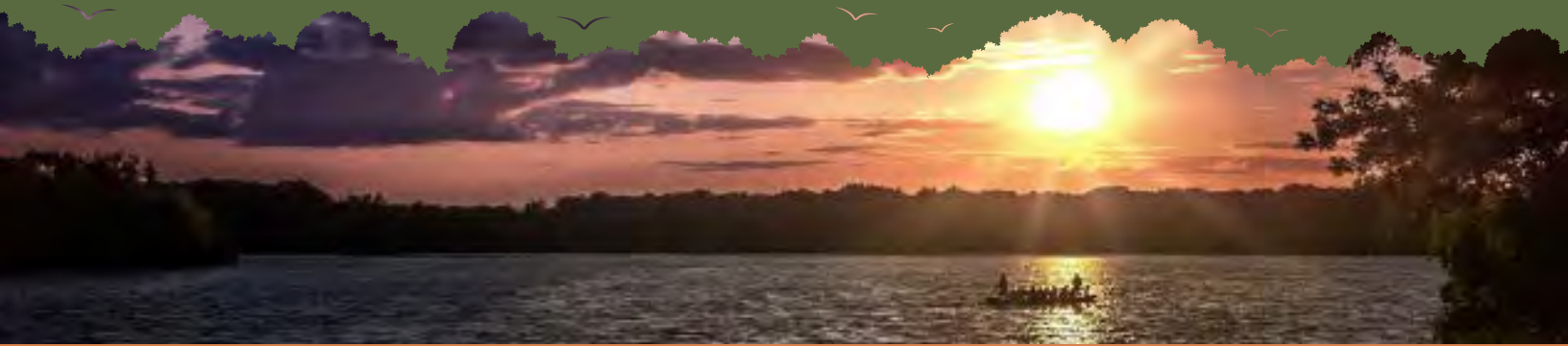


# Friends NEWS

Benjamin Cox, Editor • benjamin@fotfp.org • Volume 26, Issue 1 • Cook County, Illinois • Spring 2026



## At long last Deer Grove won, so did we

By Benjamin Cox, Executive Director

After nearly 20 years Deer Grove is protected and we won!

After a key public meeting in November 2025, the outcome was clear: people wanted to protect Deer Grove by limiting the road expansion to three lanes and rejected the five-lane alternative. As a result, the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways selected the three-lane alternative as their preferred alternative.

A dedicated coalition of local community members, volunteers, advocates, and Forest Preserves of Cook County staff stood strong for nearly 20 years and successfully advocated for the best outcome on the table for the expansion of Quentin Road through Deer Grove Forest Preserve. The coalition is proud that the first ever forest preserve for the Forest Preserves of Cook County and the nation received the protection it deserves.

This is a huge win, helping to further reinforce the precedent that forest preserves are important and essential to our quality of life and deserve the highest level of consideration and protection. When public projects propose to take already preserved land, minimizing the impact must be taken seriously.

Friends of the Forest Preserves first got involved around 2008 in the effort to fend off the expansion of the one-mile stretch of Quentin Road through Deer Grove in Palatine. Along with volunteers and advocates from partner nonprofits, we participated in countless community and government meetings, handed out flyers, posted on social media to encourage people to take action to protect Deer

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Successful advocacy by the Friends community makes Quentin Road, running through Deer Grove, safer for both people and nature. Photos provided by Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways.

# Connecting youth with their local woods

By Sydney Armstead, Engagement Program Manager

Youth from the Altgeld Gardens community are better connected to their local forest preserve thanks to a five-week paid summer program.

The Beaubien Youth Outdoor Ambassador Program is a learning opportunity for teens on the South Side of Chicago that is a collaboration between Friends, Openlands, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

Now in its 6th year, BYOA's primary goal is to connect high school students with their local forest preserves, with the goal of making the preserve feel more welcoming for the youth and their families. Through a variety of conservation-focused activities, partners aim to foster a lasting relationship and sense of ownership of the area. Key topics include ecology, the history of local Chicago waterways such as the African American Heritage Water Trail, Indigenous history, art in nature, and outdoor recreation.

Public engagement is emphasized and partners introduce participants to career paths in conservation and opportunities within the forest preserves. BYOA spans five weeks in the heart of each summer and participants are paid to work 24 to 30 hours per week.

Last year, the participants were primarily 14 to 15 years old and included rising freshmen and sophomores. Shared interests and similar cultural backgrounds further contributed to a supportive and cohesive team environment.

Essential career readiness skills such as teamwork, conflict management, public speaking, leadership, punctuality, and professionalism were part of many of the activities. Group projects gave participants the chance to practice working together and solving disagreements in positive ways. Presentations and group discussions helped them grow more confident in speaking in front of others and taking on leadership roles. Being on time and showing responsibility were encouraged every day, building habits that will help them in school, work, and other parts of life.



Crew members at Origin Woods as Dr. Nataka Moore led them in a cultural art activity of making gourds. Photos by Sydney Armstead.



