



Newsletter

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Candlelight Ski is Feb. 11!
... see page 3 for more information

From the President:

A CALL FOR HELP AND DO GOOD

By Brad Bjorklund, Friends of Wild River State Park

In this time of changes in government and increases in the needs of many, our Wild River State Park is a refuge for the human spirit, providing:

- a perfect balance: out in the country away from stressful cities, beautifully located on the shores of a wild, swimmable, fishable river
- serves as a massively therapeutic pain reliever
- is affordable and a trip not too far
- whose internal roads, programs and staff are stretched too much
- where we Friends step in and give 16 hours of our time each year to greatly enhance the public's understanding and appreciation of skiing at night, running along the river banks and through the woods, enjoying birds, butterflies, bull snakes, a Little Free Library, a reference library, and a lot more.

We make lectures, events and prairie restoration happen. We socialize at board and annual meetings. We become friends, enhance our knowledge and our skills at so many things that we come away, with such a small investment of time, enriched and satisfied knowing we have done some concrete good for others. And the sneaky part is that we also do it for ourselves and have a lot of fun in the process.

Help us out. Become an active Friend. We have an active Board -- join it. Meet someone on a trail or in the Visitor Center. Listen to the wonderment they have just experienced; their work stress gone; talking, planning and doing a shared outdoor experience with their family. It is a wow experience.

I was going to write about bigger issues like the Park's roads turning to dirt, funding cuts and the like. But we tend to do smaller and more effective "do good" things for people and... ourselves.

Pancake Breakfast & Annual Meeting

Saturday, March 12, 9 – 11 a.m. at the
Wild River State Park Visitor Center

Starting at 9:00 with the delicious Pancake Breakfast (members eat for free), featuring:

- Famous secret recipe organic buttermilk pancakes
- Wild River State Park's home-made Maple Syrup tapped from the park "sugar bush" last spring
- Fresh sausage, hot coffee and juice



2016 in Review

By Paul Kurvers,
Wild River State Park Manager



As the new year begins, I thought it would be a good idea to share with you some of the noteworthy events and activities that occurred at the park in 2016. This past year was another very busy time at the park. Overall attendance for the year increased by about 2% to 184,000. The park also hosted 34,000 overnight visitors using our campgrounds, cabins, and guest house. The number of campers at the Snake River Forest campground near Pine City, (which is under the umbrella of management from Wild River) also increased by 10% from 2015. The increase in attendance at Wild River is consistent with a statewide trend of increasing use of state parks over the past 5 years. In fact, since 2012, the number of occupied campsites in state parks has increased by approximately 21%.

Late this fall the park completed the purchase of a private tract of land within the boundary located in the south section of park. Hopefully, over this next year, the park will also complete the purchase of two additional private parcels in this area of the park. These are significant purchases as they represent the last few remaining private parcels of land within the park. When completed, these purchases of land will help preserve the aesthetic, natural and cultural resources of this area of the park for the benefit of current and future generations.

As previously mentioned in the spring newsletter, Wild River and all other state parks converted to a new camping reservation model this past season which allows campers to reserve 100% of available campsites. Additionally, campers were also able to make same day of arrival reservations for campsites (previously, reservations had to be made at least one day in advance). As a result of these changes, campers were also able to check for the availability of a campsite at the park of their choice in real-time and reserve a campsite from their home computer or smartphone. After a few hiccups during implementation, I am pleased to announce that this new model has been well received by the vast majority of our customers and also has been easier to administer from a staff standpoint. No longer do we have campers waiting in line before we open on Fridays in hopes of securing a first-come, first-served campsite only to find that none are available.

On November 12th and 13th, for the first time in four years, a special deer hunt was conducted at the park. During this two day hunt, 80 participants (selected via a drawing in September) harvested 50 deer. As a result of this hunt, the population of deer in park has been reduced which will ultimately help limit the amount of damage to trees and forbs by browsing deer. Even with this hunt, visitors should still be able to see plenty of deer as they hike, ski or drive through the park.

I look forward to seeing you at the park this winter.

Naturalist Notes

By Mike Dunker, Park Naturalist

The year 2016 is behind us and with it, another great year of interaction with park users. Typing up annual reports and crunching numbers is a part of the job, albeit not my favorite part, but it does provide a chance to reflect. These numbers do have some value. Program attendance, Visitor Center attendance, volunteers, guest speakers, Discovery Kits and GPS units checked out and other data all get calculated to look at each park's accomplishments.

What did our numbers tell us? The Friends of Wild River State Park brought in over 1,000 program attendees through their guest speakers. The park also provided about 300 hours of interpretive programs throughout the year, reaching almost 6,000 visitors. The Visitor Center itself had over 22,000 park users stop by to enjoy the view from the overlook, attend a program or say hi to Goldie and Twig, our education snakes. We also had over 500 individuals help with prairie and savannah restoration, clocking in more than 1,300 total hours for the Prairie Care program alone.

