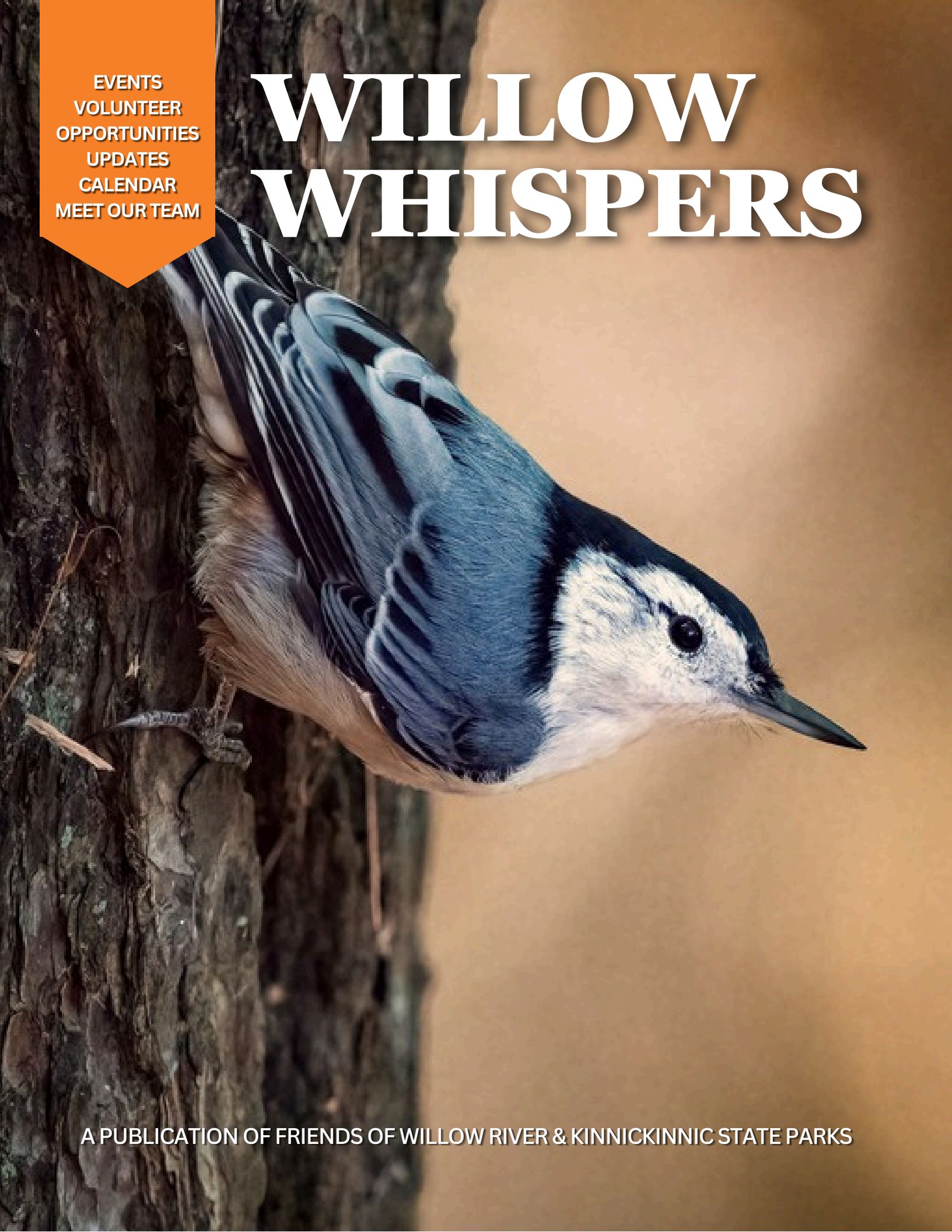
EVENTS
VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES
UPDATES
CALENDAR
MEET OUR TEAM

WILLOW WHISPERS



A PUBLICATION OF FRIENDS OF WILLOW RIVER & KINNICKINNIC STATE PARKS



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Jodi Karshbaum, Naturalist (WI Master)

Hannah Addyman, Communications & Operations Manager

The Friends of Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks is a **501(c)3 non-profit.** We operate year-round, and rely on donations, grants, and our amazing volunteers to push our mission forward.

