

Friends NEWS

Benjamin Cox, Editor • benjamin@fotfp.org • Volume 25, Issue 1 • Cook County, Illinois • Spring 2025



Milestone more than just a number

By Radhika Miraglia, Program Director

There are now more than 70,000 acres of forest preserves protected in Cook County for people and wildlife.

Late last year, the Forest Preserves of Cook County celebrated a milestone with the acquisition of a 68-acre parcel of land along Deer Creek in southeast suburban Cook County. This addition brought the total acreage of its holdings to more than 70,000 acres. The purchase of this former farmland from the Conservation Fund protects the floodplain and its surrounding ecosystems from development, and offers great potential for wetland restoration associated with the creek.

For years, we have been proud to claim “nearly 70,000 acres” of protected areas in one the country’s most populated metropolitan areas. The recent Deer Creek acquisition signifies much more than a need to change our language from “nearly” to “more than”—it demonstrates the results of deliberate actions and investments made by the Forest Preserves. Since 2014, the FPCC has dedicated nearly \$43 million to acquiring and protecting 1,378 acres as public land.

At a time when national parks and other public conservation lands are under attack, we cannot underestimate the importance of acquiring and protecting more land. As of this writing, our national parks are in serious danger of having their protections rolled back. The National Park Service has lost 13 percent of its staff, is being threatened by new permits for mining and other destructive activities, and is facing a proposed closure of 350 parks, or 75 percent of its holdings. Historically remarkable people of color are being dishonored and erased from interpretative materials, and reduced resources render amenities inaccessible and unsafe for public enjoyment.



With more than 70,000 acres now protected, forest preserve lands provide countless benefits to the entire Friends community.

The Friends community gives people hope, a voice, and practical hands-on ways to improve our neighborhoods and beyond. Photo by Robert Callebert.

“People in Cook County have demonstrated how much they value the clean air, clean water, and wildlife that the preserves provide,” said Benjamin Cox, Executive Director at Friends of the Forest Preserves. “This was made exceedingly clear when the forest preserves welcomed more than 100 million visitors—a record number—during the pandemic, and again when voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum increasing their own taxes to support the preserves in 2022 with 69 percent of the vote.”

Protected areas exist because people fought for them, and they will only endure if we integrate them into our lives. It’s easy to take the preserves for granted. A quick walk in the woods after work. A quiet morning watching birds dip into waterways. Peace of mind knowing that these places exist. Underneath those moments of peace is a story of constant effort—of invasive species removed, trails maintained, habitat restored, advocates speaking up. It’s a story we all need to be part of.

“The Friends community is a critical part of this story,” Benjamin said. “It gives people hope, it gives people a voice, it gives people practical hands-on ways in which to improve our communities, our natural areas, and our planet.”

New looks to inspire us all

The turtle with the sun under its chin anchors the new Friends of the Forest Preserves logo.

Along with our new website (if you haven't seen it yet, go check it out at fotfp.org because it is beautiful) we are also happy to share our new logo. Similar in feel to its predecessor, the new logo prominently features the turtle and a new touch of flora.

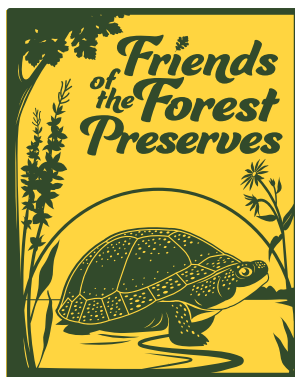
So why a turtle?

While most everyone says they love animals, honestly, if you run down the list of local wildlife people differ on their opinions of specific animals for some reason or another. Raccoons are so cute, but folks complain that they get into garbage cans. People love deer, but sometimes they eat landscaping. Frogs and snakes are beautiful and essential creatures, but folks think they are slimy (they generally are not by the way).

But turtles. Turtles are cute. Turtles are wise. Turtles are determined.

Culturally, many Native peoples and religions around the world hold turtles in high regard. They are powerful parts of origin stories, both physical and spiritual foundations, with longevity, strength, and wisdom, and they often represent Mother Earth.

The Blanding's turtle is also known as the turtle with the sun under its chin. The story is not ours to tell, so we recommend you do a little searching on the internet because we think it is a rabbit hole that you will enjoy.