As impressive as these statistics can be, it is important to pause and realize they are not just numbers. They are experiences, memories, inspirations, connections and stories. I likely hear as many park stories as I share.

These include the eighth grade Girl Scout troop who has been coming out to the park to volunteer for six years and share a passion for stewardship and nature because of the connection they made at the park. The family that had their first camping experience at the park and you have to slow the children down in their enthusiastic speaking as they tell you about all they have seen and done so far. The unforgettable smile and eye twinkle you see from that nine-year-old girl's first taste of real maple syrup. The hundreds of thank you's, handshakes and high fives I receive from visitors who are grateful that we are here and the work we do.

The numbers serve their purpose. This year we saw that we had more visitors in October than we did in July at our Visitor Center. We also saw the July flooding and higher rainfall throughout the year at the park did impact our program numbers. The numbers create a road map of where we have been and help us prepare for creating future connections. I think the Minnesota State Parks and Trails sums it up nicely in their vision statement: Our vision is to create unforgettable park, trail, and water recreation experiences that inspire people to pass along the love for the outdoors to current and future generations. Well said!



2016 Prairie Care Report

By Mike Dunker, Park Naturalist

The Prairie Care program was started at Wild River State Park in 1993 by Naturalist Dave Crawford as a way to get youth and the public directly involved with prairie restoration efforts. Since then, hundreds of students come out to the park each year to collect and sow seeds to restore our prairies. In the process they learn about becoming stewards and many develop a connection to our natural world.

This year was no different. Through their efforts, volunteers and species stewards collected 66 different species of native wildflower and grass. It was exciting to see a few less common species gathered such as Indian Paintbrush and Heart-leaved Golden Alexander. The diversity of wildflowers at the park is incredible and what grows can change from year to year. This year we saw less blazing star but much more sneezeweed.

As you can imagine, the needs of the program have changed since its start. The focus on restoring large tracts of what was farmed and grazed land is no longer needed with so much already done in the last twenty years. We are now in a maintenance phase, allowing for a shift in focus to improving specific habitat qualities.

Our program goals this year included: improving pollinator habitat, with more butterfly and bee species in decline; maintenance of open sand prairie, better suited for snake and hatchling habitat; and continued sowing of seed into burn areas to compete with brome species. Probably the highest goal priority for this year was savanna species. Since oak wilt continues to work through the park, more areas are opening up within the oak savannas creating an opportunity to plant native species to compete against invasive plants that can move into these rich ecosystems.

Want to help? This spring, we are looking for volunteers who can spare an hour or less to hand seed or plant some of these important species. You may get an opportunity to see another area of the park while you are already coming out for a visit. Call, e-mail or visit Mike Dunker at the park to find out more.

Logging in Wild River State Park

One of the many programs that the Friends of Wild River State Park help to provide is the Old-fashioned Horse Logging program. This was the second year this program was held, providing a chance to look back at some of the logging history that once took place at the park. Even today, the small footprint or should I say hoof print, this technique protects the resources within the park.

Contact the Friends group if you want to take part in or help at any of their events:

info@friendsofwildriver.org

Wild River State Park CANDLELIGHT

❄️ *Ski • Snowshoe • Hike*

Featuring the following fun activities throughout the night:

- Raffle Prizes including a new set of skis and boots!
- Minnesota's largest prairie bonfire - lit at 5:45pm
- 6 miles of candle-lit ski, snowshoe, and walking trails
- Live music at both the Visitor Center and Trail Center
- Home-made cookies, cider and coffee (donations appreciated)
- Large Telescope for viewing the remarkable night sky.
- Ski & Snowshoe rental available -- call Wade of Wild River Ski Rental at 651-257-0685 for more info.
- Call Dave at 651-583-2923 to volunteer to help out.

NOTE: A Minnesota Ski Pass is required for ski trails in State Parks or Forests, or on State or Grant-in-Aid Trails, for those who are age 16 and above. The cost is \$6 daily or \$20 for the season. and are available at the Park Office or online.



February 11, 2017
Ongoing 6-9 pm

Wild River State Park
FREE!

With a Minnesota State Park
Vehicle Permit.
Skiers: see **NOTE** below.

St. Croix River Canoe Clean-Up

By Marjorie Otto, Park volunteer and daughter of board member Dan Otto

The St. Croix River Canoe Clean-Up has been a long-standing tradition for the Friends of the Wild River State Park. It's meant for everyone – families, out-of-towners, young and old – anyone who is invested in the health of the river.

This past July saw a continuation of that tradition, with some new faces and some young faces, one as young as five years old! Two young ladies from out of town joined us as well. They saw a flyer in the Visitor Center during a previous visit to the park and decided to come back to help out.