Front and back cover photography courtesy of Jodi Karshbaum.



Rita Thofern receives a Hero Award nomination certificate from Friends of WI State Parks at our annual meeting in October.

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

PASSING THE TORCH

Serving as your president over these past six years has been a privilege. As I step aside from that role, I do so with immense gratitude and pride. While I am not accepting another term as president, I will remain active on the board and continue to support the mission of the Friends.

We can be proud of what our volunteer organization has built together. We've expanded our staff from one half-time naturalist to nearly 3 full-time positions, scaled our reach to support 15,000 nature center visits annually, donated over $100,000 in heavy equipment for park use, and championed the development of mountain bike trails at both Willow and Kinni. Best of all, we are on the cusp of replacing the Willow River Nature Center thanks to funding from the State of Wisconsin Capital Budget, local grants, and generous community donations.

These are dramatic, transformative times. I step aside confident that our organization is vibrant and its future is bright. Let's all continue to support the Friends in every way we can. It takes every one of us to support our community through the work of the Friends.

Rita Thofern
President

GROWING CONSERVATION LEADERS IN ST. CROIX VALLEY

We are thrilled to celebrate the resounding success of this year's St. Croix County Master Naturalist Training! Managed through UW-Madison Extension, the Wisconsin Master Naturalist program forms a state-wide network of passionate volunteers committed to environmental leadership, stewardship, and lifelong learning. Participants complete 40 hours of training spanning ecology, geology, native wildlife, plant communities, water quality, and human impacts! Equipped with this deep knowledge, certified naturalists make a lasting local impact by engaging in citizen science, habitat restoration, and community education—maintaining their active status each year through ongoing volunteer service and advanced training.

The Friends of Willow River & Kinnickinnic State Parks co-host the St. Croix Valley co-hort alongside the Carpenter Nature Center. Meeting from March through August, trainees explored natural sites across the valley, learning directly from regional experts—including our very own Lead Naturalist, Ash, who serves as an instructor! We are honored to play a role in fostering impactful local stewardship and environmental education. A huge congratulations to the entire Class of 2026. We can't wait to watch you shine!



Lead Naturalist Ash demonstrating seining for micro fish and during a water quality field workshop in the Kinnickinnic River. (Permits required.)



Photo courtesy of Jessica Schmidt

A STATEWIDE HONOR :
ST. CROIX VALLEY SELECTED TO HOST THE WISCONSIN MASTER NATURALIST SUMMIT 2026

It was a huge honor for the St. Croix Valley to host the Wisconsin Master Naturalist Summit from October 1–3, 2026! This statewide gathering brought together dedicated conservation leaders, advocates, and volunteers from across Wisconsin to collaborate, share, and celebrate environmental stewardship. The summit featured an incredible lineup of field events, hands-on workshops, keynote speakers, research presentations, and awards. Some events were hosted right here at Willow River State Park, allowing us to showcase our park's diverse ecosystems and vital stewardship work to environmental leaders from all across the state. It was a massive nod to the incredible natural resources we protect every day and placed our local conservation efforts directly in the spotlight.

PATHS TO DISCOVERY
THE CAMPAIGN FOR OUR NEW NATURE CENTER



PAVING THE WAY

For years, Park Superintendent Aaron Mason has consistently advocated for a new nature center to replace our aging facilities. The process requires navigating a long state budget pathway—moving from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to the Department of Administration, and ultimately to the state legislature for approval. Time and again, the proposal was submitted but not prioritized, always staying categorized as “future” development.

Fall 2024 changed everything. The Governor’s office asked the Department to include special projects—like the Willow River Nature Center—in the 2025–2027 Budget Request. Aaron Mason submitted an updated project request and program statement, and the project was submitted by the Department. It was ultimately included in the Governor's budget! The project gained further momentum in April 2025 when Governor Evers visited the park and hiked to the falls, solidifying its inclusion before moving to the Joint Finance Committee.

While the Friends originally anticipated needing to raise the entire amount independently, this state commitment marked a massive shift. However, a Governor’s budget is only a proposal—the official state budget is written and finalized by the bipartisan Joint Finance Committee before going to the full legislature.

Recognizing how critical local support would be, the Friends reached out to our area representatives on the committee. Representative Shannon Zimmerman and Senator Stafsholt joined us for park visits. After seeing our facilities firsthand, they became strong advocates for our park project.