Thank you to the incredible team of volunteers at DeanHouston, under the leadership of Friends' Board Member Jason Kaple, for their amazing work on our website, logo, and more.



This turtle is a state-endangered species in Illinois that finds refuge in our local preserves. It requires large expanses of specialized, healthy habitat—both aquatic and terrestrial—to thrive.

We hope our logo will elicit a variety of positive associations for different people, just like turtles do. For us, it provides a constant reminder that our work is rooted in valuing nature, science, culture, and community as equally important influences in ensuring these preserves are here and healthy for us and future generations. Thank you for being a part of this Friends community.



Blanding's turtle

Catching up with three alumni to see where they are now

By Jeff Shelden, Development Director

From five staff members in 2007 to more than 2,500 alumni today, Friends is proud to have employed, trained, and mentored so many people in the conservation field.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Friends," said Nate Garcia, who is now three years into his role at the Forest Preserves of Cook County as a Naturalist I.

Growing up in Chicago's southern suburbs, Nate was working at the Chicago Children's Museum and doing volunteer restoration work in the forest preserves when he learned about the opportunity to join Friends.

Dawson Cox learned about Friends of the Forest Preserves from his dad (Friends Executive Director Benjamin Cox) at a very young age but it was as a high school freshman that details of the Chicago Conservation Leadership Corps sparked his interest and "seemed like a great way to spend my high school summers outdoors while getting to learn some great skills."

Both Nate and Dawson praise the training opportunities provided to corps members. Corps crew members receive training in both the summer high school and adult programs, which are designed to prepare participants for careers in the conservation field and beyond.

"I found that the training and classes we had the privilege of attending went far to further my interest in the field and shape my understanding of the natural environment and history of the forest preserves," Dawson said.

"There were always new opportunities to log hours on topics ranging from chainsaw through plant identification to herbicide skills," according to Nate.

Katrell Folie first joined Friends as part of a teen summer program and quickly was able to step into leadership roles that inspired her to learn more about conservation. Along the way she established meaningful relationships and says she still is in contact with previous participants who reach out for advice, references, and resume help.

"It makes you very excited because you are helping people," she said. "You are seeing them learn about nature. Seeing people's career trajectories take off. I love watching people find their way into this field of work."

These days, these Friends program alumni are establishing themselves in the wider world of conservation.

The Friends community can feel great about the effectiveness of the conservation corps program and the impact program participants are making long after they've moved on from the conservation corps.

Nate's work consists primarily of public programming.

"Just today, we welcomed 85 preschoolers to Sand Ridge Nature Center," he said. "I love leading field trips and connecting people with nature from a young age."

In addition to public programming, Nate is involved with animal care as an animal ambassador, helps maintain forest preserve trails, and leads volunteer restoration days at the Sand Ridge campus.



Dawson is a Resource Technician at the Forest Preserves of Cook County and recently became a certified arborist.

"I've been working on the new Thorn Creek Resource Management Crew. As the most experienced crew member, I've been able to teach and train my coworkers on aspects of the job they're not familiar with, which is something I've always wanted to do," he said. "I enjoy being able to help people gain the confidence necessary to succeed in this field, and thanks to my employment at Friends I was able to figure out what steps to take to make that happen."



Katrell is now the Assistant Crew Manager of Friends' recently launched Engagement Corps. Katrell is using her conservation corps experience to create a career development program in public engagement. Katrell connects with community partners to establish the crew's daily activities.

"I want to connect with the entire community," she said. "We're connecting youth back to nature by turning 'iPad kids' into nature lovers."



