

Dept. of Natural Resources: Announces Wisconsin State Park System Friends Group Of The Year and Volunteer awards winners

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MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) congratulates the winners of the 2025 Wisconsin State Park System Friends Group of the Year and Volunteer Awards.

The annual awards recognize Friends Groups and volunteers who provide extraordinary service and demonstrate dedication to protecting the natural resources and enhancing the visitor experience at a Wisconsin State Park System property or work unit.

“It’s important for us to celebrate the many accomplishments achieved over the last year thanks to the hard work of our volunteers and Friends Groups,” said Steve Schmelzer, DNR parks and recreation management director. “All of this year’s nominees have demonstrated a commitment to ensuring our public lands are enjoyed for generations to come.”

Award recipients are nominated by Wisconsin State Park System staff. A panel of judges then reviews the nomination materials and selects the award winners. All winners receive a wooden plaque in recognition of the honor.

The 2025 winners are:

Friends Group Of The Year Award

Friends of Interstate and Straight Lake State Parks: The Friends of Interstate and Straight Lake State Parks were instrumental to the success of the Interstate Park 125th anniversary celebration on Sept. 20, 2025. In addition to continuing to keep the property's Ice Age Center open year-round and selling merchandise to generate funds to support projects and services, the Friends of Interstate and Straight Lake State Parks also made numerous contributions to the anniversary event. This included creating signage, funding a scenic riverboat tour, providing two shuttle service vehicles to transport visitors around the event and presenting programs on natural journaling, Wisconsin's fur trade and the history of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) at the property.

The Friends are genuinely passionate and dedicated to Interstate and Straight Lake state parks. They have contributed endless volunteer hours and are enthusiastic while sharing information with visitors, creating a memorable and positive visitor experience. The Friends of Interstate and Straight Lake State Parks went above and beyond in the last year to support the property and staff - especially during their big anniversary.

Volunteer Award

John Davies, Bong Naturalist Association

During John Davies' first year volunteering at the Richard Bong State Recreation Area, he stood out immediately as someone who took initiative to complete any project he felt was within his skill set. He quickly became recognized as a jack-of-all-trades, accomplishing any and all maintenance projects. John is also a Wisconsin Master Naturalist and Wisconsin Bat Ambassador and has piloted bat conservation initiatives at the property, including installing and maintaining several bat houses and starting a bat monitoring program. At the beginning of 2025, John stepped into the role of president for the Bong Naturalist Association (BNA) - also known as the Friends of Richard Bong State Recreation Area. Over the course of the year, John has proven to be an exceptional president for the Friends Group, making strong efforts to help ensure the DNR and the BNA are working collaboratively. John continues to find time to accomplish hands-on projects while humbly balancing many hours of administrative work. In 2025 alone, John gave over 550 hours of volunteer time to the property.

Congratulations to the 2025 award recipients for their dedication to protecting and

enhancing the Wisconsin State Park System's natural resources.

Every year, Friends Groups and volunteers provide thousands of service hours to help support the mission and activities at Wisconsin State Park System properties. Learn more about [becoming a volunteer with the Wisconsin State Park System](#) and find current [volunteer openings](#).

Throughout Wisconsin, 63 Friends Groups support 68 properties. If you are interested in becoming a friend of a particular property, please see the list of official Friends Groups on the [DNR website](#).