The paddle began at the Sunrise River boat landing with five canoes, along with Mike Dunker in a kayak. We were spoiled with perfect paddling weather. The temperature was perfect, with enough of a breeze to keep the bugs away. At our halfway point the group shared lunch, stories, and finished it off with a scrumptious watermelon treat! In addition to picking up trash we saw many bald eagles, both mature and immature. The day ended at the Wild River boat landing, with about five bags of garbage. Those returning to the clean-up from past years noted that each year there seems to be less garbage; a promising sign.

The canoe clean-up is one of the Friend's most important activities, as it makes an impact both for visitors to our beautiful river and state park, but also to the wildlife who depend on the river. So if you're looking for family-friendly adventure with positive impact, make sure to join us next year on Saturday, July 8, 2017! Perhaps the bald eagles will make an appearance to thank us once again.



The 2016 Clean-up Crew

History of the Candlelight Ski

By Dave Kozlovsky, Board member and past-President

“So, tell me again, why are we doing this?” This was a question posed to me in recent years by a young lady that was a National Honor Society member from North Branch High School. One of their service projects was helping the Friends of Wild River State Park with their Candlelight Ski-Snowshoe-Walk. My answer was “because this is Minnesota, this is winter, and this is fun!”

As I prepared for Candlelight Ski 2017, I looked back to the beginnings of this fun family event and discovered that it pre-dates the Friends of Wild River State Park. As past-president of the Friends of WRSP (2005-2012), my charge for the last five years has been to chair the candlelight ski. So my question was how did all this get started? In recent years we have illuminated more than 6 miles of trails for skiing, hiking, and snowshoeing with entertainment and refreshments. The record breaking year was 2009, according to Kris Backlund, Assistant Manager at WRSP. We had 625 vehicles and an estimated 1725 visitors participate between 6-9 PM the night of the event.

To find out more about the beginnings of the Candlelight Ski, I met with Gary Noren, President of the FWRSP (1993-2004) and Chuck Kartak who was WRSP Manager at that time.

Gary said the idea got started when he and his boys, Anders and Peter, attended the Lantern Loppet in Mora on February 1st, 1991. The three of them had a great time and Gary thought this would be a great event for Wild River State Park. He brought the idea to Chuck Kartak, who thought it over and decided to give it a try. The first Candlelight Ski was held on January 11, 1992, which would make the 2017 Candlelight Ski the 26th year!

One of the problems was they had no funds for this event and, since lanterns would have been too expensive, they decided to do paper bag luminaries with a candle held up by sand in the bag. Plastech Corp. in Rush City helped out by donating the paper bags the first year, with those bags being the most unique in the Candlelight Ski history (see picture), as they had a picture of a coyote on the side.



Gary remembers that in those early years he had four or five volunteers help set up the luminaries and they usually included Bill Carlson, Craig Poorker, Jim Sauerby, Mike Chrun, Chuck Kartak and Eric and Joanne Christensen. Barb Ledbetter-Nelson was in charge of hospitality and refreshments. In 1992, they illuminated the Mitigwaki loop which is about 2 miles. The first few years, Gary said, the volunteers were required to bring their own sleds as well as lighters. They soon realized that it would have been easier to put snow in the bags rather than drag a sled full of sand around the trails. The event was a success with many visitors attending.

The Candlelight Ski soon became the “Candlelight Event” according to Gary Noren, opening the evening to hikers and snowshoers as well. The event depended on snow of course, but some years Mother Nature did not cooperate. In a note from 1997 from Chuck Kartak,

“Special thanks to all the Friends who helped put on the Candlelight Walk. There were 80 vehicles that came in after 4 PM for the event giving us in the neighborhood of 200 visitors in spite of being El Niño’d”.

1997 was the earliest I could find a count for the Candlelight event. Other early Candlelight attendee number when there was better snow conditions were 845 in 1999, 618 in 2000, and 800 in 2001.

As time went on, the event grew with the addition of an illuminated walking trail. Soon a huge bonfire in the prairie as big as a house was added and for a number of years Maggie Kuusisto provided horse drawn sleigh rides. Entertainers were added at both the Trail Center and Visitors Center. Dave Crawford also entertained with slide shows of the Park and his pet bull snake.



- Continued from Page 4 – History of the Candlelight Ski -

The earliest musicians I could find were singer/guitarists, Gigi Nauer and Paul Dennison. If the sky was clear the night of the Event, Kenny Bahmer would bring his telescope and help you view the stars.