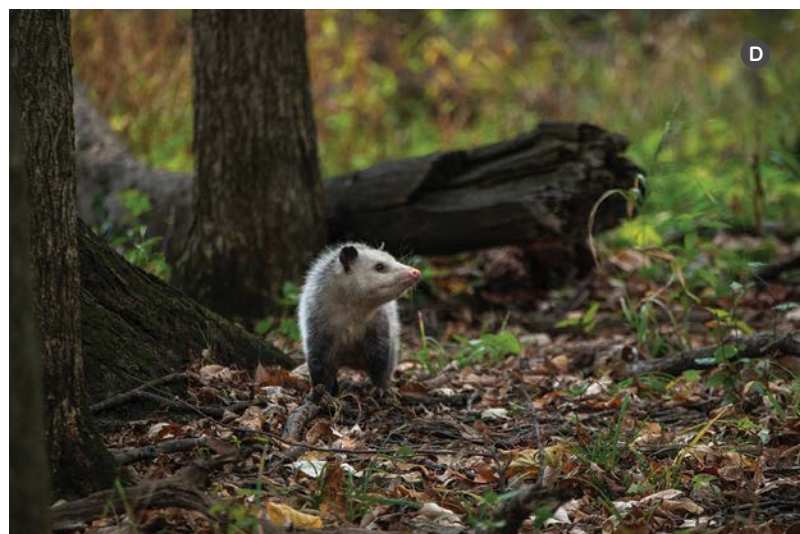
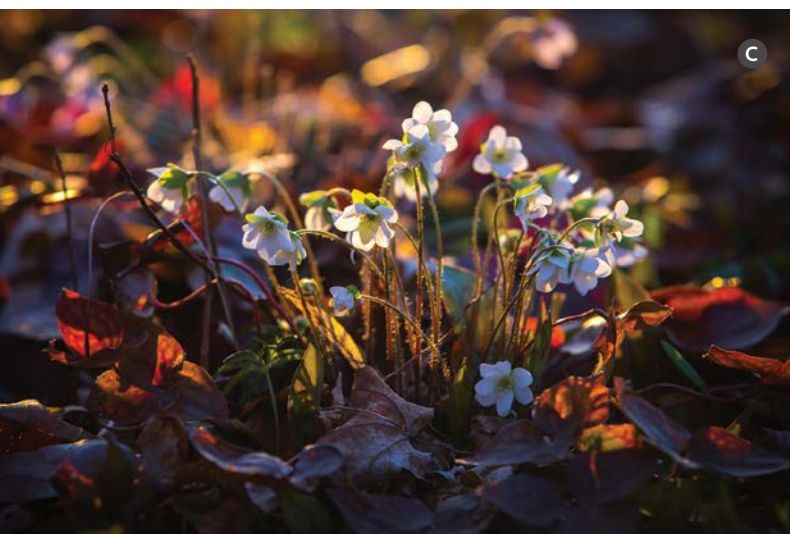
2024 Photo Contest Winners

1st Place ▶

"*Mecasphesa Asperata* Northern Crab Spider," Deer Grove East, Palatine, by Edward Boe



Thank you to the dozens and dozens who submitted photos, and congratulations to all the winners. Visit fotfp.org/photo-contest to learn more about the annual contest and learn how you can enter the 2025 contest.





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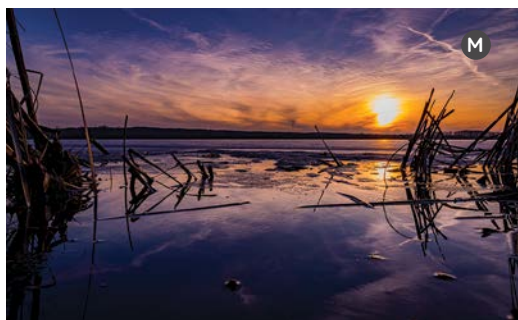
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A 2nd Place: "Bed Head," (Adult and Juvenile Barred Owls), Linne Woods, Morton Grove, by Shea Dettling

B 3rd Place: "Wind Dispersal," (Milkweed Pods), Jurgensen Woods, Thornton, by Michael Kobe

C Best Flora: "Hepatica," Busse Woods, Elk Grove Village, by Maria Sacha

D Best Fauna: "Night shift," (Opossum), National Grove-South, Riverside, by William Santus

E Best Landscape: "Sunset Along Tinley Creek Trail," Orland Park, by Bud Dyke

F Best Small Critter: "Snail at Little Red School House," Willow Springs, by Mark Hanna

G Best Bird: "Ruby-Throated Hummingbird on Great Blue Lobelia," Deer Grove West, Palatine, by Lisa Musgrave

H Honorable Mention: "Golden Twilight Trail Fall Colors," River Trail, Northbrook, by Utsav Upadhyay

I Honorable Mention: "Frosty Ground Cover Along the Tinley Creek Trail," Orland Park, by Bud Dyke

J Honorable Mention: "Blue Hour," Salt Creek Woods, Westchester, by Matt Zuro-Small

K Honorable Mention: "Spring Newborns," (Waterfowl Babies), Powderhorn Lake, by Michael Kobe