Crew members and staff from American Indian Center during a workshop on African history and culture making face jugs.

The program also highlighted the connection between art and nature. Crew members explored how creativity and nature connect with each other through hands-on activities like drawing, painting, and cultural art expressions. This theme helped them see nature in new ways and express their ideas through art, making it one of the most meaningful parts of the program.

Throughout the program's history, the Friends staff has worked to enhance outcomes through evaluation and exploration.

In 2025, Friends established a partnership with Firehouse Studios, an organization that functions as an art studio, church, and community center serving youth and families in the North Lawndale neighborhood on the west side of Chicago. Friends has been collaborating with Firehouse to develop a mural project that captures participants' reflections on nature and their experiences at Beaubien Woods. Firehouse also engages youth who are exploring artistic expression within urban environments. As part of this partnership, Friends facilitated a series of youth exchanges: BYOA crew members visited the studio, while Firehouse youth traveled to Beaubien Woods to participate in a guided hike, a scavenger hunt, and team-building activities.

The collaboration among youth from different programs across the city greatly enhances the program's success. Teen participants are often strongly influenced by their peers, and the opportunity to work alongside others who are engaged in meaningful, community based work has consistently proven to be a valuable and rewarding experience.

# Celebrating the Friends Community

By Morgan Williams, Calumet Field Organizer

Though the ecological benefits of restoration are valuable, many volunteers treasure the relationships they've made just as much. Recently, Friends was able to gather everyone to celebrate exactly that.

On March 13, some of our partners, volunteers, and board members joined us at Thatcher Woods Pavilion for "Field Notes and Friendship," a first time event developed by Field Organizers Isabella Stocke and Morgan Williams.

One of the biggest challenges of our field work can be the literal size of the geography we cover. We may not always have the chance to gather together or meet some of the individuals we hear so much about. The theme of this event was "Rooted in Reciprocity" and enabled our friends to attach names to faces, as well as meet some new ones in an exchange of gratitude and joy.

Over dinner and drinks, the Friends community got the chance to meet people from nearly every community we serve. As stewards of our forest preserves, our volunteers have created immeasurable changes in our local ecology and brought joy and inspiration to many around them. We honored them with several awards developed by Friends staff:

The Unsung Hero Award honored volunteers' unwavering dedication and passion to their work. Hailing from Kickapoo Woods in Riverdale, IL, June Webb was our first recipient. June was noted as having a genuine appreciation for the land and true commitment to stewarding it. She regularly hosts volunteer workdays for the public, in addition to working on the site on her own almost daily! She has welcomed groups like Mighty Acorns and Envision Unlimited and created a safe space for all.

Ken Demuth was the second recipient of this award. He volunteers across all Spring Creek sites and brings a wealth of knowledge with him. In addition to his field work, he has a great passion for the geological features of his region and site and regularly shares that with patrons.

Diane Yurksaitis was awarded Walk of Fame for her incredible walks as a part of the Trailblazers program. Leading a variety of engaging and educational walks, she was presented a framed photo of buttercup for her work by Radhika Miraglia.

Finally, two Rooted in Reciprocity Awards were given to those who steward and lead with deep care, respect, and listening. Jim Root received the award for his sense of wonder and curiosity, while still managing to lead workdays with great care and efficiency. Marianne Kozlowski was honored for her dedication to Eggers

Grove and its history. In addition to her workdays, Marianne has led workshops, seminars, plant walks and more, instilling the same passion she has for Eggers Grove into countless others.

Some of our partners present included Friends of Chicago River, Forest Preserves of Cook County, Lake County Forest Preserves, Field Museum, University of Illinois Extension, and more. Over the years, we've gotten to collaborate on some amazing community outreach projects and events at the heart of our mission, and deeply appreciated the chance to show off some of this work.

As the night wrapped up, attendees felt the weight of our work and the impact that it has on all of us. Being able to sit back and take in all of our accomplishments was incredibly rewarding. Rarely do we get to simply reflect on the gravity of our work, and for those who did, it was an incredibly special night to share with all of Friends. We thank everyone who was able to make it out.