Thanks to that advocacy, when the final 2025–2027 State Capital Budget passed, **our nature center was the only park project of its kind included in the entire state of Wisconsin.** As part of this approval, $250,000 in planning funds was officially awarded to hire an architect and begin the initial design phase.

CURRENT STATUS UPDATE (AS OF NOVEMBER 2026)

Our project secured $250,000 in state planning funds as part of the 2025–2027 Biennium. That money is currently being spent on Planning & Design. Following a competitive bidding process this summer, the Architecture/Engineering contract was awarded in late July 2026 to Cedar Corporation from Menomonie, Wisconsin. The contract between Cedar Corporation (Architecture and Design consultants) and the Department of Administration has been signed. Full-scale planning and design will begin shortly.

ALREADY A SUPPORTER? HERE’S HOW YOUR GIFT IS GROWING

To everyone who has donated to the Friends in the past: you made this possible. Your early investment proved to state decision-makers that our community cares deeply about this park. Because of your foundational generosity, we were able to turn local commitment into a multi-million-dollar state investment.

LOOKING AHEAD: PROJECT ROADMAP & KEY MILESTONES

If state budget approvals stay on track, our path toward opening looks like this:

- January 2027: Design Report Complete
- October 2027: State Building Commission Approval
- February 2028: Construction Bid Opening
- May 2028: Break Ground / Start Construction
- May 2029: Substantial Completion (Moving in!)
- May 2030: Final Project Completion

Funding, Advocacy, & Logistics Note: This timeline hinges on inclusion in the upcoming 2027–2028 State Capital Budget. Active legislative advocacy at the local level will be critical to securing these funds and keeping the project on schedule.

BEHIND THE SCENES: FRIENDS IN ACTION

We aren't just waiting around—our team is actively shaping the vision for the new space:

- **Representation:** We have a dedicated liaison working directly with the official Project Planning Committee.
- **Active Focus Groups:** Three specialized teams are hard at work on Building Design & Construction, Staffing & Programming, and Fundraising Strategy.
- **Submitted Vision Documents:** We have already provided state planners with essential foundation materials, including our Building Design Needs, a native Plant Palette, and initial Exhibit Concepts.

WHY LOCAL CONTRIBUTIONS MATTER

It’s natural to ask: **"If this is a state park, shouldn't state taxes pay for it?"** State tax dollars are stretched across dozens of state parks, and demand always far exceeds the state's budget. Decision-makers prioritize parks that show active local backing because it proves the investment will actually be used and cherished. Showing that our community stands behind the project gives us a massive competitive advantage—putting our park at the front of the line for state funding ahead of other projects across Wisconsin.

State funds will cover the building, but we are responsible for transforming it into a nature center. This includes furnishing the rooms, building the exhibits, and equipping the space. Additionally, we're also preparing for logistics not covered by state funds, like temporary offices and storage.

We are working with the Project Planning Team to clarify our final funding role. We have a big mountain to climb with fundraising, and we need community support to get there! Together, we’re laying the groundwork for a nature center that will serve our community for generations. Stay tuned as design work officially kicks off!

WHAT’S NEXT: REACHING OUR GOAL OF $500,000+

Securing state support is a huge victory, but our work isn’t done yet. To fully bring this vision to life, the Friends needs to raise an additional $500,000+ beyond what we have already collected.
Your future contributions will directly support key aspects of the new nature center, which may include:

- **State Project Support:** Contributing directly toward overall building and site development costs.
- **Interactive Exhibits:** Designing and installing high-quality, hands-on educational displays.
- **Classroom & Facility Outfitting:** Equipping learning spaces with modern tech, tools, and furnishings for students and visitors.

MAKE YOUR IMPACT TODAY

Scan the QR code to head straight to our secure donation page. Send checks to: Friends of Willow River & Kinnickinnic State Parks at 1034 County Road A, Hudson, WI 54016.

OPEN DOORS FOR THE NEW NATURE CENTER

Connections matter! Do you want to hear more?
Your support will help us bring this new building, and its exhibits, to life.
If you have a lead on a supporter or corporate sponsor, let us know.
Contact us at **paths@willowkinnifriends.org.**

FULLY FUNDED!

THANK YOU TO OUR 75+ DONORS!