L Honorable Mention: "Black-Crowned Night Heron Peering into the Duckweed for Signs of Prey," Skokie Lagoons, Winnetka, by Chris Szafoni

M Honorable Mention: "Sun of Saf," Saganashkee Slough, Willow Springs, by Josh Cupp

N Honorable Mention: "Meep Meep," (American Woodcock), Wolf Road Prairie, Westchester, by Matt Zuro-Small

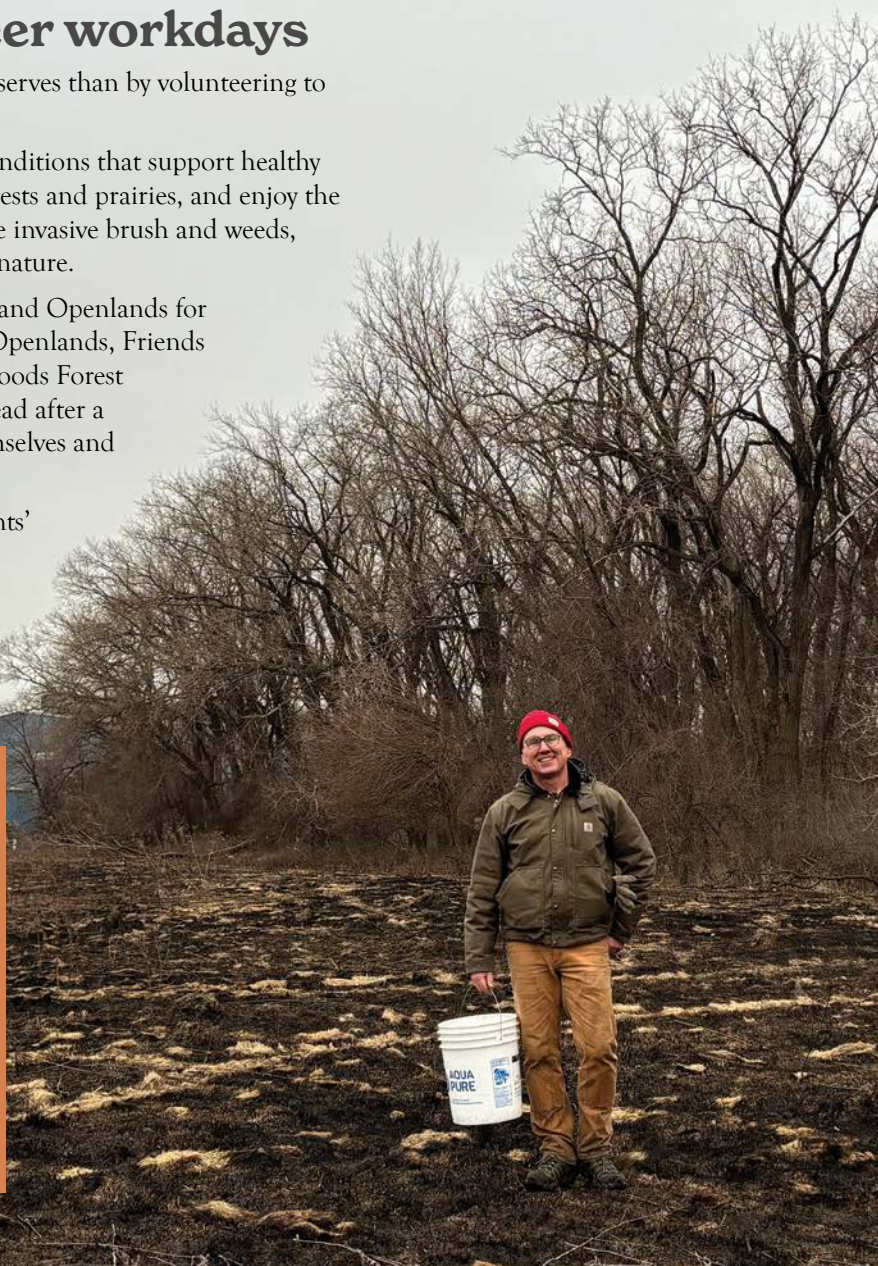
Standing invitation: volunteer workdays

There's no better way to get outside and enjoy the forest preserves than by volunteering to restore its natural beauty.

