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Friends of the St. Croix Wetland MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

Blazing Star

Newsletter for the Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District

Welcome to the Blazing Star, the newsletter for Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District. Stay up to date on our current projects and events while learning about conservation and management efforts, endangered species, and habitat restoration.

Let's come together to protect our precious local flora and fauna.

From the Desk of the President

Hello Friends and Fellow Conservationists!

Each fall, the green canopy on the overhead framework of branches fades, bringing about a bounty of gold, orange, and red. Our trees will release these colorful leaves, conserving moisture and energy for the oncoming cold of winter. The falling canopy is more than scenery; it is part of a cycle that protects the tree and nourishes the land. Leaf litter shelters insects, fungi, and small wildlife, insulates roots, retains moisture, and slowly returns nutrients to the soil. This annual process is part of the tree's stewardship to itself, the land, and to us.

Meanwhile, fall blooms and seed pods are preparing pollinators and birds for their fall missions before frost. Our native plant species are equally vital as the trees. These seeds also ensure a return next year.

Fall reminds us that abundance and letting go belong together. Seeds scatter, birds depart, and bare branches prepare for a coming renewal. Conserving these natural rhythms protects tomorrow's beauty and bounty. For all our technology, schedules, obligations, and priorities this season, hit pause now and then to soak in the wonder around you, and ponder your part.

Brian Headlee, *President, Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District*

FSCWMD is a 501(c)3 non-profit associated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thank you to all who contributed to this issue, including Brian Headlee, Tony Hill, Cheryl Johnson, Larry Keller, Tom Lindfors, Will Mahler, Tracy Ronnander, Greg Scheder, Chris Trosen, and . Created and edited by Jean Gfall, Anthony Howe, Charlotte Nicholes, Allison Salas, and Greg Scheder.

Acting Project Leader's Corner

2026 Volunteer Season Recap

By Chris Trosen, Acting Project Leader



The 2026 volunteer season for the St. Croix Wetland Management District was truly something special. It was a year filled with growth, creativity, and a real sense of community. Even with fewer staff on hand, our volunteers didn't just fill the gaps; they brought their own ideas, skills, and energy, stepping into leadership roles that moved our mission forward in meaningful ways.

All told, volunteers gave more than 5,400 hours of their time this year, and remarkably, we made it through the entire season without a single injury. That speaks directly to the care, awareness, and dedication of everyone involved. Our expanded partnership with Wild Rivers Conservancy brought four interns into the fold, and their enthusiasm and willingness to learn made a noticeable difference in our fieldwork, monitoring, and outreach efforts.

The Seed Farm Program had another strong year, too, hosting 22 events and making great progress toward a native seed harvest valued at nearly $100,000. Across the district, interns and volunteers played a role in nearly every corner of our work: seed collection, wildlife surveys, invasive species control, hydrology projects, facility upkeep, and educational programs.





Photo Credits this page: Chris Trosen

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Volunteer of the Year — Mike Roberts

By Chris Trosen, Acting Project Leader

This year, we're especially proud to recognize Mike Roberts as our 2026 Volunteer of the Year. Mike quietly became one of the most dependable and versatile people on our team. He took on a series of small but important electrical projects that made a big difference in how safe and functional our office and shop feel. From installing the MOTUS tower to renovating the lighting system in the fire cache and upgrading indoor and outdoor lighting, Mike's work helped brighten, literally and figuratively, our everyday operations.



Photo Courtesy of Tracy Ronnander

On top of that, he pitched in with mowing at the office and shop and helped keep equipment running smoothly. Whatever the task, Mike showed up with reliability, problem-solving know-how, and a can-do attitude that made every project feel doable. His contributions strengthened our work in so many ways and truly embody the spirit of service we're grateful to have in this district.

As we look back on the year, I want to extend a sincere and heartfelt thank-you to everyone who shared their time, skills, and enthusiasm with us. Everything we accomplished in 2026 was possible because of you. And once again, congratulations to Mike. Your dedication made a lasting impact, and we're grateful to have you as part of our community.

Volunteer Corner — Grasshoppers, Doubt, and Why I Show Up Anyway

By Cheryl Johnson, Volunteer



Photo Courtesy of Cheryl Johnson

I'll start with this confession: I don't love nature. I was the fair-skinned, not-athletic kid who spent my time at the library and being afraid of grasshoppers. I grew into an adult who preferred a nice view through a window or a trip to the farmer's market over time on my knees in the dirt.

Then my husband and I built a house on a lot that was part Minnesota prairie natives and part Minnesota prairie invasives. I thought I'd signed on for "no more lawn mower." True, but I hadn't understood the responsibility we'd taken on—or the opportunity in front of me.

What did I honestly know about what was growing near our house? Plants in our landscaper's seed mix.

Neighbors offered advice, but I needed a different kind of mentoring: people who could help me understand how a healthy prairie actually works and give me the confidence to make a plan for our own land that wouldn't kill me.