THE RIPPLE EFFECT

The impact of this launch is already making waves—there is a noticeable surge in boat rentals at the park! That extra activity brings vibrant energy to the waterfront, and the proceeds directly support park programs, trail maintenance, and future improvement projects across both Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks.

This launch did far more than build a new dock—it unlocked the water for our entire community, creating an accessible legacy that will be enjoyed for generations to come. To view the generous donors who made this launch possible, visit www.willowkinnifriends.org/launch

A PLACE TO GATHER & REST

NEW BENCHES ALONG HIDDEN PONDS TRAIL



Visitors to Willow River State Park have new scenic spots to rest, thanks to recently installed trail benches along the Hidden Ponds Trail.

Located behind the Nature Center, this paved, 0.5-mile path is one of the park's most accessible routes—popular with families, strollers, and visitors using mobility devices. The new seating gives everyone a comfortable place to pause and take in the natural surroundings.

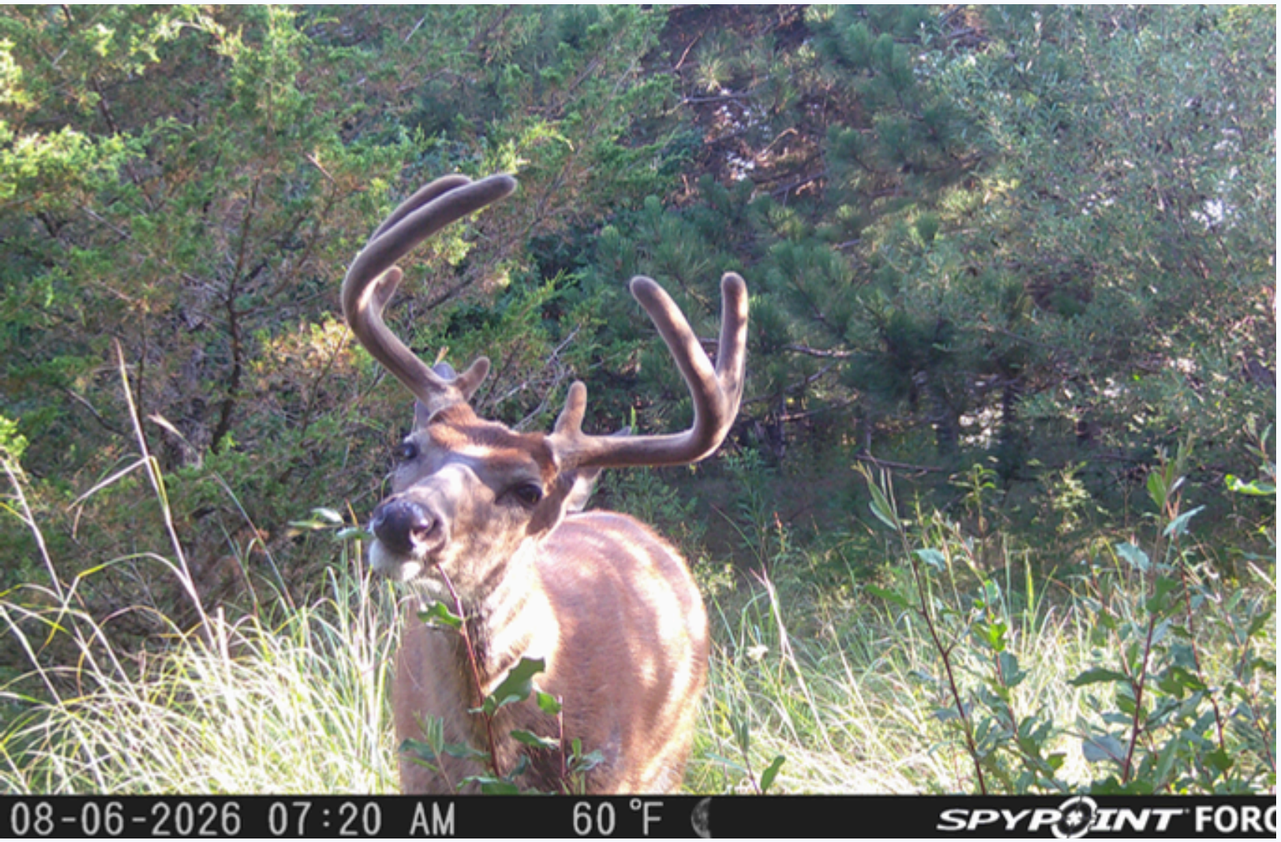
This project was made possible by a grant from the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin, secured through the dedication of our volunteer Grant Research Team. Installation was a true team effort, with Friends volunteers working alongside DNR staff to clear brush, level terrain, and securely anchor each bench.

