



FRIENDS OF WILD RIVER STATE PARK

Newsletter



A community organization devoted to preserving and enhancing the experience of Wild River State Park

Winter 2025



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Welcome

From the President



As we enter 2025, it is good to reflect on the many accomplishments of the Friends group during the past year. In this newsletter, you can read about the successful launch of the Nature Play Area, a successful Celebration of Spring, and plans for Candlelight Night among other things.

Special thanks to Marjorie Otto for her tireless efforts as secretary and her work putting out the newsletter over the past few years. Marjorie has accepted a new job that keeps her busy and starts her on a new career path but makes it necessary to cut back on her board duties. She will continue to contribute as a member of the board.

Welcome to our new secretary Sierra Stukenholtz who has stepped into this important role. And also, Bill Johnson who attends many of our events, interviews people, takes many photos and writes articles and press releases for our events. Thank you. It takes a village to keep moving things forward.

As winter progresses, fingers crossed for snow to enjoy the beauty of the park during this approaching season. Mark your calendar for the second Saturday in February for Candlelight Night. We have a plan so the event will go on...snow or not.

Becky Leuer, Friends of Wild River State Park President



FriendsOfWildRiver.org



Have you checked out the website for the Friends of Wild River State Park? We have been working with a computer programmer to update our website, particularly making it more user friendly on mobile devices.

And if you notice anything that is out of date or links that don't work, please let us know.

NATURE PLAY

Come Explore

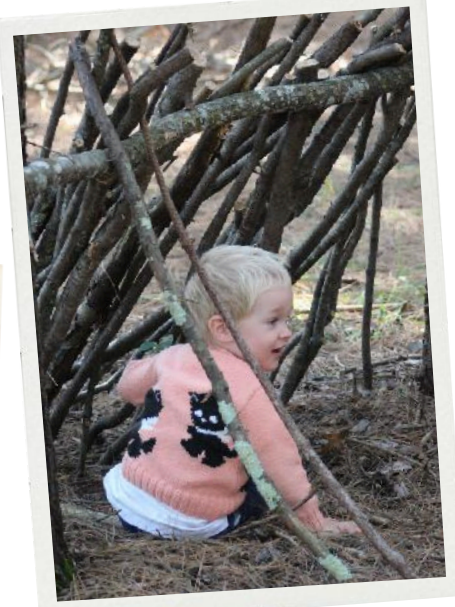
Build a shelter. Hop on logs (to avoid the hot lava, of course). Play tic-tac-toe. Join a story circle. Use your imagination.

By Jan Kozlovsky, Treasurer

These are the activities we had in mind when Phase One of the Nature Play Area was constructed on October 6. Plans for a play area using only natural elements have been in the works for several years, on hold as we waited for the Resource Assessment to be completed. This fall, working with Park Naturalist Sean, the committee developed a plan to construct some elements of the playground that didn't involve any digging. Across from Campground Loop D, the site designated for the play area, and right next to the original site, there is a mature red pine planting that is the perfect place for a shady play area.

The play area is marked by a sign and a yellow boundary rope. Volunteers trimmed the low dead branches from the pines for safety. A downed dead oak from the road to the Visitor Center was cut into logs and slabs and hauled to the play area. From one tree there are 20 stumps for a story circle, a tic-tac-toe table, and a path of short stumps for jumping on a winding path. Three horizontal poles of varying heights were tied to trees and an assortment of sticks from buckthorn and iron wood cleared in other areas were available to create lean-tos and shelters. The surface is matted with pine needles, and there is plenty of space for free play.

By the time the volunteers left, the first families were already enjoying the space. And ironically, the Resource Assessment was completed the next week, so by next spring we should be able to proceed with the original plans.



OTTER TROTTER 5K



Photos by Bill Johnson

2024 Otter Trotter 5K featured record-setting time, gorgeous autumn scenery and enjoyment by all

By Bill Johnson

A big shout-out and thanks to everyone who helped make the 2024 Otter Trotter 5K run/walk on Oct. 12 a resounding success!