Now, I spend many Tuesday nights with Alex and Jean and a crew of dedicated seed collectors looking for just wild lupine or just prairie smoke For those two hours, we collect whatever's decided it's time to seed. It's a deep dive into one plant at a time, and I leave for home feeling like I'm starting to kinda get it.

Every week, I'm reminded that healthier prairies can be built one healthy plant at a time. How does this change what I do when I'm back home and on my own in the natural world? Rather than worry about perfection, I get the honest-to-goodness bully plants out of the way to make room for the ones that belong, whether or not they are my "favorite" plants or if they're appearing in just the right spot. Every week, I'm reminded that healthier prairies can be built one healthy plant at a time.

This is a completely new mindset for me. I've traded how a piece of land should look for what makes it healthiest. And now, when I collect and scatter little bluestem seeds at home, mostly in the spots that used to belong to bullies, I know that I might not see results for years. But it still matters. With whatever pops up (literally) week to week, month to month, I'm learning.

So, even after hours at the seed farm—and covering every inch of my own property with the same attention I give on Tuesday nights—I still can't call myself a nature person." But when I head into the field wearing my ridiculous prairie suit of armor (gloves, sunscreen, tick gear, hat, bandana), the grasshoppers don't bother me while I watch bees land on the anise hyssop, or when I'm taking on a sea of Canada thistle.
I didn't expect to ever have any kind of real relationship with nature, but now I show up the same way I would for a good friend.

Seasons of Wild Enters the Homestretch

By Tom Lindfors

We are entering the homestretch for the Friends' inaugural "Seasons of Wild" photography contest. If you are still considering shooting and entering images, please submit them by midnight, October 31. Go to www.fscwmd.org/photocontest to enter.

To recap, during its inaugural season, the contest, which began on January 1, 2026, hosted three workshops, Winter Photography, Naturescapes, and Flower Photography, and two Walk & Talks, Bird Photography Walk & Talk and Migration Photography Walk &Talk. Although attendance at the first three workshops was sparse, it picked up considerably for the two recent "walk and talks."

Thanks go to all the contest committee members, Jean Gfall, Jean Maher, Charlotte Nicholes, Mark Ritzinger, and Tom Lindfors, who have done a terrific job working together to prepare, promote, and present these educational events.

This final month and a half will provide some of the best photo opportunities of the contest. The fall migration will see not only waterfowl but also songbirds grouping up in late September and throughout October, in preparation for the long journey south, providing plenty of photo ops on the WPAs. This summer's dry conditions seem likely to impact fall colors, so be prepared to get out there now. As the foliage begins to disappear, exposure increases, revealing.



still more opportunities to photograph even the most elusive wildlife.

The dry conditions also emphasize the importance of water, so every pothole and drainage basin will be a good bet to find wildlife. Stake out a WPA basin close to you and see what turns up

We're excited to see what you saw. Enter your best photos now. Good luck!



Photo Credits this page: Tom LIndfors

Spotlight: Veteran's Goose Hunt 2026

by Greg Scheder



Photo Credit: Larry Keller



Photo Credit: Tony Hill



Photo Credit: Larry Keller

This year, the Friends of the St Croix Wetland Management District, in partnership with Troy Hill and The Fallen Outdoors, hosted the third Veteran's Goose Hunt. Basing the hunt once again at the handicap-accessible blind on Erickson WPA, this year's hunt was a success.

The program hosted three hunters each day, two from the Army, two from the Navy, and two from the Air Force on September 18 and 20. Each day started with coffee and donuts from the Busy Bee in New Richmond, a safety talk from guide Larry Keller, and a talk from Wisconsin Conservation Law Enforcement Officer Chuck Wincek. Then off to the blind, as everything was set and ready to go. The Friday hunt ended before 9:00 a.m. Everyone had reached their third limit, which was fortunate, as the rain moved in shortly after.

While waterfowl hunting is frequently pursued regardless of weather conditions, it was nice not having to dry out afterward. The hunters then moved on to a late breakfast at the Not Justa Café as well as banter and stories, some from the hunt, and some from their time in the service. Day 2 was also a success, although the hunt lasted a little longer due to slightly more challenging conditions. Again, the group moved on to the Wild Badger for lunch and after-hunt chatter. The Friends thanked all participants for their service. We also wish to thank our partners and their organizations, Chuck Wincek and Troy Hill, for their support, as well as the donations from Willow River Rod and Gun, Star Prairie Fish & Game, and Johnson Motors.

Conservation Corner: Recipe for a Healthy Wetland

By Will Mahler Volunteer and FSCWMD Member



Photo Courtesy of Will Mahler

Picture your favorite wetland and its richness of sights, sounds, and smells. I can easily imagine one of my favorites, maybe it is one of yours as well? Located on Oak Ridge South WPA it epitomizes a shallow prairie pothole; the undulating landscape of low ridges and depressions gives way to a long shallow lake alive with wildlife. Its occupants change with the seasons from the first passing flocks of divers and dabblers of spring to the raucous nonbreeding sandhills and trumpeters of summer and the passing shorebirds of fall. It seems to continually team with life from spring through fall. But like many wetlands in our area of Wisconsin this summer the water seemed to recede more and more, as the drought continued on and on. Finally, by the end of August what was once a crystal-clear prairie pothole was sun-baked mud!

