



FRIENDS OF WILD RIVER STATE PARK

Newsletter



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

Winter 2026



Photo by Sean Hoppes

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Welcome

From the President



At the end of November, I went on my first snowshoe trek of the season through the pasture at our farm, which is located close to Wild River State Park. It was great to see the fresh snow and get back into our traditional winter routines. I enjoyed trekking through the fields and navigating the deep drifts while our dog, Marvel, followed along, hunting for field mice beneath the snow.

The new snow made me think about all the wonderful winter activities available at the park for people of all ages to enjoy. This includes our upcoming Candlelight Night (Feb. 14), giving you the opportunity to ski, hike or snowshoe, depending on your preference and conditions, on six magical miles of candlelit trails. (For more details, see the Candlelight Night article in this issue.)

Speaking of trails, Wild River State Park boasts one of the largest – and most varied – cross-country skiing operations in Minnesota, according to Minnesota Trails magazine. Our trails range from the easy Logging Trail to the thrilling Highland Hills Loops...something for skiers of all abilities.

As I write this in early December, all signs are pointing to a great winter season. Let it snow, snow, snow – and let's get out and enjoy it while we can (spring will be here before you know it!).

Jim McCarthy,
Friends of Wild River State Park President



FriendsOfWildRiver.org



Vehicle permits and free park days

Reminder: Minnesota state park vehicle permits are required if you're driving to events at Wild River State Park. However, there will be four statewide "free park days" throughout 2026: Jan. 19 (MLK Day), April 25 (Saturday after Earth Day), June 13 and Nov. 27 (Black Friday).



Feelings about WRSP? The ‘Love Tree’ tells all!

If you stepped inside the Wild River State visitor center in 2025, you probably noticed a tree decorated with multi-colored leaves. And, if you took a closer look at those leaves, you saw that they contained notes – love notes. The “Love Tree,” which provided insights for JG Everest’s yearlong MNPAIR Artist Residency, gave visitors the opportunity to answer the question: “What do you love about Wild River State Park?” You’ll find some of the notes scattered throughout this issue of the FWRSP newsletter.



Embrace winter at Candlelight Night, Feb. 14

An enchanting experience awaits you at our 2026 Candlelight Night, Saturday, Feb. 14, on six miles of luminary-lit trails at Wild River State Park! The Friends event, scheduled for 6 to 9 p.m., will include opportunities for skiers, snowshoers and hikers.

“This is a joyful event!” exclaims FWRSP board member Jeske Noordegraaf, who has been participating in Candlelight Night since its inception. “People come from all over to hike, snowshoe or ski, as well as to partake in other activities such as looking through a telescope at the star-filled sky, warming up by the bonfire, listening to live music, entering a raffle drawing for snowshoes and enjoying refreshments.”

“So many people are involved in creating this memorable event,” adds Jeske, “including North Branch Honor Society students, FWRSP volunteers and park staff. Anyone who wants to help out should contact Dave Kozlovsky (davejankoz@gmail.com).”

Note: A Great Minnesota Ski Pass is required for skiers age 16 and up; cost is \$10 for a one-day pass and \$25 for an annual pass. You can buy a pass online at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/skiing/skipass/index.html> or at the ranger station.



OTTER TROTTER 5K



Photos by Bill Johnson

Impressive records set at 2025 Otter Trotter 5K

The 2025 edition of our Otter Trotter 5K run/walk was noteworthy for TWO record-setting performances. First was the turnout: 84 participants, surpassing the previous total of 79 in 2015 (Great job, everyone!) Second was the fastest course time set by Cody A., clocking in at 18 minutes, 5 seconds. By the way, Cody beat his own 2024 record of 18:32!

Not to be outdone, Mother Nature impressed everyone – runners, walkers, spectators, staff and volunteers – with amazing weather, accentuated by the emerging autumn colors. Also, we cannot overlook the fabulous contributions of our dedicated FWRSP volunteers and hardworking park staff. What surprises will the 2026 Otter Trotter bring? Find out for yourself on Saturday, Oct. 10!