The annual event, also known as the Wild River Run, attracted 59 runners and walkers, plus many family members and friends to root them on. Providing support were several FWRSP volunteers, along with Wild River State Park staff, led by Park Manager Kris Backlund.

Highlight of the day was an Otter Trotter record time — 18 minutes, 32 seconds — set by Cody Anderson. Our top female finisher was Lily Stelmack with an impressive 24:03 time.

In reality, everyone was a winner, taking in the gorgeous scenery: the emerging reds, oranges and golds of autumn, along with spectacular views of the scenic St. Croix River. The Otter Trotter course started at the picnic shelter, taking participants on a loop that included the Old Logging Trail and Walter F. Mondale River Trail. A persistent light rain during the event didn't dampen the enthusiasm (or performance!) of everyone involved.

Top finishers by gender and age group, along with their winning times, were:

Ages 0-11 (male/female)

1st - Andrew Nelson 43:10

2nd - Jonah Boyd 44:58

3rd - Daniel Appleby 47:32



Ages 12-30 (male)

1st - Cody Anderson 18:32
2nd - Owen Wynia 21:44
3rd - Rayne Schwinghammer 22:14

Ages 31-45 (male)

1st - Eric Joki 21:54
2nd - Steve Stelmack 25:12
3rd - Joshua Manske 28:25

Ages 46-60 (male)

1st - Joel Dunning 24:32
2nd - Mike Beaverson 29:34
3rd - Steve Crumley 34:54

Ages 61+ (male)

1st - Josef Klubnsnik 22:32
2nd - Rob Thompson 31:40
3rd - Frank Lilja 48:07

Ages 12-30 (female)

1st - Lily Stelmack 24:03
2nd - Anna Beaverson 29:18
3rd - Vivian Shaw 35:26

Ages 31-45 (female)

1st - Sara Jeddeloh 27:30
2nd - Marlene Gilkerson 28:44
3rd - Nina Watercott 28:49

Ages 46-60 (female)

1st - Noreen Haukland 27:49
2nd - Mary Anne Obst 46:42
3rd - Wendy York 49:12

Ages 61+ (female)

1st - Laura Carlson 28:47
2nd - Maria Sahs 43:05
3rd - Margaret Shoemaker 48:07

Post-race activities included an awards ceremony, refreshments and socializing in the picnic shelter. All participants received a pendant golden medal, and the top three finishers in each gender/age group took home a state park gift card.

The next Otter Trotter is scheduled for Saturday, October 11, 2025. Go to friendsofwildriver.org/5Krun.php for event details and a registration form.





Photos by Gary Noren

Prairies took center stage at EarthFest 2024, our new celebration of spring

By Bill Johnson

“Why do we care about prairies?” was the theme for EarthFest 2024, our new celebration of spring (previously called Seegwan), held April 27 at Wild River State Park.

Paying tribute to the park’s extensive oak savannas and prairies, EarthFest included several outdoor and indoor events throughout the day, starting with two morning nature walks.

A Bird Walk group, led by local naturalist Dawn Doering, identified nearly 30 species of birds, several of which are found in the prairie. A Prairie Walk, led by Wild River State Park naturalist Sean Hoppes and Native cultural teacher Hope Flanagan, focused on areas of the park where prairie restoration is happening. At the end of the day, attendees had the opportunity to help with the restoration by planting native prairie seeds in a section where a prescribed burn had just occurred.

Hope, from the Tonawanda Band of Seneca, delivered an informational and inspirational keynote presentation, starting with a Native invocation that she translated into English. She also shared stories rooted in Native culture, including a riveting account of “why we are here on this planet.”

Following a lunchtime concert by popular local musician AJ Spoff, EarthFest continued with educational programs at the park’s visitor center. Former park naturalist Dave Crawford gave an update on his 20-year study of bullsnares at the park, while Gloria Peterson shared fascinating stories and beautiful photos from her many years of monitoring the park’s eastern bluebirds.

Meanwhile, in the visitor center lobby, representatives from various conservation groups distributed information and engaged in conversations with attendees about their efforts to protect and enhance the one-of-a-kind landscapes and waterways of the St. Croix River watershed.