It is understandable to be concerned. It can often feel downright depressing to see our favorite wetland gems turned into dry mud holes. But this is all part of Mother Nature's plan! Since their formation by the last glaciers, prairie potholes have evolved not only to withstand drought but also to thrive in its aftermath. Drought acts as a productivity reset button. It solidifies bottom sediment, increases water clarity, and promotes the germination of many productive emergent wetland plants that wildlife depends on. It also has the added benefit of eliminating fish, which act as predators and severely affect the availability of certain wetland invertebrate populations that are crucial to the productivity of waterfowl and other wetland birds. So next time you drive by a drought-stricken prairie pothole, take a closer look! That dry mudflat may be sprouting next summer's crop of food for wildlife, and the shallow mudflats themselves may be teaming with all sorts of wildlife, from herons and egrets to passing sandpipers and various teal. Take a deep breath, drought is all part of Mother Nature's recipe for wetland success!



Photo Credit: Greg Scheder

Conservation Day on the WPA 2026

By Greg Scheder

This year marked the 15th year that the District and the Friends have partnered with Scouting America's Northern Star Council for the annual Conservation Day. 15 years! Chris Trosen and the Scouts from Somerset Pack and Troop launched this program with 20-25 participants. Back in those days, it was invasive species eradication. Fast forward to today, and on October 4th, partnering with Scouting America's (formerly Boy Scouts of America) Northern Star Council, 100 Scouts and Scouters, along with 30–35 Friends members and volunteers, grabbed buckets and set out across the prairie in search of late-season seed.

I've been fortunate to have participated in every Conservation Day other than 2025. It has been amazing to watch the growth of this event. From that humble beginning in 2011, this event demonstrates the eagerness of volunteers from various backgrounds supporting conservation efforts. Like the St Croix Wetland Management District and its mission, Conservation Day has evolved to meet the changing needs of conservation efforts. Starting with invasive species, the event pivoted to milkweed seed collection in 2016–2017, in response to the monarch butterfly population decline at that time. Today, the collection focus is much more sophisticated. The writing was on the wall: change the program as needed.



Photo Credit: Greg Scheder

Today, Conservation Day focuses on targeted seed collection efforts. Under the direction of Alex Bouthilet, Seed Farm Manager, after a program day overview, the volunteers spread out across the prairie in search of round-headed bush clover, purple prairie clover, white prairie clover, yellow coneflower, culver's root, and golden alexander. Volunteers collected until 11:30, broke for a hotdog lunch, and were back in the field until 2:00 pm.

It was a great event; the rain held off for the most part, and a large amount of seed was collected. How much? That we won't know until later this year or early 2027, after Alex and Jean Gfall and their volunteers have cleaned and sorted this year's collection. But the public seed repository we support will continue to support public lands. This year, much of the effort will focus on restoring 30 acres at Freedom Park in New Richmond. Conservation Day's volunteers' impact spans many boundaries, including local communities, District properties, and the National Park Service in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, as with all conservation efforts.

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Conservation Day on the WPA 2026, continued



Photo Credit: Chris Trosen



Photo Credit: Greg Scheder



Photo Credit: Greg Scheder

Calendar of Upcoming Events

31 Oct, Sat All day PHOTO CONTEST–LAST ENTRY DAY All Waterfowl Production Areas, District 3

6 Nov, Fri 6:30 – 8:30 pm Owl Prowl Event Prairie Flats South WPA, 2241 80th St., New Richmond, WI 54017 – Please note this location is north of Somerset, WI, but is in the New Richmond mailing area.

11 Nov, Wed 6 – 7:30 pm Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District Meeting 1764 95th St, New Richmond, WI 54017, USA

9 Dec, Wed 6 – 7:30 pm Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District Meeting 1764 95th St, New Richmond, WI 54017, USA

9 Jan, Sat All day Tentative Winter Walk - please see details tbd.

13 Jan, Wed 6 – 7:30 pm Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District Meeting 1764 95th St, New Richmond, WI, 54017, USA

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How to get involved

1. Volunteer

We're always looking for volunteers to help with our conservation projects and events.
Contact us by emailing **StCroix@fws.gov** or visiting our website (link below) to learn more.

2. Upcoming Events

The Friends Group holds monthly meetings at the headquarters office on the first Wednesday of every month, 6 pm. See our calendar for more events!

3. Donate

Your donations help support our conservation efforts and make a difference. All donations to the Friends of the St. Croix Wetland Management District are 100% Tax-Deductible. Donate here through **PayPal**.

4. Follow Us

Please stay up to date on our latest projects and events by following us on social media. Find us on **Facebook,** join our email list, and check out our website (link below).

Thank you to our many partners!
For more information on our partners, please visit **fscwmd.org**.

FriendsOfTheStCroixWetlandManagementDistrict