Following are the top three Otter Trotter finishers, along with their times, in each gender/age group:

Ages 0-11 (male/female)

- 1st. Gage R. 23:48
- 2nd. Jonah B. 44:12
- 3rd. Daniel A. 44:22



Ages 12-30 (male)

- 1st. Cody A. 18:05
- 2nd. Owen W. 22:06
- 3rd. Noah B. 22:08

Ages 12-30 (female)

- 1st. Cailyn K. 22:14
- 2nd. Anna B. 29:19
- 3rd. Kayla F. 31:56

Ages 31-45 (male)

- 1st. Victor G. 26:31
- 2nd. Steve S. 26:46
- 3rd. Josh M. 28:58

Ages 31-45 (female)

- 1st. Sara K. 26:31
- 2nd. Nina W. 28:24
- 3rd. Marlene G. 28:39

Ages 46-60 (male)

- 1st. Rahn H. 23:13
- 2nd. Mike B. 29:35
- 3rd. Jeff A. 31:22

Ages 46-60 (female)

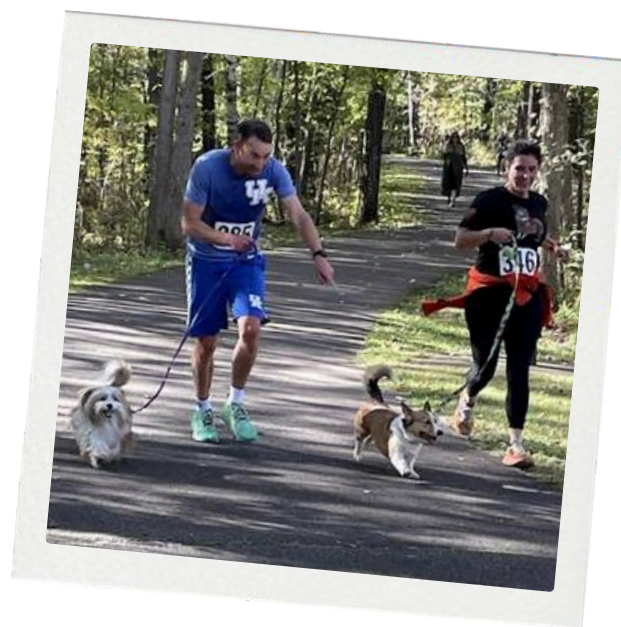
- 1st. Noreen H. 29:44
- 2nd. Kristen A. 38:19
- 3rd. Wendy W. 39:59

Ages 61+ (male)

- 1st. Josef K. 28:13
- 2nd. Tom H. 34:00
- 3rd. Rob T. 35:11

Ages 61+ (female)

- 1st. Kathy S. 44:10
- 2nd. Sandy H. 47:00
- 3rd. Pat O. 51:36





Photos courtesy of JG Everest / Wavelets Creative

An event for the ages: Festival of Belonging in review

One of the top highlights of the past summer/fall season was Festival of Belonging, held four weekends in August and September. This multisensory event was the culminating project of composer JG Everest’s yearlong MNPAiR Artist Residency at Wild River State Park.

Festival of Belonging consisted of 45 site-specific performance installations in several areas of the park. Each weekend featured a different lineup of music, dance, storytelling, nature walks and presentations for visitors of all ages – from JG’s signature sound gardens in a variety of settings and arrangements to programs on bugs, birds and snakes.

Friends of Wild River State Park sponsored many of the guest artists and presenters, including Heather Holm (author and pollinator conservationist) and Andrea Karpenski (yoga teacher).

A total of 2,191 visitors attended festival events over the four weekends. Here are a few of the many positive reviews we received:

“Thanks for making the forest sing with joy and peace.”

“I love how the sound just becomes a part of nature. Just mind blowing.”

“Raised my spirit today.”

FWRSP wishes to thank JG and his collaborators, as well as park staff, for bringing this unique event to our special corner of the wild world.





Water colors workshop in
Visitor Center Sound Garden



Lisa Yankton shares her poem
at the Amador Prairie.



Walking Into The Woods
Storytelling Walks with
Rosetta Peters



Fire in the Village crafting

View additional photos at waveletscreative.org/festival-of-belonging-photo-gallery/

To hunt or not to hunt?