Next time you are near the Nature Center, take a loop on Hidden Ponds Trail and test out the new seating!

Natural Resources FOUNDATION of Wisconsin

HUNTING AT WILLOW RIVER & KINNICKINNIC STATE PARKS

Hunting officially opens at both Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Park on **November 15**. Below you'll find more information and maps displaying the areas open to hunting within the parks. Hiking (or skiing if snow is present) remains open to the public on all trails within the park throughout hunting season. **When hiking in areas open to hunting, wear blaze orange and keep pets leashed at all times.** Good luck to all the hunters out there!



HUNTING & TRAPPING MAPS

Use your phone camera to scan & review!

WILLOW RIVER

KINNICKINNIC

CAPTURING THE WILD SIDE OF WILLOW RIVER STATE PARK: TRAIL CAMERA STUDY

We are officially wrapping up the first year of our wildlife monitoring project at Willow River State Park! By placing trail cameras across diverse habitats, we are building a crucial picture of local animal movements and habitat use to help inform park conservation efforts. The effort is already paying off—we recently captured our very first river otter on camera, along with a photogenic black bear who made a star appearance in two separate locations! A huge thank you goes out to volunteer Ed Heyes for his incredible work helping to develop this project. Camera locations remain top secret to protect the gear and the wildlife, but we can't wait to share more candid snapshots with you soon!











WIKI MOUNTAIN BIKE CLUB BRINGS PROFESSIONALLY BUILT TRAILS TO WILLOW RIVER STATE PARK

Mountain biking at Willow River State Park continues to reach new heights, thanks to the vision and leadership of WIKI (Willow River & Kinnickinnic Mountain Bike Club)! Partnering with the Wisconsin DNR, WIKI spearheaded the project to bring a brand-new, professionally constructed skills trail area to the park. Designed and crafted by professional trail builders, this specialized addition gives riders of all ages and experience levels a safe, progressive space to practice essential bike-handling techniques. Featuring flowy berms, wooden balance features, and low-risk obstacles, it allows beginners to build confidence and gives seasoned mountain bikers a polished warm-up spot before heading onto the main singletrack loops. We are deeply grateful to WIKI Trails for championing this project and bringing top-tier, professionally built recreational amenities to our local trail system! Find out more about WIKI Mountain Bike Club at wikimountainbike.com.



MEET JODI

OUR NEW NATURALIST

A certified Wisconsin Master Naturalist with a background as a local middle and high school educator in Durand, Jodi brings a strong foundation in hands-on teaching to her role. Jodi is particularly fascinated by nocturnal ecology, including bats, fireflies, and moths, and is excited to lead interactive bug hunts and mothing events at the Nature Center.

> **I want to help adults find their inner child who used to love watching ladybugs or bumblebees, and to support that same natural curiosity in children.**



CITIZEN SCIENCE:

TRACKING BIODIVERSITY AFTER DARK

Jodi pioneered our first summer of weekly nighttime surveys, which was a huge success with over 100 moth species identified. This citizen science project tracks park biodiversity and seasonal patterns (phenology) to better understand our local ecosystem.



Why Mothing Matters:

- **Pollination:** Moths are highly efficient and among our only nighttime pollinators.
- **Bioindicators:** Jodi discovered three aquatic moth species, confirming the strong health of our pond and lake systems.
- **Food Web:** Moths serve as a critical foundation for local wildlife diets.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

KATRINA LARSEN



Seeking outdoor balance in retirement, Katrina joined the Friends believing state parks are a vital gift to the public. Helping lead W.O.W., she loves watching thick walls of buckthorn disappear around Little Falls Lake to reveal the open water. She is drawn to the vibrant, changing beauty of the rivers across Willow River and Kinni State Parks, with her absolute favorite spot being the overlook high above the Falls on the pink trail. Above all, Katrina treasures the wonderful people she's met along the way and encourages anyone considering volunteering to give it a try—whether helping at the Nature Center, grooming trails or clearing invasives, there's a place for everyone!