Ecological restoration is the practice of bringing back the conditions that support healthy nature. Volunteers get outside, surround themselves in the forests and prairies, and enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded people as they collect seed, remove invasive brush and weeds, and learn about the connections between people and healthy nature.

Friends of the Forest Preserves would like to thank ComEd and Openlands for their support of volunteer workdays. Thanks to ComEd and Openlands, Friends was able to purchase 15 pounds of native seed for Whistler Woods Forest Preserve. During a volunteer day last spring, this seed was spread after a prescribed burn, which helps the prairie plants replenish themselves and prevent phragmites from growing at the site.

For details on upcoming workdays, visit the 'Activities & Events' section of our website, fotfp.org.



Corporate Team Building Days connect teams and restore the forest preserves

The 70,000 acres of forest preserves in Cook County offer unrivaled physical, intellectual, and creative team-building experiences. Friends offers corporations and their employees the opportunity to establish or renew a sense of partnership and determination as they work together to combat aggressive species and return these ancient oak savannas, prairies, wetlands, and woods to their natural, healthy state.

Corporate Team Building Days are offered nearly year-round, with each season providing its own wonder. Depending on the month, participants might collect and spread seed of native plants or cut and burn aggressive shrubs like buckthorn. In the springtime, they might remove weeds such as garlic mustard, another foreign species that can take over. Winter is, perhaps surprisingly, one of the more optimal times. That's because there are few bugs and the burning brush piles keep everyone toasty!

You can find more information about hosting your team for a Corporate Team Building Day under the 'Get Involved' section of Friends' website or by contacting frances@fotfp.org.

"Our committee wanted to include experiences that had a broader reach into the community around us, outside of the office. A Corporate Team Building Day with FotFP was a great way to do something hands-on, in nature, and accomplish a common goal."

- Katie Jordan, Holcim US

BEST ^ **Friends of the Forest Preserves**

Meet Alex!

Our popular monthly giving program donors are officially anointed Best Friends status.

Monthly gifts are a sustaining and reliable income source that enables us to plan and implement long-term programmatic initiatives with confidence. Gifts of any size add up over time and multiply as the total of all Best Friends gifts helps Friends be efficient and effective.

We'd like to introduce one of our new best friends, Alex!

Tell us about you!

I've been a Chicago resident for eighteen years and I live with my wife in the Avondale neighborhood. Outside of my job at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I'm passionate about climate change and supporting policy solutions that will positively impact our planet. To that end, I spend a lot of time volunteering with Citizens Climate Lobby.

Which forest preserve(s) do you visit?

LaBagh Woods! It's arguably the most popular forest preserve for those of us close to downtown Chicago and for good reason. LaBagh has a variety of natural features and is accessible by CTA bus. During the early days of the pandemic we found the space to be an excellent place to get out in nature.

What do you love about the forest preserves?

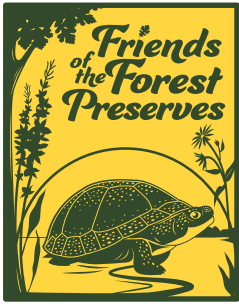
Our forest is an entirely different experience from the smaller green park spaces near us. The forest preserves allow us to get away from traffic, pollution, and our everyday experiences even though we're still relatively close to home.

It's a reset. Being in nature is good for you according to studies and I can attest to leaving the preserves feeling better for it.

Why is it important to you to support Friends?

As somebody who is concerned about climate change, I know that forest preserves are some of our planet's first and last defenses. They provide flood prevention through wetlands and trees and are a powerful force to mitigate heat island effects. Natural areas provide value we can't even quantify monetarily. Ultimately, supporting Friends is a way to do my part to prevent carbon emissions from entering the atmosphere.





Friends of the Forest Preserves
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Friends of the Forest Preserves unites people to protect, promote, and care for the forest preserves in Cook County. Thanks to your ongoing support we are collectively upholding our shared responsibility to carry on the legacy of healthy natural areas for future generations. Please consider making a donation today by visiting fotfp.org, scanning the QR code, or mailing a check to the address above. Thank you!



Printed with vegetable ink on recycled paper with 10% post-consumer content manufactured using renewable biogas energy.

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 Friends of the Forest Preserves

"Butterfly and bug" (Monarch butterfly and soldier beetle), Whistler Woods, Riverdale by Elm Stoelinga