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PARKS AND RECREATION

The magazine of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association



Focus on  
Forest Preserves,  
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& Nature



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## FROM THE EDITOR

The protection of open space is absolutely a group effort.

These areas, which provide us so many benefits, are a cornerstone of what makes Illinois such an amazing place to live.

Not only are there monetary benefits to securing and maintaining open space, such as increased property value and tax revenue, but there are also opportunities to use these spaces to improve the mental and physical health of residents and visitors.

As I've mentioned before, I am always looking for new trails and adventures to embark upon, and Illinois is loaded with so many opportunities for all of us to get outside and experience the greatness this state can offer. This past year has shown me just how motivated our communities can be once they realize the treasures they have right outside their door.

I'm excited for this issue because we have some fantastic articles looking in-depth at the work being done to make sure these beautiful locations are there for generations to come. Not only will we look at the work our conservation districts and forest preserve districts are doing, but we will also explore what being outdoors can do for your mind, body and soul.

With the retention of Open Space Land Acquisition and Development funding, there are more opportunities than ever to take advantage of the beautiful environments spread throughout Illinois. I look forward to seeing what agencies across Illinois do now that restrictions have been lifted.

On page 12, you'll find *Saving the Sand Savanna*, looking at a crucial project being tackled by the Forest Preserve District of Will County. On page 16, learn more about how agencies differ but can also work together in *Forest Preserves, Park Districts & Conservation Districts: Partners in Resiliency*. In *Creating a Conservation District* on page 22, we learn how the Boone County Conservation District came to fruition. Finally, on page 26, Jo Burns explores the benefits to engaging outdoors with *Mother Nature is Calling... Are you Going to Pick Up or Send Her to Voice Mail?*

Go visit one of the many amazing outdoor areas this state offers before summer ends and take a moment to appreciate the beautiful land we've preserved for generations to come!

— Wayne Utterback, Editor

### COVER PHOTO:

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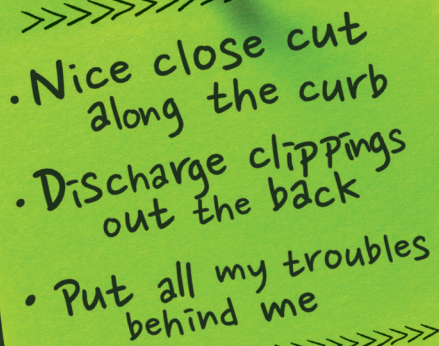
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## PEOPLE & PLACES



### Dan Leahy New Executive Director at WDSRA

The Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (WDSRA) has announced **Dan Leahy** as executive director. Dan has served in local government for the past 15 years with experience in various roles at the Schaumburg Park District, the Bolingbrook Park District, the Bolingbrook Park

District and the City of Elmhurst. He also has experience in the private sector as a marketing/communications professional. Most recently, as part of the Fox Valley Park District's executive team, he led the marketing/communications/business development efforts and has served as a board member at the Fox Valley Special Recreation Association.

He is a graduate of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and recently earned his master's in public administration from Aurora University.



### Beckie Korzyniewski New Executive Director at WSRA

**Beckie Korzyniewski** was recently selected as the new executive director for the Warren Special Recreation Association (WSRA) in Gurnee.

Korzyniewski assumed the position on June 16, 2021. She joins the WSRA agency with 20 plus years of experience in the parks and recreation field. A native of

Wisconsin, she graduated from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse with a degree in recreation management/business in 1998. Soon after graduating, Beckie began her career as a recreation supervisor with the Gurnee Park District in 1999.

After spending 10 years with the Gurnee Park District, she expanded her experience serving as the assistant manager at the Patty Turner Center with the Deerfield Park District, assistant superintendent of recreation with the Glencoe Park District, upon returning to the Gurnee Park District in 2015 to fulfill the position of manager of recreation and facilities.



### Brenda Zeck Announces Retirement

**Brenda Zeck**, executive director of the Warren Special Recreation Association (WSRA), announced her retirement as of June 18, 2021. Brenda's 32-year career in therapeutic recreation has included 25 years at WSRA, and also the roles of recreation specialist

and manager of program support at Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA).

With the assistance of Warren Township, WSRA was able to move their administrative offices to a larger building which provides much needed program space for its ever popular adult day program. In addition, she took the lead in forming a 501 (c)(3), Friends of the Warren Special Recreation Association which assists in providing scholarships and program supplies.

The most recent committees that Brenda was involved in were the PACE Suburban ADA Advisory Committee, the PDRMA Wellness Committee and the IPRA Legislative and Advocacy Committee.



### In Memoriam

*Illinois Parks & Recreation* magazine extends its condolences to the family and friends of Robbins Park District Board President **Maurice Nesbit**, who passed away July 2.

