleared by volunteers.

While some trees can be cut with hand tools, most must be dealt with using chainsaws. The Wisconsin DNR has strict rules regarding chainsaw usage on its properties. This includes a requirement that anyone operating a chainsaw must have completed a certified chainsaw safety training course.

While the DNR requires volunteers to be chainsaw safety certified, they do not provide funding for the training course. The Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks and its WIKI Mountain Bike Club, were grateful to receive a \$1,300 grant from River Falls State Bank to pay for an all-day chainsaw certification class held this spring.

Additional funding was provided by the Friends.

Fifteen volunteers are now newly certified. They will join veteran volunteers and park staff in safely keeping the many miles of park trails clear of fallen trees.



News From the Bike Trails

Willow's nearly 25 miles of mountain bike trails now have beautiful new wooden signs donated by True North Map Company.

This season's trail work will focus on completing the mountain bike trail system at Kinni, including a new "bike playground" where riders will hone their riding skills.



A Different Perspective

LuAnne Spetcher

In our busy lives, it is easy to lose sight of the present moment. In past years, I hiked primarily for quick exercise. While walking, I was undoubtedly thinking of what needed to get done later when I returned home.

Being retired, I now benefit from a better sense of time management. I enjoy a totally distinct perspective of a hike when I am on the trail. My walks are usually on weekdays, at low park usage times. Nature invites me to slow down and connect with my surroundings. I take notice of my breathing, what I am smelling, and even how my feet contact the ground with each step. I immerse myself in the sounds of nature, and connect with each present moment. This reduces stress and brings a calmness that enhances my overall well-being. Worries about the past and future melt away.

Reducing stress and anxiety is a huge benefit to my health. Resting and replenishing my mind leads to better clarity and focus. By embracing

mindfulness on my hikes, I change a simple activity like hiking, into a practice that enhances mental and emotional well-being. I gain a deeper connection with myself and the world around me.

Enjoy our parks! Choose your trail and let our paths in nature guide you in more ways than you might ever have realized.



Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks, Inc.

Willow River State Park
1034 County Road A
Hudson, WI 54016

Park Office: 715-386-5931

Nature Center: 715-386-9340

naturecenter@willowkinnifriends.org
volunteer@willowkinnifriends.org
www.willowkinnifriends.org

New Kayaks!

Dave Thofern

Boat rentals at Willow received a big upgrade this spring with the replacement of our four rental kayaks and the construction of a new kayak storage rack. Renters now have a choice of a traditional sit-in kayak or a sit-on-top style. The sit-in style provides more protection from waves, is lighter, and a bit faster. Sit-on-top kayaks are easier to enter and exit and are a bit more stable.

We are very excited about the new kayak storage rack built by Friends' board member, Bob Richardson. The new rack keeps the kayaks cleaner by moving them farther off the ground while still providing easy access for renters.



Little Falls Lake



New rental kayaks

The kayak rack is now located where renters can launch without carrying boats across the pavement.

Kayak and canoe rentals are available through the park office. Rentals are \$25 for four hours; \$40 for over four hours. Little Falls Lake is a great place to canoe and kayak. Motors are not allowed on the lake and the view from the water gives you a brand-new perspective on Willow's beauty.

Board Officers

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Vice-President: Walt Zuliani

Treasurer: Dave Thofern

Secretary: Bob Richardson

Directors

Steve Campbell, Joey Filipiak, Joe Folsom, Dan Marchand, Mark Meydam, Colleen O'Brien, LuAnne Spetcher, Steve Spetcher, Mike Wilcox

Park Superintendent: Aaron Mason

Kinnickinnic Park Manager: Eric Klumb

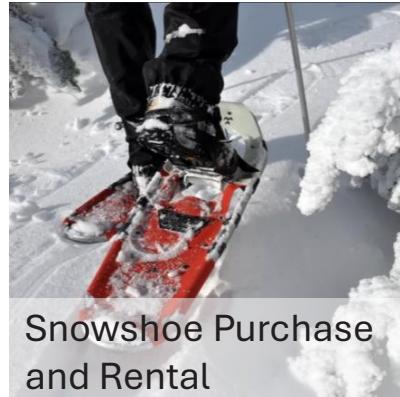
Lead Naturalist Educator: Ashley Goldbeck

Naturalist: Amber Rappi

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