



FRIENDS OF WILD RIVER STATE PARK

Newsletter



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

Spring 2025



Candlelight Night: Luminaries lined six miles of trails for skiers, snowshoers and walkers.

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Welcome

From the President



As I begin my term as your president, I've been reflecting on our group's past achievements and planning for our future activities.

First, I want to thank past-president Becky Leuer for her leadership. She effectively guided our meetings, keeping us focused and moving forward. I particularly appreciated her ability to maintain progress with a steady pace. I will

strive to be an effective president by building on her methods. I also acknowledge her work in recruiting new and younger members to our board. Their energy and support have been a valuable asset to our events and volunteer efforts. On that note, please join me in welcoming our newest board member, Micki Husnik of North Branch; her term runs until March 2028.

Secondly, I recently spoke with our founding president, Gary Noren, about the group's history. He shared that when he was first elected, the board had a budget of only \$300 and had to work hard to organize the initial events. Our group has since achieved significant fundraising success, placing us in a strong position to fulfill the mission outlined in our group's new Memorandum of Understanding with Wild River State Park. I look forward to using our resources to support the park and the excellent naturalist programs led by Sean Hoppes.

And, finally, I would like to start a discussion about our role and place in the community. During my recent trip to El Salvador, I had a lot of time to think about our good fortune and how others live very different lives. I'd like us all to consider how the group can help and serve the less fortunate through the use of Wild River State Park.

I'm eager to work with all of you as we move forward. Thank you for your continued support and dedication.

Jim McCarthy,
Friends of Wild River State Park President



FriendsOfWildRiver.org



From left to right: board members Jan K., Dave K., Becky L., Jim M., and Pat G. in El Salvador with Habitat for Humanity.



Candlelight Night 2025 arrives with a fresh blanket of snow, creating a winter wonderland for 531 visitors

By Bill Johnson

Photo: New for 2025: a special “sound garden” installation by the park’s artist-in-residence James Everest, whose 3D concert was accompanied by live music performed by a mini-choir.

Seven inches of fresh snow provided a magical backdrop for Candlelight Night on February 8 at Wild River State Park. Started in 1992, our annual wintertime event attracted an estimated 531 individuals who enjoyed a variety of activities, including cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and walking on six miles of candlelit trails.

Participants also enjoyed a blazing bonfire, entertainment by local musician Aubrey Gieske, a raffle drawing for free snowshoes and refreshments.

This year, for the first time, Candlelight Night featured a “sound garden” presented by the park’s new artist-in-residence James (J.G.) Everest. While attendees strolled along a candlelit section of trail, they were treated to a “3D concert” of music, composed by James, playing over a series of small speakers. Complementing the recorded music were live singers as well as poetry and storytelling by Rosetta “Rosie” Peters.

Asked for his impression of Candlelight Night 2025, FWRSP board member Gary Noren responded: “Wow! What a beautiful evening. How do you improve on perfection?”

Event coordinator and FWRSP board member Dave Kozlovsky expressed appreciation for everyone who contributed to the success of Candlelight Night 2025, including Park Supervisor Kris Backlund and staff for plowing roads and parking lots, as well as grooming trails for skiers, walkers, and snowshoers in time for the start of the event. Among the many volunteers were members of the North Branch High School National Honor Society, who along with their advisor, Laura Rothe, set up luminaries and helped with concessions.

The next Candlelight Night is scheduled for Saturday, February 14, 2026.



Tables filled up with hungry and happy attendees.

Highlights from our 2025 Pancake Breakfast and Annual Meeting

By Bill Johnson

Steaming stacks of “famous secret recipe” pancakes satisfied 49 hungry individuals at the Friends of Wild River State Park 2025 Pancake Breakfast and Annual Meeting on March 8. Our team of kitchen volunteers made certain everyone was well fed with organic buttermilk pancakes, maple syrup (tapped at the park!) and savory sausages. The meeting that followed featured enlightening updates, entertaining presentations and special moments.

Park updates: past, present and future

Park staff and FWRSP representatives provided updates on past and future activities, as well as park facilities and natural phenomena. Meeting highlights included:

- Park Supervisor Kris Backlund provided an insider’s look at facility infrastructure, from efforts to control buckthorn to the challenges faced during the past camping season (e.g., electrical and water issues).
- Park naturalist Sean Hoppes shared fascinating phenology from the park, including the return of red-headed woodpeckers, which he hopes to support through oak savanna restoration.
- FWRSP board members detailed Friends financials, projects and activities, including phase one of the new Nature Play Area, which was completed in the fall of 2024.

Special guest speaker: James (J.G.) Everest

The park’s first-ever artist-in-residence, James shared details about the vision and plans for his unique “sound garden” installations at upcoming park events, including Maple Syrup Day (April 5) and EarthFest 2025 (April 26). He even provided a three-dimensional audio demo of the sound garden with help from audience members scattered around the room. Check out James’ Wild River web page (<https://jgeverest.com/wild-river-state-park/>) for a closer look at his intriguing work at the park. Also, go to the Wild River State Park [events calendar](#) for information about when you can experience James’ sound gardens.