Nesbit served the Robbins Park District for 28 years. During

his tenure as president, he brought the local carnival back, brought the first ever circus to the district, expanded the "Breakfast with Santa" program toy giveaway to help 400 youth, installed a youth splash pad, installed outdoor fitness equipment and much more.



# Saving the Sand Savanna

**By Cindy Cain, Public Information Officer, Forest Preserve District of Will County**


Illinois residents don't have to travel 3,000 miles to the Galapagos Islands to see an ecosystem teeming with exotic diversity.

Just head south of Joliet in Will County to a cluster of preserves that provide the rare conditions necessary for an incredible mix of native plants, animals, insects and birds to survive and thrive.

The preserves feature a wonderful abundance of native species and a mixture not found elsewhere in the county. For instance, if you take a hike in Kankakee Sands Preserve in July, you're likely to see swamp milkweed,

great blue lobelia, common milkweed, sand milkweed, spotted hemlock, blue iris, golden aster, elderberry, button bush, marsh vetch, marsh field fern and showy tick trefoil, to name a few.

Two unique things about this particular part of the county are the sandy soil, which supports an unusual suite of species, and the remnant prairies, wetlands and savannas that are all in the same area. This is the only place in Will County where that can be found, said Floyd Catchpole, the Forest Preserve District of Will County's land management program coordinator.



The region is one of the rarest ecosystems in North America and all the preserves combined protect a type of landscape that has been shrinking for decades.

The sand featured in southern Will County came from glacial Lake Wauponsee, which was created during a massive flood that occurred around 19,000 years ago.

### **Disappearing savanna**

Catchpole refers to this region, which is located east of Braidwood and west of the Kankakee River, as Braidwood Sands. It consists of the Forest Preserve's Braidwood Dunes and Savanna Nature Preserve, Sand Ridge Savanna Nature Preserve and Kankakee Sands Preserve as well as two state-owned nature preserves, Hitts Siding Prairie and Wilmington Shrub Prairie.

The diverse mosaic protects 8,000 insect species and 750 native plant species as well as birds, mammals, reptiles, mosses and mushrooms. The region is one of the rarest ecosystems in North America and all the preserves combined protect a type of landscape that has been shrinking for decades.

According to Catchpole, savannas once stretched between the Great Plains and the Eastern deciduous forest in a great ribbon that was hundreds of miles wide in places. But the savannas have declined partly due to the creation of pastures for animals and the practice of





If the district can assemble and manage a large enough refuge, it will be able to preserve a diverse ecosystem full of bizarre and beautiful species for the enjoyment of the people of Will County for centuries to come.

allowing parcels to fill with trees. Nonnative cool season grasses were planted after the Dust Bowl to “improve” pastures and hay meadows; natural fires were suppressed for more than 60 years; and invasive species took root.

That is why the forest preserve district and the state are striving to save this stunningly beautiful landscape with an intensive effort that started around a decade ago.

The forest preserve and state of Illinois have combined efforts to protect 2,798 acres of sand savanna in Will County along the Kankakee River east of Braidwood. The Braidwood Sands ecosystem is composed of a mosaic of black-and-white-oak sand savanna groves, sand prairie, sand shrub prairie, sand seeps, sedge meadow, marshes, ponds, the Kankakee River, small streams, ditches and agricultural fields.

The site also shelters a group of state-endangered or threatened species made up of 18 plants, two turtles, two birds and one insect.

“What we’re doing is knitting together these remnants of nature preserves by converting the agricultural fields to their native state,” Catchpole said. “And we still have half of the acreage to go.”

### **Providing public access**

The forest preserve district opened its latest public access area in the Braidwood Sands region in December 2017. The Kankakee Sands – Route 113 Access area features a picnic shelter and 2.5 miles of trail.

Ralph Schultz, the forest preserve district's executive director, said the Kankakee Sands Preserve restoration and improvement project provided both a chance to link, buffer and enhance two state nature preserves and also to fulfill the goal to expand recreational and educational opportunities for visitors to get close to nature and experience firsthand the transition of the preserve.

Access to nature can have a healing and calming effect on visitors, he added. As the restoration effort continues, visitors will be treated to an ever-changing kaleidoscope each season. The district believes it is important to provide people with access to their forest preserves so they can experience the wilds of Will County.

### **'Rough shape'**

The area was in “rough shape” when Catchpole said he first viewed it in 2001 after being hired by the forest preserve. Sunny savannas and wet prairies were often choked with invasive trees and shrubs and much of the land was either in agriculture, or showed clear signs of former plowing or overgrazing.

A savanna should have less than a 50 percent tree canopy, he explained. "If you spend the day walking in a savanna, you should get a sunburn."