In 2000, Jim Walters, a Friends of WRSP board member at the time, connected with my wife Jan and I to see if we could get help from our National Honor Society students from North Branch High School as we were the group's advisors. The Friends were looking to expand the lighted trails and needed more volunteer help. We sent the group's representative, Abby Nordaune, to one of the Friends meetings, and she felt it would be a good project. The group voted and agreed to help out and it is one of North Branch High Schools NHS service projects to this day. As many as 60 NHS members have helped each year with setting luminaries, parking, greeting and giving directions as well as helping serve refreshments. The Friends of WRSP could not put on Candlelight Ski-Snowshoe-Hike, as it is currently called, at the scale we are now doing, without the help of the NHS students. Since the NHS has been doing this for over 15 years, it is great to see some of these former students coming back with their own families and participating in the Candlelight event.



We have been fortunate in the last several years to have a donation of a cross country ski package from Wade Vitalis (vendor for ski and snow shoe rentals) to use as a fundraiser for the Friends. That, in addition to free will offerings for cookies, coffee, and cider, makes this a nice fund-raising event for the Friends. Discussion of "how many cookies do we need" has been on the agenda of many planning meetings, with an agenda item of "BAKE COOKIES," according to Gary Noren. The total cookies we now plan on is 15 dozen, often adjusted at the last minute due to snow conditions.

So, what has changed in the past years? The candles and bags are a part of the Park budget. We now have, instead of coyotes, different colored bags denoting ski, hiking and snowshoeing trails. The WRSP staff has always been over the top helping us pull off the Candlelight Ski event. The ski trails are always well prepared, including in the "El Niño" years, sometimes scraping together enough snow to cover the trails. Thanks to Paul Kurvers, Kris Backlund, Mike Dunker, and all the park staff, current and past, who are so critical to the success of the Candlelight Ski.



I tried to get as many names included from the beginnings in 1992 as I could find as they were the pioneers getting this wonderful event started. I hope this article will peak memories of past "Candlelight Events" and if you have other names, memories, please email me at davekoz40@gmail.com and I will include them in future newsletters. I also would be remiss to not thank all the Friends of WRSP board members and volunteers over the last 26 years for their efforts to make this a safe and fun family event.

If my math is right 26 years times 15 dozen cookies= 13,780 cookies!

I hope you are planning to attend this year, whether you want to ski, snowshoe, or walk, watch the bonfire, or enjoy the hospitality of a warm beverage and some cookies. If you want to rent skis or snowshoes, I would advise you to make your reservation early.



Thank you for your
Membership

FWRSP Membership Options

- Junior **Friend, 12 and under** – \$5 / year
Includes an "Action Guide" and other benefits
- Individual **Friend** – \$20 / year
- Family **Friend** – \$35 / year
- Silver **Friend** – \$50 / year
- Gold **Friend** – \$100 / year
- Platinum **Friend** – \$250+ / year
*Add an additional \$10 and be a member of
Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota*

Name:			
Address:			
City:			
State:		Zip:	
Email:			

(We will never sell or trade your email address.)

Option 1: Mail above with check to:
Jan Kozlovsky, FWRSP Treasurer
(make check out to "Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota"
and put "Friends of Wild River membership" in memo field)
17190 410th St.

North Branch, MN 55056

Option 2: Sign-up Online and use your credit card at:

www.FriendsOfWildRiver.org

Friends of Wild River State Park
Bob Kessen
31145 Genesis Ave
Stacy, MN 55079-9417

Improvements to our Website!

Check out the Friends updated website at:
www.FriendsOfWildRiver.org

Some of the new features are:

- Complete list of the 5 main Friends-sponsored events, plus additional information on each.
- More past editions of this Friends Newsletter plus listings of articles in each.
- An expanded list of "Our Favorite Links."
- A cool new link to this DNR page:
▶ **NEW!** [DNR Snow Depth and Trail Conditions](#)

Please contact me if you have any comments or suggestions about our Friends website:
Bob Kessen – kesse002@umn.edu

Calendar of Events

FEBRUARY:

11: 6:00 - 9:00 p.m.: **Candlelight Ski**

19: *Park Program:* Snowshoe along the St. Croix -- 1:00 p.m. at Visitor Center.

MARCH:

4,5,12: *Park Program:* Tapping the Magnificent Maple -- 1:00 - 2:30 starting at the Visitor Center, then driving to tap trees.

11: **Pancake Breakfast** at 9:00 in the Visitor Center, followed by our **Friends Annual Meeting**

18,25,26: *Park Program:* Maple Syrup Workshop -- 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the Visitor Center. Registration required; 35 max.

APRIL:

22: *Park Program:* Earth Day Hike -- 1:00 – 2:30 at Visitor Center.

29: *Park Program:* Sounds of Spring Stroll -- 1:00 – 2:30 at Visitor Center.

MAY:

13: **International Migratory Bird Day** -- events throughout the day.

For more info and activities go to friendsofwildriver.org or mndnr.gov/wildriver