HELP US SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT!

Send nominations for our next spotlight *or* connect new volunteers with us at communication@willowkinnifriends.org.

W.O.W.

WILLOW OUTDOOR WORKERS

Every Tuesday morning, Katrina and the Willow Outdoor Workers gather to restore the health of our woods by keeping invasive buckthorn in check. While the team works hard week in and week out, managing invasive species is an ongoing effort—and we always need more ground covered. Whether you drop in occasionally or join weekly, your extra hands help our native forest thrive. No experience necessary, just a willingness to dig in!

CITIZEN SCIENCE:

WILLOW RIVER'S FIRST-EVER BAT IDENTIFICATION HIKE



Following our recent installation of five volunteer-built bat houses across Willow River State Park, our community took the next step in our bat-based citizen science program by gathering in June for our kickoff tracking event: "Echos in the Night: Bats by Sound Identification Hike." Using specialized bat detectors to translate ultrasonic echolocation into audible sound, participants tracked over 30 individual bats flying overhead. The group successfully recorded 6 of Wisconsin's 8 native bat species in a single night: Hoary Bat, Little Brown Bat, Big Brown Bat, Silver-haired Bat, Tricolored Bat, Eastern Red Bat.

Why Detecting 6 Native Bat Species Matters:

- **Environmental Indicators:** Bats are key indicator species. High diversity confirms that Willow River State Park's aquatic and forest ecosystems are thriving.
- **Conservation Progress:** With White-nose Syndrome threatening regional populations, detecting sensitive species—especially the Tricolored Bat—provides crucial proof that local habitats are supporting vulnerable wildlife.

ATTENDING OUR EVENTS IS NOW EASIER THAN EVER!

See all upcoming events in one place and add programs directly to your personal calendar with just one click.

willowkinnifriends.org/event-calendar

PRESERVING OUR PARKS

HOW WE ARE IMPACTED BY THE KNOWLES-NELSON STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

At the Friends of Willow River & Kinnickinnic State Parks, our ability to care for and enhance our local parks relies heavily on strong conservation partners. Over the years, grants from the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program have been instrumental in amplifying our reach, directly funding projects that protect our natural resources and improve park experiences for every visitor.

Highlights of the Knowles-Nelson funded projects in our parks include:

- Restoration of Little Falls Dam
- Installation of Fishing Piers
- Construction of the Wood Shed located by the Park Office
- Playground in 200 Campground
- Universally Accessible Kayak / Canoe Launch

For decades Knowles-Nelson has helped fund essential outdoor projects across Wisconsin. As of this year, the program's funding authorization has lapsed, pausing new grant distribution across the state. With funding currently paused, the work of preserving and improving Willow River and Kinnickinnic State Parks relies heavily on local action.

True stewardship happens at every level. You can keep our parks thriving by:

- **Supporting Local Efforts:** Joining the Friends group, volunteering for trail workdays, or donating to our projects.
- **Sharing Your Voice:** Letting your local and state representatives know how much public lands, accessible facilities, and park funding matter to you and your family.

As you enjoy the fishing piers, trails, and launch sites this season, remember that these spaces exist because community members spoke up and stepped up to advocate for them.

Learn more about how you can support the reinstatement of Knowles-Nelson funds by visiting their website: **knowlesnelson.org/take-action/**

2026 IMPACT REPORT

Our community is the heartbeat of the Friends organization. We receive zero funding from taxes or state park fees. Instead, **66% of our operating revenue comes directly from grants and individual donations**—with individual gifts outshining foundation grants.