Forest preserve restoration efforts include removing invasive species, including trees and shrubs; thinning the overabundant deer herd that overgraze the land; removing drain tiles; strategically closing ditches in a way to not cause flooding on neighboring properties; seeding; and prescribed burning.

The seeding is performed in winter when there is snow cover, which has proven to be a more efficient method to get seed to germinate in the spring. Some of the seed being used in the Braidwood Sands region comes from The Nature Conservancy. The agency provides surplus seed from a nursery in an area of Indiana that features the same type of sandy soil. In exchange for the seed, the Forest Preserve provides monitoring and management assistance at the nursery.

Schultz said that partnering with nongovernmental organizations at Kankakee Sands Preserve and throughout Will County was essential to protect, restore and enhance our forest preserves.

### Nurturing nature

The restoration work is designed to restore the land to its native, sunnier state.

The landscape, up until around 1970, still consisted of a lot of marsh, prairie, and sand savanna, although the savanna wasn't open and sunny anymore. Between the

1970s and now, the sunny savannas and woodlands became much darker and the wetlands became much shrubbier and the prairies often grew over with trees and shrubs.

This shift matters because with today's landscape being dominated by agriculture and development, these natural areas have become islands. If the district is going to protect the biodiversity that's there, Catchpole said, they need to protect the landscape that was there. So, the district is working to restore the marshes and the prairies and the savannas to sunny conditions again.

Many wildflowers have responded to the forest preserve's restoration efforts.

Catchpole said that the once-scarce and lovely pink meadow beauty now occurs in swaths along the margins of many wetlands. The strange, tall and stately rattlesnake master now stands like thousands of slender yuccas among the prairie grasses and lures moths in for a feast. And the beautiful orange Michigan lilies are flowering in every preserve and setting seed for the first time in decades.

Most exciting of all, he added, is the return of grass pink orchids, which had been virtually eliminated in Will County, and the discovery of the state-threatened Eryngium stem borer moth, which feeds on rattlesnake master.

If the district can assemble and manage a large enough refuge, it will be able to preserve a diverse ecosystem full of bizarre and beautiful species for the enjoyment of the people of Will County for centuries to come.

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FOREST PRESERVES, PARKS DISTRICTS & CONSERVATION DISTRICTS:

# Partners in Resiliency

BY BEN HABERTHUR

Director of Natural Resources, Forest Preserve District of Kane County

Working for the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, I often take calls from the public that are meant for one of the park districts in our county. When I redirect those callers, I'm not surprised that park district reps have plenty of their own experience directing forest preserve-related calls back my way. It shouldn't come as a surprise that residents are confused by the differences between park districts, forest preserves and conservation

**While our organizations can appear to be the same thing on the surface, let's break them down, so you'll better know the differences, and can better convey that to residents, as well.**



districts, when we have many staff and even elected officials who struggle with the same question. They're all open spaces, right? Decades of collaboration and shared achievements have intertwined our histories. We have parks with prairies and preserves with disc-golf courses. What gives? While our organizations can *appear* to be the same thing on the surface, let's break them down so you'll better know the differences, and can better convey that to residents, as well.

### **Brief history of park districts**

Chicago has always had a large pull on anything in Illinois, and the history of park and forest preserve districts is no exception. First incorporated in 1837, the City of Chicago chose the Latin motto "*Urbs in Horto*" which translates to City in a Garden. This may indicate an early desire to preserve green space. Chicago even dedicated parcels for preservation *prior* to incorporation. You can follow the evolution of the Chicago Park District on their website at <https://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/about-us/history-chicagos-park>. There, you can learn about the creation of the Daniel Burnham plan, how Soldier Field came to be, the creation of Grant Park and Buckingham Fountain, and the origins of the iconic fieldhouses. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century projects of the Chicago Park District centered around public health, such as transitions from poorly constructed cemeteries to parks, and the construction of places to gain relief from overcrowded tenements. Over time, the Chicago Park District slowly transitioned into the quality-of-life role it plays today, with more than 8,800 acres of open space across 600 parks.

Closer to home for me, the St. Charles Park District is one whose history typifies many park districts across the state. They formed in 1912, after the passage of the Illinois Park Act. The Act permitted park districts to form and acquire land for park and playground purposes and to improve, maintain and equip the same as a park or playground, and to place permanent buildings and structures thereon. St. Charles voters passed non-referendum bonding authority for their district in the late 1960s, and that has enabled the district to grow into what it is today — almost 1,500 acres across 59 parks, with amenities including playgrounds, athletic fields, community centers, aquatic facilities, an environmental education center, a nine-hole golf course, a substantial trail system, dog parks, natural areas and more.

### **A brief history of forest preserve districts**

The Forest Preserve District of Cook County became the first forest preserve district in the state in 1913. The Cook County Forest Preserve District Act stipulated that the newly formed district could acquire lands "for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure and recreation of the public."