Looking ahead to spring: EarthFest 2025 is set for Saturday, April 26

Mark your calendar for Saturday, April 26, because EarthFest 2025 at Wild River State Park will be here before you know it!

EarthFest 2025, our 43rd annual celebration of spring (formerly Seegwan), will feature lots of activities for visitors of all ages, including a morning bird walk, informative talks and presentations, storytelling, art displays and service projects. While many of the event details have yet to be finalized, here are some EarthFest highlights:

- Events will occur between approximately 7:30 a.m. and 5 p.m.
- The theme for this year's EarthFest is "Oak Savannas," which means you can learn fascinating facts about this unique ecosystem, its history, flora and fauna. You'll also have an opportunity to help with restoration of the park's 10-acre oak savanna.
- Our keynote speaker is Laurie Allmann, artist-in-residence at North Woods and Waters of the St. Croix Heritage Area. She's also an award-winning author and was the longtime naturalist and program director at Carpenter Nature Center.
- Meet James Everest, the park's new artist-in-residence, and learn about plans for his unique "sound gardens" (see separate article in this issue).
- All events are free and open to the public. Plus, April 26 is a free park day at all Minnesota state parks!

As the date gets closer, you'll find more details, including a schedule of events, on the FWRSP website, as well as on the park's events calendar.

Apple Fest and Age Well Expo

By Jan Kozlovsky, Treasurer



Volunteers from the Board participated in local events to help promote the park and the Friends group.

Once again, the Friends had a popular activity at the Apple Festival in Almelund in September. The day before over 100 buckthorn sticks were cut at the park and the home of Board Members Dan and Lisa Otto. At the Apple Festival, the buckthorn was made into walking sticks by scraping the bark using butter knives. Then a hole was drilled so a leather thong was added. Not only is a fun activity but also a chance to educate people about buckthorn and share a DNR brochure about the pesty invasive.

In October the Friends had a table at the Age Well Expo at Chisago Lakes High School. Visitors to the Expo stopped by to get their bingo cards initialed, to view our photo displays, learn about upcoming park activities, and once again learn about buckthorn.



A Volunteer Year at the Park

By Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes

Volunteers have been contributing time and love to Wild River State Park for decades. The Covid pandemic pushed pause on their efforts. Now, volunteerism is growing again, and it's time to celebrate some accomplishments.

Thirty-four volunteers jumped into action in 2024, with about 60 more participating in one-time projects. Their activities were varied. Friends of Wild River State Park hosted their annual programs, including EarthFest and the Otter Trotter. They also cut the ribbon on a nature play area adjacent to the campground. Campground Hosts were a resource for campers and kept the campground clean. Visitor Center Hosts recommended trails, let visitors touch a captive snake, and projected tiny worlds onto a screen with the new microscope. Species Stewards collected seeds from about 80 types of plants that will be used to continue diversifying the prairies and oak savannas. Bluebird Monitors diligently checked on eggs and babies in 37 bird houses. Buckthorn Buddies removed buckthorn from 48 acres, greatly improving the future of wildlife habitat. Land Stewardship Volunteers cut brush from the oak savanna restoration area.

It's impossible to fully describe the impact these volunteers had in 2024. All we can do is imagine the smiles on kids' faces, the wonder that visitors returned home with, the fishers and woodpeckers finding more to eat in restored habitat, the millions of seeds awaiting a chance to grow next year. Volunteers create connections to the park and to other people. When people are connected, they feel that they belong. Thank you to all of the volunteers who showed that the park belongs to people, and people belong in the park.

Programs will continue to grow in 2025. If you want to be a part of it, email sean.hoppes@state.mn.us to ask about opportunities. Let's talk.