Left: Receiving the Wild Friend Award for Duane Fisk, who passed away in August 2024, was his wife Eileen (seated), along with family members (left to right): Carl (grandson), Todd (son), Darrel (son) and Lori (Todd's wife).

Below: Many thanks to our dedicated kitchen crew for feeding – and delighting – the nearly 50 individuals who attended.



Photos by Bill Johnson

Presentation of the Wild Friend award

The meeting's grand finale delivered a truly heartwarming moment! Board member Jan Kozlovsky made a posthumous presentation of the 2025 Wild Friend Award to North Branch resident Duane Fisk, who passed away in August 2024. Mr. Fisk was born and raised on a farm that became part of the park, and the family home's fieldstone foundation stands to this day. The park was "near and dear to his heart throughout his life," according to Mr. Fisk's obituary. Memorial donations made in his honor, totaling more than \$2,000, will be used to enhance the park's visitor experience.

The 2026 Pancake Breakfast and Annual Meeting is scheduled for Saturday, March 14.





Get ready for EarthFest 2025, our annual celebration of spring, set for Saturday, April 26

By Bill Johnson

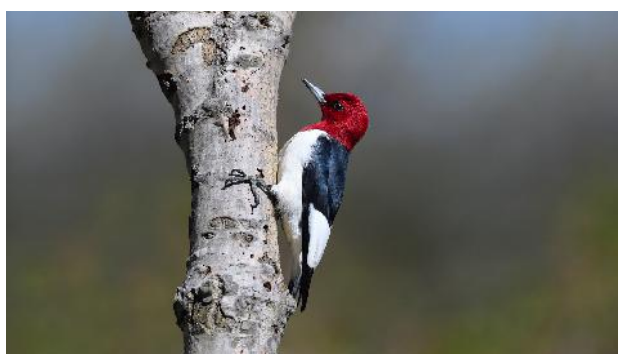
What will be your favorite memory from EarthFest 2025, our annual celebration of spring? Sightings of migratory and resident birds – maybe even the elusive red-headed woodpecker? Experiencing James (J.G.) Everest's one-of-a-kind 3D sound garden? Listening to stories and poetry inspired by the park's oak savannas? Perhaps helping out – hands on – with the ongoing oak savanna restoration?

When you consider all the EarthFest events at Wild River State Park on Saturday, April 26, it's easy to see that great memories will be plentiful. View the full schedule on the next page.

All events are free and open to the public. Better yet, you don't need a vehicle permit to enter the park because April 26 is a FREE park day at all Minnesota state parks. Where else will you find so much fun and education for the whole family...absolutely free of charge? Join us for EarthFest 2025!



Photo by Garin Noren





EarthFest 2025

Wild River State Park

Saturday, April 26 (Free Park Day)



2025 Theme: Restoring Oak Savanna for Red-Headed Woodpeckers.

7:30-9 am Bird Walk Meet at Trail Center

Join Michelle Terrell, vice president of Wild River Audubon, in search of feathered friends. We have binoculars to borrow. Wear good hiking boots.

All programs are
FREE and open to
the public.

9:15-10 am Storytime & Craft Trail Center

Geared toward kids, but adults are welcome! Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes will read a few short books and lead games and activities that celebrate the theme of the day: oak savannas.

10 am-noon Woodpecker Walk & Talk Meet at Trail Center

Caitlyn Jacobson studies red-headed woodpeckers at Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve. We'll join her in a search for this rare woodpecker and discover their connection to oak savannas. The final 30 minutes will be an indoor presentation in the trail center. Wear good hiking boots and long pants. We may go off trail.

12-5 pm Earth Day Sound Garden Outside the Visitor Center

Wild River Artist-in-Residence JG Everest presents a powerful experience for the senses. Each speaker in the sound garden plays a different part of the whole piece of music, so that every step, every turn of the head, every bird song and shifting breeze results in a different mix and arrangement of the music. With live, pop-up performances.

1-2 pm What Fills the Open Space: Savanna Stories Visitor Center
Keynote presentation by poet & essayist Laurie Allmann

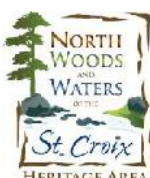
Join Laurie for selected readings, poems and research-based insights illuminating these special places. As a writer, Allmann's sweet spot lies at the intersection of art and science, always with a sense of curiosity and more to learn. Here's a chance to celebrate this globally imperiled native plant community and its restoration here at Wild River State Park.

2-2:15 pm Oak Savanna Restoration at Wild River Visitor Center

Naturalist Sean Hoppes will highlight the restoration efforts at the park. Discover why we are undertaking this project and how you can participate for a single day or as a regular volunteer.

3-5 pm Oak Savanna Stewardship Projects Meet at the Trail Center

Cultivate your own connection to oak savanna. In collaboration with Great River Greening, we will be planting a seed mixture made of 50 species, most of which were carefully hand-collected by volunteers at the park. Wear work clothes, hiking boots, and long pants.



Woodpecker Year at the Park!

By Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes



Red-headed woodpecker at the park in 2024.