**Whether you work for a nature first forest preserve district, or a recreation oriented park district, both work in tandem.**

Today, the rebranded Forest Preserves of Cook County boast over 70,000 acres of protected lands. They serve more than 5 million people, by far the most of any district in the state. The scale at which the Forest Preserves of Cook County operate, along with its unique founding legislature, have made it a standout amongst Illinois' forest preserve districts. There are far too many amenities to list, but some of the highlights include their operation of the Chicago Botanic Garden and Brookfield Zoo.

The 10 remaining forest preserve districts in the state are mandated by the Downstate Forest Preserve Act. This Act passed in 1915, and has the same stated purpose as Cook County's, but with slight financial and governance distinctions, primarily related to population.

There doesn't seem to be a common story on how the various forest preserve districts have grown and developed over time. The Lake County Forest Preserves have a well-documented origin story about Ethel Untermyer who in 1957, simply wanted more nearby open space in which to visit with her son. She was able to spark the creation of a whole district. The Lake County Forest Preserves now comprise nearly 31,000 acres. While most forest preserve districts cover a county, they can also be smaller. The Byron Forest Preserve District, for example, covers the city of Byron, in Ogle County.

The Forest Preserve District of Kane County formed in 1925 and then quickly purchased the Johnson's Mound Forest Preserve in Elburn. Initially referred to simply as "Preserve #1," Johnson's Mound puts on one of the most beautiful, annual displays of spring ephemeral wildflowers, anywhere in Chicagoland.

The district was slow to acquire land in its first 74 years. In 1999, the district owned just over 6,900 acres — less than half of what the other collar counties had protected. At that time, public concern over the rate of development, without similar increases in protected open space, led to the district's first referendum for land acquisition and capital improvements. That referendum was a success, garnering 66.5 percent of the vote in favor of expanding the district's holdings.

To date, the voters of Kane County have made up for lost time. They have approved five forest preserve district referenda for land acquisition and capital improvements, totaling \$310 million. This has resulted in a rapid expansion of the district's holdings. Today, the forest preserve district has protected roughly 23,000 acres. Of those, about 16,000 acres are under natural areas restoration. Less than 6,000 acres are under agricultural leases (about 115 acres are converted to natural areas, each year). The remainder are primarily trails and high-use amenities that make the preserves accessible. Along with the traditional forest preserve uses (trails for hiking, biking, and equestrian riding; a nature center; campgrounds; and

various picnic shelters) the district also owns two golf courses, a minor league baseball stadium (home of the Kane County Cougars) and an ice rink that doubles as district headquarters.

### Next up, conservation districts

Along with the 11 forest preserve districts across the state, Illinois also has five conservation districts. McHenry County Conservation District is the largest, at over 25,500 acres. That's especially impressive considering they were only formed under the Conservation District Act in 1971! Conservation districts are similar in scope than forest preserve districts, but they have different legislative and taxing authority.

Conservation areas (as opposed to preserves) may or may not be open to the public based on ecological sensitivities of area. Interestingly, they can be multi-county in scope, up to five, but it does not appear any place has yet exercised that option. **Conservation districts put protection of natural resources before all else.**

### The Main Differences

The differences in the missions and the historic execution of those missions at so many park, forest preserve districts and conservation districts is not found in the specific projects completed and amenities provided by each district but rather in the prioritization of those objectives.

The first priority of Chicago Park District's mission is "to enhance the quality of life in Chicago by becoming the leading provider of recreation and leisure opportunities." The banner on every page of the St. Charles Park District's website is only three words: "Enriching your life." **Park districts put people and recreation before all else.** Forest preserve district missions harken back to the Downstate Forest Preserve Act. In 1981, then director of the Winnebago County Forest Preserve District, Robert Manke, simplified their role:

"...a forest preserve district is a regional open space agency charged with the responsibility of acquiring, developing and maintaining properties for the specific purpose of protecting and preserving the natural resources located on the property. In doing so, they have further statutory responsibility to provide education and recreation facilities for the public." *Illinois Parks and Recreation 17 March/April 1981*

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As Manke put it, conservation comes first, followed by education and recreation. **Forest preserve districts put nature and its conservation before all else.**

Whether you work for a nature-first forest preserve district, or a recreation-oriented park district, both work in tandem. The entities are different, but both provide quality of life benefits to Illinois residents. While one focuses first on nature, and the other primarily focuses on recreational amenities, residents get the best of both worlds. One can visit Geneva Park District's spray ground in the morning, and watch the pelicans return to Dick Young Forest Preserve while hiking in the afternoon.