Bear Necessities

by Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes

2024 was Bear Aware Year at Wild River State Park. And what a year it was! Visitors and staff saw bears regularly. The park's trail cameras caught at least 9 individuals in action. We saw multiple females with cubs, including some that climbed a tree in the campground. When bears and humans live in close proximity, especially in a park setting, conflict can arise. But in 2024, thanks to staff and visitors, there were no reports of bears eating camper food. In 2024:

- A total of 471 people attended ten Bear Necessities nature programs.
- Black Bear Basics signs greeted campers and visitors.
- For the most part, campers kept food and trash locked in cars.
- Visitors read the signs on the dumpsters and used the provided clips, keeping bears out.
- Almost everyone kept dogs on leash, greatly reducing the chance of a bear incident.

People often think black bears are more dangerous than statistics suggest. Since 1987, only 10 people have been hospitalized from bear attacks in Minnesota. All of them fully recovered. The incidents were mostly preventable. You can learn to avoid such incidents and live peacefully with black bears at www.bearwise.org.



FWRSP welcomes artist-in-residence James Everest, creator of magical 'sound gardens'

By Bill Johnson



Imagine entering a wooded nook and sensing something different, magical perhaps: subtle musical notes emanating from points all around you, intermingling with the sounds of singing birds, trilling frogs, buzzing insects and leaves rustling in the breeze.

There's a good chance you're experiencing a "sound garden" created by multidisciplinary artist James (J.G.) Everest.

In the coming months, James will be weaving his magic at Wild River State Park as the first-ever artist-in-residence. His yearlong stint with the park is part of MNPAiR, a new program sponsored by the Minnesota DNR Parks and Trails Division, Met Council Metropolitan Regional Parks and the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission.

James, who has created sound gardens in many parks and other public spaces, is spending the first three months of his residency "embedded" in Wild River State Park, absorbing his surroundings and gathering input from staff and visitors.

'Composing a 3D concert'

Working closely with park naturalist Sean Hoppes, James initially plans to integrate his musical compositions into existing events (possibly Candlelight Night on Feb. 8 and EarthFest on April 26) and then compose new music specifically for one or more sound gardens in the park. He describes the process as "composing a 3D concert using lots of small speakers, each one playing a different part of a whole piece, with the music constantly changing as a person moves through the space."

James quickly adds that he intends to "bring attention to the sounds that are already happening in that space, whether it's a woodpecker drumming on a tree or a bee flying by. Ultimately, our goal is to connect people more with the local ecology, history and culture, along with fostering a sense of curiosity, discovery and sense of belonging for park visitors."

As with each of his sound garden installations, James will strive to create a one-of-a-kind experience that embodies the uniqueness of Wild River State Park. "I was drawn to the park because it's very intentionally a very quiet place," he says. "At the same time, it's a vast park with many different ecosystems, including woodland, riverine, prairie, oak savanna and wetland. We'll have some tough decisions to make as to where we focus our limited time and resources."

This past autumn James invited members of the Friends group to experience a sound garden demo at the park. One of the attendees was Jan Kozlovsky. "I found it to be a gentle and calming space and a one-of-a-kind musical experience," she recounts.

Specific plans for James' sound gardens are in the development stage and must be approved by the park and DNR. However, you can expect to see details emerging soon. Check the park's events calendar for updates.



Friends of Wild River State Park Membership Options

Thank you for your
membership!

- ☐ **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

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 "Friends of Wild River State Park")
17190 410th St. North Branch, MN 55056

Option 2: Sign up online and use your credit card

FriendsOfWildRiver.org

We will never sell or trade your email address.



**Join or renew your membership today
to help make this work possible!**

Thank you for your support!



In Memory of Duane Fisk

We have received memorial donations from the family and friends of Duane Fisk. Duane was born on property now part of the park and lived in Amador Township. The Board will be giving careful consideration to how best to use these funds to honor Duane's memory.



In addition to supporting the events highlighted in this issue, we donated money to the park this summer toward printing of new maps in color and for summer park programs. We also purchased a "feather flag" to use for EarthFest and a logo table cover to use at our events.



Friends of Wild River State Park

17190 410th St.

North Branch, MN 55056

CANDLELIGHT SKI



JOIN US ON SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8TH

We hope for snow but are prepared for a snowless event.

Find details at friendsofwildriver.org/candlelightski.php

Pancake Breakfast & Annual Meeting



Save the date for

Saturday, March 8th