By Park Supervisor Kris Backlund

Wild River State Park held a resource management firearms deer hunt November 8th and 9th, 2025. The park was closed to all non-hunters during the hunt. Normally, state parks are designated game refuges, so these special hunts are only set up after several factors are carefully considered. Although we have not done an aerial deer count recently, we look at factors such as browse evidence, observed deer density, and concerns of neighboring landowners, to name a few. We may think deer browse mostly on woody vegetation, but they will also consume herbaceous plants, without much discernment! In 2025, extra consideration was given to the presence of deer that tested positive for chronic wasting disease (CWD) in areas within 15-20 miles of the park. The closest CWD-positive deer were in Wisconsin, but deer can and do cross rivers. So even though hunts were held at the park in 2023 and 2024, another hunt was scheduled this year to evaluate the possible presence of CWD.

Staff from the DNR Division of Fish and Wildlife were onsite both days of the hunt, collecting lymph nodes from harvested deer in the daylight and dark, in pleasant weather and howling wind. I am happy to report that most results are in, and no deer tested positive for CWD.

Some other facts from the hunt. Seventy-seven permits were issued, with 70 hunters actually participating. Sixteen hunters from Ojibwe bands participated in the hunt. A total of 67 deer, 30 of them bucks, were harvested. The largest bucks were 17 and 14 points. Hunters were required to use non-toxic ammunition. Approximately 250 hours of staff time were devoted to the hunt between park and Wildlife staff.



To answer the question in the title, there are important reasons why resource management deer hunts are conducted. Hunters appreciate the opportunity to hunt in a unique setting. On the other hand, those who love to visit the park to look for deer probably oppose hunting in this setting. Animals that benefit from gut piles left after the hunt get an easier meal. For me, in my heart, I love the deer (especially the fawns!), but in my head, I know there are benefits to these hunts and the reasons for holding the hunts are determined to benefit the deer herd and the park. How would you answer: to hunt or not to hunt?

May 2: EarthFest 2026 kicks off ‘Bat Year’

by Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes

EarthFest turns 43 this year. This founding event of Friends of Wild River State Park has changed shape and name through the decades, yet its core mission remains the same. It celebrates spring, connects people with each other and unleashes our innate curiosity about the natural world.



What’s new this year? It’s happening on Saturday, May 2 (vs. late April in previous years). As a result, the early bird walk will be a “welcome home” party for warblers arriving from tropical lands. Also, we’re trying out a “festival style” arrangement for our morning activities (9 a.m. to noon) in the trail center and visitor center areas. This year’s theme is “bat conservation and forest stewardship.” DNR bat expert Melissa Boman will run one of the stations. Pick up a snack, get a stamp on your “bat passport” and move on to other stations, which include:

- Forest scavenger hunt
- Kids crafts and activities
- Making buckthorn walking sticks
- Earning a “throwback patch” (for the retired Junior Naturalist Hardwoods program)



Participants who show their completed bat passport can earn a prize – their choice of a tree or shrub donated by the Chisago County Soil and Water Conservation District. A special lunchtime concert, from noon to 1 p.m., will cap off our morning activities. Finally, from 1 to 2:30 p.m., attendees who feel inspired to help the park can participate in stewardship projects.

Making WRSP part of ‘aging well’

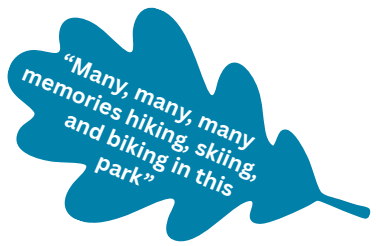
The recipe for “aging well” should include regular visits to Wild River State Park! Hopefully, that’s the message we conveyed at the annual Age Well Expo held Oct. 17 at Chisago Lakes High School. This year’s theme: “Aging Reimagined: Looking at Aging Through a New Lens.”

Expo attendees, including older adults and caregivers, stopped by the Friends of Wild River State Park booth to learn about our group, as well as Friends-sponsored activities and the park’s naturalist programs. Many expressed their familiarity with, and love for, the park, while others said they weren’t acquainted with the park at all.



Year in review: 2025 naturalist and volunteer programs

By Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes



How do you measure a year at Wild River State Park?

In numbers?