### Looking forward

The people of Illinois have met and overcome daunting challenges since the inception of both the forest preserve and park district systems, more than 100 years ago. Together with conservation districts, we certainly will face major dilemmas in the next century. Climate change and the Sixth Great Extinction are not simple problems that will have simple solutions. But just as past investments in our

public open spaces have resulted in having literal room-to-breathe in the parks and forest preserves during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (as it surely did during the Flu Pandemic of 1918 as well) our soil can save us.

We and our open spaces become stronger and more resilient to an uncertain future when we care for our land as we care for ourselves. There is a saying amongst restoration ecologists: Diversity equals resiliency. Having a diverse portfolio of all types of open space is *how* we build the capacity to recover quickly from difficult conditions. Our ancestors left us the legacy of a strong open space network. Open spaces helped them overcome physical and mental health challenges like World Wars, pandemics and personal struggles.

Let's continue to support our parks, conservation areas and preserves! Let's do the most we can, while it's our turn, to protect the land we share. The distinctions between the separate entities still make sense, and may be even more relevant now.

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C R E A T I N G A



D I S T R I C T

**By Dan Kane, Executive Director, Boone County Conservation District**

On November 4, 1964, the residents of Boone County created a new, local government agency. It was the first of its kind, whose charge was to conserve land and water resources; enhance the ecological productivity of those resources; provide educational programming; and afford the public with opportunity for compatible outdoor recreation. Early on, the Boone County Conservation District (BCCD) developed a mission statement, which provides guidance to the board and staff. This statement is broad in scope but focuses the district with respect to its policies and operational management. It reads: "Preserve and manage natural areas and open spaces for ecological, educational, and recreational benefits of present and future generations." Since its inception, the BCCD has held fast to this directive. Voters in 1964 created an opportunity and gifted that opportunity to all future residents.



KISHWAUKEE RIVER RIFFLE, KISHWAUKEE VALLEY CONSERVATION AREA. PHOTO CREDIT: DAN KANE

Now, long reaches of shimmering riffles will always be open to paddlers silently gliding on the Kishwaukee's north branch. Families can feel the crunch of newly fallen snow as they tromp across trails at Distillery Road Conservation Area. In fact, the Boone County Conservation District (BCCD) now provides opportunities for the public to enjoy outdoor experiences at nearly 30 different sites spanning over 4,000-acres of important conservation lands.

Even better, these important conservation lands contribute many unseen benefits. These lands allow local streams and rivers to function naturally – affording the right space for floodwaters to stretch out and slowly flow across a natural floodplain. Facilitating this natural function can create a cascade of complementing benefits – slower flowing floodwaters allow sediment to settle out and replenish soil nutrients. Remnant or reintroduced native plants use those nutrients and provide or enhance habitat for many species in need of conservation. Filtering out sediments also improves water quality in the stream, which improves conditions for fish, mussels, and other critters that live in or depend on those waters. Everything is connected!

Who would not marvel at the site of an eagle snatching its breakfast out of Piskasaw Creek? A vision become reality due to an alignment of special circumstances. Starting with a pair of eagles selecting a nest tree along the banks of Piskasaw Creek. This vision also hinged on the following: landowners who wanted to preserve this unique setting & offered to gift nearly 50% of their property's value; the existence of the BCCD to accept & manage the land; and grant funding to provide the financial support needed to

complete an acquisition. That is a string of what ifs! Now, BCCD owns those important conservation lands - where pairs of eagles have been nesting and rearing young since at least 2012. The initial two eagles hold the distinction of being the first documented pair to call Boone County home since DDT was banned in 1972. This site is now called Funderburg North Conservation Area and that nesting location has been successfully used by differing pairs of eagles every year since then. And yes, there is a Funderburg South Conservation Area too!



OWBOW WETLAND IN RIPARIAN CORRIDOR OF KISHWAUKEE RIVER AT KISHWAUKEE VALLEY CONSERVATION AREA.

PHOTO CREDIT: DAN KANE



RESTORED NATIVE PRAIRIE WITH LUPINES BLOOMING IN FOREGROUND, OAK SAVANNA IN BACKGROUND, PISCASAW FEN CONSERVATION AREA. PHOTO CREDIT: DAN KANE

It is important to acknowledge that our conservation district was not created to function as or duplicate the functions of a park district. Although our sites may look like parks, we do not manage them the same way a park district does, a fact that often confuses our patrons but affords us an educational opportunity when we are questioned. BCCD Trustees, staff, and volunteers strive to provide the community with something that can be valued even if they never set foot on a district site.