In 2024 we celebrated black bears. This year our focus shifts to the lives of woodpeckers. Seven distinct species can be found at Wild River State Park. How many can you name? (See answer at the end of this article).

All woodpeckers share some common characteristics. They use strong beaks to search for food under bark and excavate holes in trees. Their tongues are sticky and so long that they wrap up around their skulls. Most birds have feet with three toes pointing forward and one pointing backward, but woodpeckers are among a small number of birds with “zygodactyl” feet. Having two toes that point forward and two that point backward helps with gripping and climbing trees, an activity that woodpeckers engage in regularly.

An exciting thing happened in 2024. (Spoiler alert, here comes one of the woodpecker names.) Red-headed woodpeckers moved in, and not just one or two, but a colony of 15 to 20. Young birds appeared, so they likely raised offspring in the park! Why is this exciting? Red-headed woodpecker numbers have declined by 95% in Minnesota since 1967.

Wild River is undertaking a 10-acre oak savanna restoration, which happens to be a beloved plant community for red-headed woodpeckers. It's also rare, covering only about 1% of its historic Minnesota range. They nest in dead tree cavities and “fly-catch” insects in the open understory. Next time you come to the park, look for them from the main park road between the trail center and visitor center turnoffs. During the summer, we'll be offering Woodpecker Walk & Talks and evening programs about woodpeckers and oak savannas. These will be on the park's event calendar.



Prescribed burn in the oak savanna in 2024.

Now for the woodpecker names: pileated, yellow-bellied sapsucker, northern flicker, downy, hairy, red-bellied and, of course, red-headed.

Interpretive and Volunteer Programs of 2025

By Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes

Get ready for a wild year at Wild River State Park! We offer various levels of engagement, so if you just want to stop by a nature table to explore a topic for five minutes, do that! If you want to sit in the amphitheater and take in an evening program, great! And if you want to volunteer one time or once a week, we've got jobs for you.

In addition to the Woodpecker Walk & Talks and an evening program about woodpeckers and oak savannas, this year will feature special opportunities. A Half-Moon Paddle will take us down the river at sunset. We'll look for birds on their migrations on several bird walks in late April and early May. Kids will be delighted with guitar songs during story time and nature activities in the new nature play area. Nature stations will provide an opportunity to learn about frogs, mosquitos, microscopic worlds and more in just a few minutes.

In late August and early September, artist-in-residence James (J.G.) Everest will present his culminating work at Wild River through a series of sound gardens, musical walks and other experiences that celebrate curiosity, discovery and belonging.

Volunteer opportunities abound this year. Cut brush out of the understory during our oak savanna restoration volunteer days. Join a team on seed collecting workdays to continue diversifying prairie plant communities. For a longer engagement, become a "species steward" to collect seeds on your own, or join the visitor center host program to facilitate great experiences and learning for those less familiar with the park. In the late fall, enjoy soup and bread inside before cutting invasive species with "Buckthorn Buddies." Training days and single-event opportunities are already posted, so visit the park's event calendar online to find out more.

Scan here to view the Wild River Event Calendar



Naturalist programs offer a closer look at the park!



Buckthorn Buddies getting ready to work!



Evening paddle on the river.





Mark your calendar & RSVP for the St. Croix River clean-up on July 12

By Bill Johnson

Here's a cleaning job anyone can love: our annual St. Croix River clean-up on Saturday, July 12. Why will you love it? Because it involves paddling down the scenic and wild St. Croix from the Sunrise River landing to the main boat landing at Wild River State Park. Plan on an all-day event that typically wraps up around 4 p.m. Here are other key details about the event:

- The event is open to all: FWRSP members and their families, along with anyone else who wants to volunteer.
- Bring your own canoe or kayak, or use one provided by the park.
- You must wear a personal flotation device (life jacket) during the entire event; the park will lend you a PFD if you don't have one.
- Meet at the Wild River boat landing by 9 a.m.; you'll be shuttled to the Sunrise River landing to start our clean-up of the river and its banks.
- We'll stop for lunch about halfway through our route.
- Since we'll be on the river most of the day, bring plenty of water (2 liters recommended), a lunch, sunscreen, bug repellent, a hat, toilet paper and work gloves.
- Dress for the possibility of inclement weather; we go out rain or shine, but will cancel if lightning is present or expected.

Because of limited space in the canoes and shuttle vehicles, it's important to RSVP if you're planning to participate. RSVP by calling or texting Dan Otto at: 763-688-5979.

President's Farewell



It has been my pleasure to serve as the Board President the past few years. As a group we are always looking to assist and enhance opportunities in the park. I am most appreciative of the tremendous job board members do and thankful we have a great park staff that welcomes input and assistance. FWRSP is such a great organization and does many great things. I will continue to serve on the board and help out with events.

Becky Leuer, former Friends of Wild River State Park President



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 _____
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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.



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to help make this work possible!

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EARTHFEST



ST. CROIX RIVER CLEAN-UP



JOIN US ON SATURDAY, APRIL 26TH

Find details at friendsofwildriver.org/earthFest.php

JOIN US ON SATURDAY, JULY 12TH

Find details at friendsofwildriver.org/StCroixCleanup.php