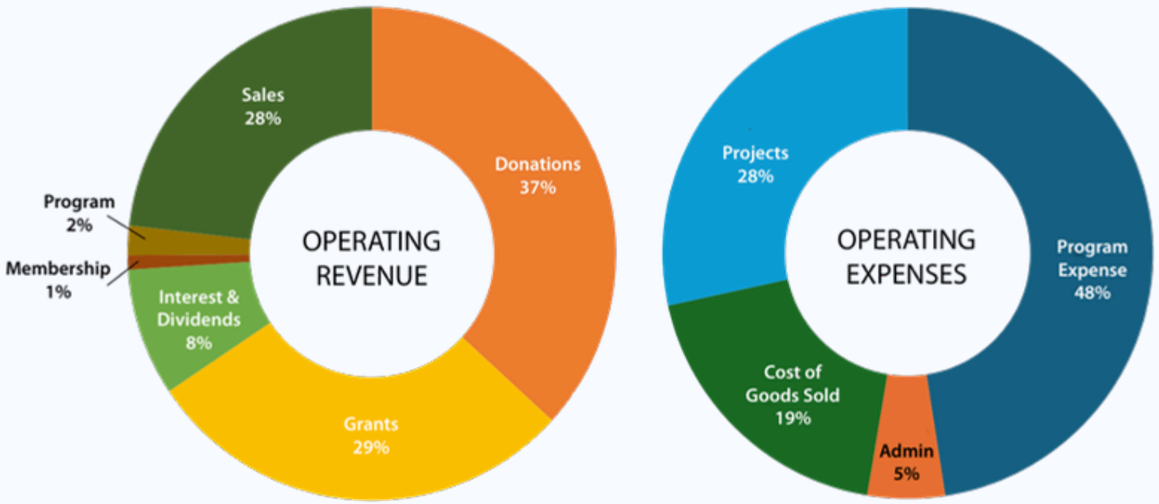
This year, **76% of our funding directly supported programming and special projects.** Highlights include:

- **Accessible Outdoor Recreation**: Willow River State Park now features a universally accessible canoe and kayak launch.
- **Upgraded Park Grounds**: Hidden Ponds Trail behind the Nature Center now features new benches. (Read the full story in this issue!)
- **Community Education & Outreach**: Over the past 12 months, our naturalists and volunteers welcomed **15,000+ visitors** to the Nature Center and hosted **255 programs for 6,500+ participants**.

The Friends organization thrives because of the generosity and dedication of our community. Every donation, grant, and volunteer hour keeps our parks vibrant, accessible, and welcoming for generations to come.

See the charts below for a breakdown of our operating revenue and operating expenses this year:

2026 FINANCIALS



GRANTS DON'T WRITE THEMSELVES

MEET THE TEAM POWERING OUR NON-PROFIT



From left to right: Bob Richardson, Mike Wilcox, Joey Filipiak, Rita Thofern, & Colleen O'Brien

As a non-profit, the vast majority of our funding comes from grants. But grant funding isn't automatic; it takes strategy, consistency, and a massive amount of behind-the-scenes effort.

Every single week, this dedicated group gathers to dig through grant databases, align our vision with funding opportunities, and craft compelling proposals. They debate strategy, double-check details, and ensure our non-profit stays sustainable so we can keep doing the work that matters. It is easy to focus on the end result when a grant is awarded, but the real work happens in those weekly sessions. We owe so much of our reach and impact to their ongoing dedication. Thank you to our grant team volunteers for making our work possible!

DID YOU KNOW?

NEW TAX BENEFIT FOR DONORS IN 2026

There is a new federal income tax deduction for the 2026 tax year. Taxpayers can deduct $1,000 cash donations to charities directly from their taxes without having to itemize their deductions. This is per person, so couples can deduct $2,000. **Why not take advantage of this by making a donation to the Friends? You can help the Friends and take it off your taxes!**

Information provided is for educational purposes only and does not constitute formal tax or legal advice. Please consult your financial or tax representative for guidance on your individual tax deduction eligibility.

WHATS NEW IN THE NATURE CENTER GIFT SHOP

Stop by the gift shop to explore our latest lineup! Check out our brand-new sticker designs alongside our cozy quarter zips featuring the classic Willow River patch.



EVERY PURCHASE DIRECTLY SUPPORTS OUR NONPROFIT MISSION.

Our goal is to keep the gift shop open daily from 12 PM to 4 PM. Since store operations depend on our wonderful volunteer team, *hours are subject to volunteer availability*.

SHARE YOUR PARK MOMENTS!

Got a photo wearing your new Willow-Kinni gear in the parks? We'd love to see it! ***Tag us on Facebook*** or send your favorite photos and park stories to communication@willowkinnifriends.org.

Thank You Business & Foundation Supporters

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Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund (WIDNR)

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c/o Willow River State Park
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Hudson, WI 54016