It is doubtful that our founders thought there would be a need for climate resilience as part of their original vision. Many unexpected changes have unfolded since 1964 and our agency is well-positioned to contribute significantly to address our current critical trends. We utilize a science-based approach to managing the important conservation lands now entrusted to our care. These lands demonstrate a plethora of conservation elements that could be scalable to backyard applications; agricultural settings or practically any landscape where the landowner is interested in restoring natural functions and values. BCCD's natural resource professionals and professional conservation educators offer a wide range of programs and activities to the community. In doing this, the BCCD serves as a model for residents, students, agricultural producers, or anyone really with an interest in learning more about how they might incorporate conservation practices or plantings into their respective circumstances.

Class field trips, summer camp programs, and other special events are key components of district operations. Conservation and environmental education take place year-

round. Annual events like the Boone County Fair provide unique educational opportunities for our district trustees, staff, and volunteers to engage with large numbers of people drawn from both a local and a regional audience. School programs developed by BCCD educators ensure teacher objectives and relevant state standards are strongly woven into the curriculum.

The value we contribute to the Boone County region was never more apparent than during the pandemic. At the onset of this world-altering event, district staff continued to provide the essential services associated with an open-space agency – safe access and use of district sites and outdoor facilities. The leadership team went into overdrive to ensure we developed and implemented protocols to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19. The result of that effort was a seamless extension of services and an actual expansion of sites available for public uses. Under normal circumstances the district seasonally closes several sites to public use in correlation with the departure of the seasonal workforce and the depletion of funds budgeted for seasonal staff. As the pandemic unfolded, numerous comments and requests were posted to our social media sites seeking to have the seasonally closed sites re-opened. The challenge was met, and the community immediately took advantage of new opportunities to relieve stress and enjoy nature. Every employee contributed to developing and implementing the district's "Infectious Disease Outbreak Response Plan." The success of which can be defined any number of ways, but the most telling and important of these is the fact that none of our employees became ill with COVID-19.

Conservation areas need constant attention to ensure sites are kept safe for public use and managed for the ecological functions just like park sites do. The BCCD has an exceptional team of eight full-time staff who have become the proverbial well-oiled machine adapted to this unique agency. Regardless of whether you walk in with a question, seek to serve as a volunteer, sign-up for a program, or purchase your pooch a tag at the Hammertime Off-leash Dog Area - our team aims to deliver the best service we can provide.

Seeing the glint of appreciation in a patron's eyes or hearing the excitement in their voice as they describe their experiences at one of our conservation areas is most rewarding. A recent phone call conveyed ecstatic voices jointly pronouncing the joy experienced during a recent visit to the Piscasaw Fen Conservation Area. Their enthusiasm eloquently described the hypnotic dance of thousands of gently swaying lupines bursting in purplish-blue and radiating an equally gentle fragrance on the slightest morning breeze, all the while buzzing with the hum of pollinators zipping between the blooms. You cannot quantify the value of that!



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# MOTHER NATURE IS CALLING...

ARE YOU GOING TO PICK UP OR SEND HER TO VOICE MAIL?

BY JO BURNS, MS, CTRS

The pandemic created a surge of opportunity to get back to nature. Suddenly, many of us were working and schooling from home and the urge to move and be outside was undeniable. As winter gave way to spring in 2020, the computer, Zoom and home office could no longer contain us. The project to revamp the front yard and the desire to hit the trail beckoned. For my family, we chose to get on our bikes. What did your family choose? Gardening, walking, hiking, bird watching, nature play, fishing, dining al fresco on newly closed streets?



Mentally, having a change of scenery that was not on our computer, was imperative to our sense of peace, calm, and sanity.

Connecting to nature happens in a variety of spaces and places. Nature is our backyard, the dandelion growing in the crack of the sidewalks, the trees outside our window, in urban and wild trails, local parks and open space. Being outdoors and near nature, no matter how you may define it, offers many benefits to our health both physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally. In nature we can be more physically active with a plethora of activities available to us whether we choose to participate in something organized through our local parks and recreation department or planned on our own. Physical activity does amazing things to benefit minds and bodies. A few of these amazing benefits include releasing endorphins, boosting energy, jumpstarting creativity, reducing chronic pain symptoms, and helping us manage or lose weight.

Whether at the local park or downtown on the promenade, being in the outdoors provided an opportunity to connect socially and be in proximity of one another, our families, and our pets with less fear of spreading COVID-19. Our awareness was heightened, yet being with people, in some semblance of community provided a sense of connectedness and that was our desire. Kids longed to see other kids and people who were not their parents. Being outside in the neighborhood or at the park created an opportunity for those chance encounters to connect with others. The park became a respite, even when the playgrounds had been taped off. Parents had to get more creative and frequently looked to recreation programmers, social media, and Google for ideas. Being outside with

other people meant we got that boost of oxytocin, the smile or cuddle hormone that helps us feel connected.