- 8,600 visitors attended 244 naturalist programs.
- 101 volunteers contributed 1,500 hours to park activities.
- 83 species of prairie plants donated their seeds to less-diverse areas of the park.
- 61 Eastern Bluebirds fledged from carefully monitored bird houses.

In experiences?

- Volunteers engaged with visitors, removed invasive species, collected seeds from prairie plants and assisted with special events.
- A magical Candlelight Night occurred in the wake of a massive snowstorm that ended just a few hours before the event.
- Hundreds of visitors played the “woodpecker game,” testing their skills with fake beaks to remove fake bugs from a log.

In feelings?

- Gratitude for volunteer enthusiasm.
- Joy of seeing Red-headed Woodpeckers for the first time.
- Worry that rain will leak into a tent.
- Peacefulness of quiet spaces and the flowing river sounds.
- Surprise at an unexpected deer sighting.
- Trust that the sun will rise over the river valley again and again.

In pictures?



A Red-headed Woodpecker



The northern lights put on several magnificent shows in the dark skies over the park



Yellow lady slippers

Cozy up to a good read at the ‘Book Nook’

The next time you stop by the Wild River State Park visitor center, check out the “Book Nook,” and maybe enjoy a good read while warming up by the wood stove. Chances are, your selected title will be from the collection of nature books donated to the park in memory of Barb Ledbetter Nelson.

Barb’s legacy...

Barb’s deep passion for the park culminated in her desire to establish a Friends group. Joining her in this effort were Bill Carlson and Gary Noren, with support from then-park manager Chuck Kartak. Following the group’s founding, Barb served as our secretary for many years.



After Barb’s passing, her husband Stan Nelson donated her extensive collection of nature and natural history books to the park. On March 28, 2009, the Book Nook was dedicated in her honor. Board members Dennis Johnson and Tessa Hill donated lumber for the shelving, and Barb’s collection was supplemented by children’s books purchased at Scout & Morgan Books in Cambridge.

With the remodeling of the visitor center, the Book Nook was moved from one side of the room to the other. But one thing remains constant: Barb’s legacy as a lover of books and Wild River State Park. By the way, if you can’t get through your selected book in one sitting, you can check it out...just like you would at the library.



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!

Come hungry to the Pancake Breakfast and Annual Meeting on March 14

Dreaming about made-from-scratch buttermilk pancakes? Hungry for details about Wild River State Park and FWRSP happenings – past, present and future? Then you won't want to miss our 2026 Pancake Breakfast and Annual Meeting on Saturday, March 14, from 9 to 11 a.m., at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Almelund, MN. The event is open and free to everyone (bring a friend!).

At 9 a.m. we'll kick things off with a scrumptious breakfast, consisting of our "famous secret recipe" buttermilk pancakes, served with homemade maple syrup tapped from Wild River State Park's sugar bush, accompanied by fresh sausage, coffee and juice.



Following the breakfast at 10:00, the Annual Meeting will include a review of FWRSP 2025 programs and initiatives, a look ahead to plans for the rest of 2026, reports from the FWRSP board and park staff, presentation of the annual "Wild Friend" award and a brief program featuring a special guest speaker (to be announced).

If you're a current FWRSP member, you may renew your annual membership at the event or anytime online. Non-members will be given the opportunity to become FWRSP members, although it is not required for attending the event.

The church is located at 37515 Park Trail in Almelund. Please enter the building via the side door off Maple Lane.



Friends of Wild River State Park

17190 410th St.
North Branch, MN 55056

Join us for maple syrup season in 2026!

By Park Naturalist Sean Hoppes

This coming spring, Wild River State Park visitors will have two options for discovering the Minnesota tradition of maple syruping:

Hands-on Homemade Maple Syrup programs (March 21 and 28 and April 4) take participants through the experiences of identifying trees, tapping, collecting, boiling and tasting. By the end, many feel knowledgeable enough to try it out at home! Registration is required.

For our Maple Syrup Day (April 11), about 10 stations are set up to explore all aspects of the maple syruping process. Grab a maple syrup passport, and take your family and friends on a journey to the ultimate goal: your favorite grade of maple syrup drizzled over ice cream. No registration required.

Programs are free, and details can be found by scanning the QR code above.



Visitors participate in a Homemade Maple Syrup program.