Mentally, having a change of scenery that was not on our computer, was imperative to our sense of peace, calm, and sanity. So many people experienced this pandemic differently, from those on the frontlines in our medical facilities and grocery stores (yes, there are many more), to those in the service industry who lost their jobs, to those in black and brown communities that were hit hardest by the incidence of the virus, to women and men who became home-school teachers and caregivers, while being employees and business owners. The outdoors became a type of respite, place of hope and space for renewal.

As the pandemic waned on, we began to see health, public health, parks, and nature used 100's of times together in the news, social media and articles all over the place. As parks and recreation professionals, we know there is a profound connection between health, parks, and nature. *Outdoor Magazine* was pronouncing nature as our next wonder drug and it's free. When everything else was closed, Mother Nature was still open.

As a parks and recreation professional, I was thrilled to see more people answering to the call of Mother Nature and connecting with the outdoors, but I also had questions about capacity, access, and resources. I wondered how were we going to handle the surge, the increase in foot and bike traffic, and an increase in pets and poop?

On a bike ride in mid-summer, I remember seeing 100's of people with their dogs at the dog park, the parking lot was overflowing as was the trash can. Despite the overflow, it was the look of joy, contentment, and freedom on the faces of the people that caught my eye as we rode by.

How were we going to encourage community members to experience Mother Nature close to home? It was difficult to see our national parks close in some places simply because it couldn't provide adequate space for people to gather, recreate and play in a safe way. Our local, urban, suburban, and rural parks and wild places all have the ability to positively affect our health in a multitude of ways without having to travel too far from home.

There also became the awareness that not all of us could experience Mother Nature equitably, whether because of geographic location, proximity, cost, access, transportation, feeling welcome or other obstacles. We need to acknowledge that not everyone has the same experience in nature and our outdoor spaces. Not because nature itself is biased but because those of us who are stewards, providers, caretakers, builders, and programmers certainly are and needed opportunities to grow, learn and make change. This made me think about how we were going to support newcomers unfamiliar with or unprepared to be out enjoying Mother Nature's splendor. Would we offer resources and programs focused on what people need to know?

Over this last year, parks and recreation professionals were suddenly the essential resource and answer we were looking for yet, at the same time, our parks organizations were sending folks on furlough or having to get creative with redeployment. Without a doubt parks maintenance crews were the unsung first responder heroes keeping our parks, trails, and open space open, clean, and available to community members. I think they have an "in" with Mother Nature that the rest of us can only dream about.

Promoting opportunities in nature both big and small, local, or distant, lends the opportunity for us to educate, advocate for conservation and preservation, as well as acknowledge and balance the need to be places to explore, recreate and renew as humans.

Ready to answer the call and share with your community how Mother Nature can have a positive effect on your health?

A few ideas on ways to "brag" on Mother Nature and share online or in your activity brochure.

- Highlight a park, trail, or open space each issue or week online – share what amenities, wildlife or plants are known for being seen there, how they contribute to the health of that eco system.



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As parks and recreation professionals, whether you are in parks maintenance, programming, sports, special events or active adults, we all have the opportunity and responsibility to answer Mother Nature's call to spend more time with her in a multitude of ways from short bursts, weekend adventures to week-long holidays, in green, blue, and brown spaces both built and natural.

- Share a “Fun Fact” about nature found in your community on your social media each week. Example - you can get your daily dose of Vitamin D in 10-30 minutes of sunshine time. OR trees emit phytoncides which protect the trees from bugs and disease and can help kill cancer cells in humans.
- Try a “Did you know” series at your nature, recreation, or community center. Example – “Did you know that the tree canopy reduces the UVB rays by 50%, which helps reduce exposure to harmful rays and reduces the incidence of skin cancer?” Or, “Did you know urban trees significantly reduce the amounts of carbon emitted into the atmosphere?”
- Create advocates and champions for your local parks and natural spaces by “catching” people outside and congratulating them on doing something positive for their health. Share a free day pass or entry fee.
- Offer free Nature Play programs for kids and parents – provide supplies (kid binoculars, magnifying glasses,

cloths, clothes pins, buckets, shovels) and a natural space or park with a variety of features and let them explore, make temporary forts, look at bugs. You'd be surprised how many kids and parents need nudging to get dirty and just play.

As parks and recreation professionals, whether you are in parks maintenance, programming, sports, special events or active adults, we all have the opportunity and responsibility to answer Mother Nature's call to spend more time with her in a multitude of ways from short bursts, weekend adventures to week-long holidays, in green, blue, and brown spaces both built and natural. We also have a duty to help others learn what Mother Nature can provide and sharing that with others not only in our favorite ways, but in formats our community members might most find enjoyable. There is plenty of nature to go around, be accessible and welcoming to all.

*Jo Burns is a facilitator, speaker and consultant determined to make a difference in the world, one connection at a time. Connect with her at [jo@joburnsconnects.com](mailto:jo@joburnsconnects.com).*



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Morton Park District



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## PEOPLE & PLACES



### Dan Leahy New Executive Director at WDSRA

The Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (WDSRA) has announced **Dan Leahy** as executive director. Dan has served in local government for the past 15 years with experience in various roles at the Schaumburg Park District, the Bolingbrook Park District, and the City of Elmhurst.

He also has experience in the private sector as a marketing/communications professional. Most recently, as part of the Fox Valley Park District's executive team, he led the marketing/communications/business development efforts and has served as a board member at the Fox Valley Special Recreation Association.

He is a graduate of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and recently earned his master's in public administration from Aurora University.



### Beckie Korzyniewski New Executive Director at WSRA

**Beckie Korzyniewski** was recently selected as the new executive director for the Warren Special Recreation Association (WSRA) in Gurnee.

Korzyniewski assumed the position on June 16, 2021. She joins the WSRA agency with 20 plus years of experience in the parks and recreation field. A native of

Wisconsin, she graduated from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse with a degree in recreation management/business in 1998. Soon after graduating, Beckie began her career as a recreation supervisor with the Gurnee Park District in 1999.

After spending 10 years with the Gurnee Park District, she expanded her experience serving as the assistant manager at the Patty Turner Center with the Deerfield Park District, assistant superintendent of recreation with the Glencoe Park District, upon returning to the Gurnee Park District in 2015 to fulfill the position of manager of recreation and facilities.



### Brenda Zeck Announces Retirement

**Brenda Zeck**, executive director of the Warren Special Recreation Association (WSRA), announced her retirement as of June 18, 2021. Brenda's 32-year career in therapeutic recreation has included 25 years at WSRA, and also the roles of recreation specialist

and manager of program support at Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA).

With the assistance of Warren Township, WSRA was able to move their administrative offices to a larger building which provides much needed program space for its ever popular adult day program. In addition, she took the lead in forming a 501 (c)(3), Friends of the Warren Special Recreation Association which assists in providing scholarships and program supplies.

The most recent committees that Brenda was involved in were the PACE Suburban ADA Advisory Committee, the PDRMA Wellness Committee and the IPRA Legislative and Advocacy Committee.



### In Memoriam

*Illinois Parks & Recreation* magazine extends its condolences to the family and friends of Robbins Park District Board President **Maurice Nesbit**, who passed away July 2.

Nesbit served the Robbins Park District for 28 years. During

his tenure as president, he brought the local carnival back, brought the first ever circus to the district, expanded the "Breakfast with Santa" program toy giveaway to help 400 youth, installed a youth splash pad, installed outdoor fitness equipment and much more.

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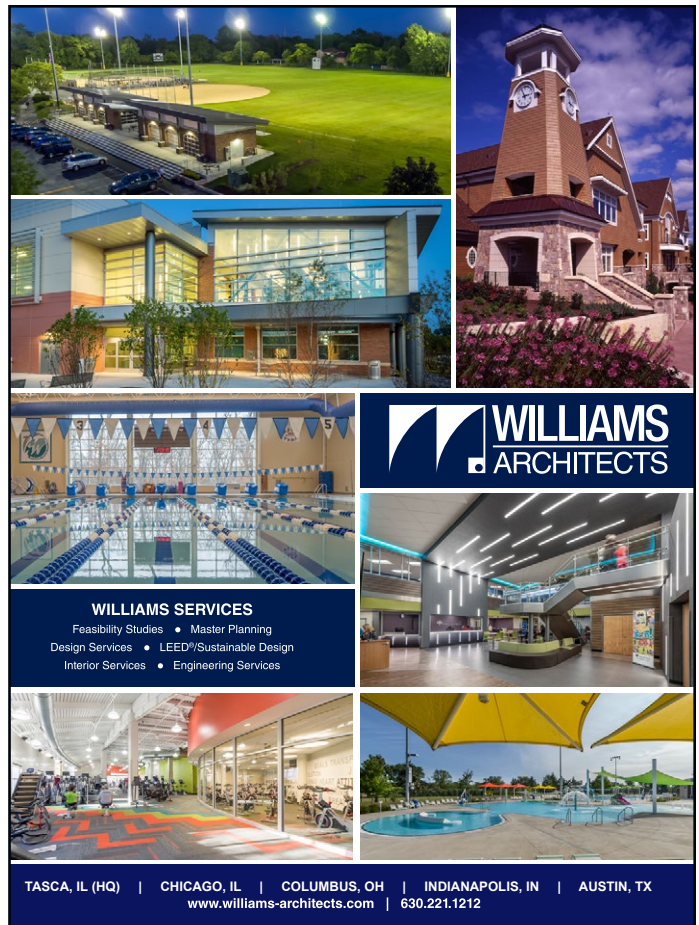
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