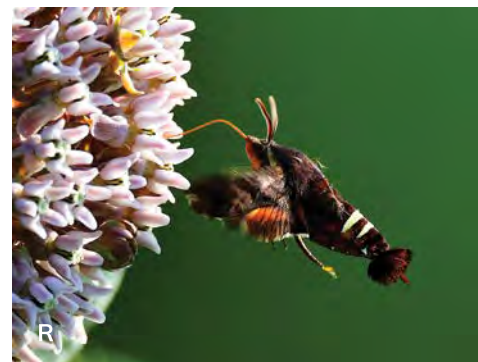
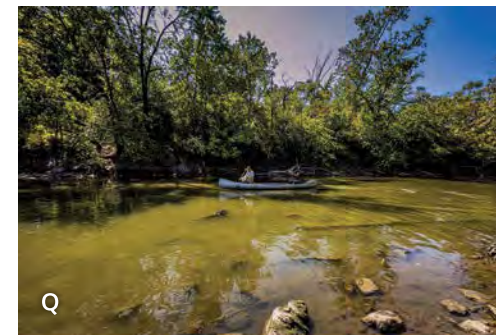
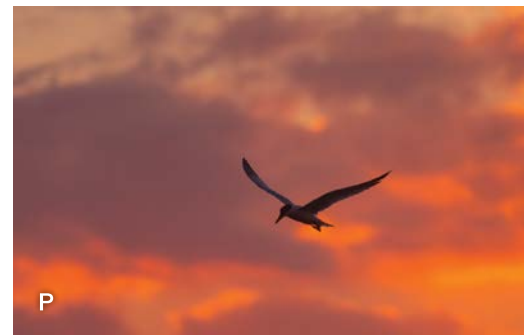
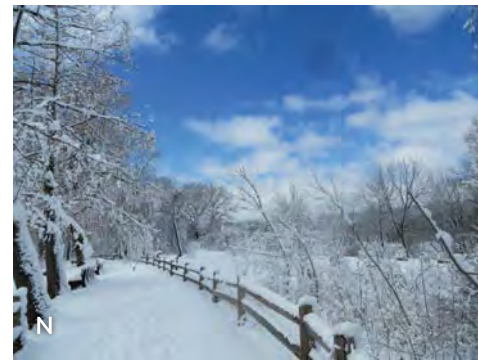
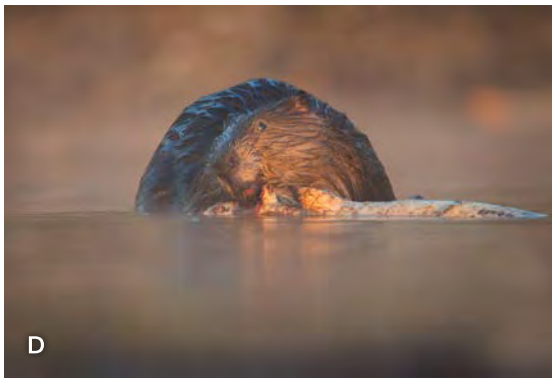


Friends hosted volunteers and partners for an event, Field Notes and Friendships, celebrating their collective efforts. Photos by Jeff Shelden.

2025

# Photo Contest Winners

Congratulations to all the winners and thank you to everyone who submitted photos. Visit [fotfp.org/photo-contest](http://fotfp.org/photo-contest) to learn more about the annual contest as well as the rules and prizes for 2026.



- A 1st Place:** “Female Hooded Merganser,” at Burnham Prairie Marsh by Scott Wedell
- B 2nd Place:** “Learning the Ropes” (juvenile Red-tailed Hawk), at Bemis Woods North by Matt Zuro
- C 3rd Place:** “Three’s a Crowd” (Northern Watersnakes), at Little Red Schoolhouse by Tim Minnick
- D Best People in the Preserves:** “Healy’s Madonna,” at Spring Creek Forest Preserve by Ken DeMuth
- E Best Fauna:** “Beaver,” at Burnham Prairie by Scott Wedell
- F Best Flora:** “Yellow and Blue,” at Crabtree Nature Center by Paula Matzek
- G Best Bird:** “Eastern Bluebird,” at Crabtree Nature Center by Edward Boe
- H Best Landscape:** “Thorn Creek Trail System,” at Thorn Creek by Mike Anderson
- I Best Youth:** “Wood Duck,” at LaBagh Woods by Jordan Kreiner
- J Honorable Mention:** “Coopers Hawk,” at LaBagh Woods by Jordan Kreiner
- K Honorable Mention:** “Friendly Wave” (Common Loon), at Axehead Lake by Carlos Molano
- L Honorable Mention:** “No. 2” (Blackburnian Warbler), at LaBagh Woods by Riley Phoebus Mazock
- M Honorable Mention:** “Camouflaged—A frog blending in with his environment,” at Crabtree Nature Center by Michelle Puszka
- N Honorable Mention:** “Crystal Blue Sky and Snow,” at Little Red Schoolhouse by Karen C. Garrett
- O Honorable Mention:** “Gasteruptionidae sp.” (Carrot Wasp), at Crabtree Nature Center by Edward Boe
- P Honorable Mention:** “Taking it In,” at Eggers Grove by Ishaan Inamdar
- Q Honorable Mention:** “Paddling the Little Cal,” at Kickapoo Woods by John Slivka
- R Honorable Mention:** “Hummingbird Moth,” at Little Red Schoolhouse by Mark Hanna
- S Honorable Mention:** Wild Bleeding Heart,” at McClaghrey Springs Woods by Tim Minnick

# Oaks, native shrubs, and wildflowers can stretch out thanks to North Branch crew

By Grace Reilly, North Branch Conservation Corps Crew Manager

The wildflowers are back and celebrations are in order.

In September, the North Branch crew completed the last of its U.S. Forest Service grant work. This grant funded many of the crew's large-scale projects throughout the year. During the summer, the crew focused on treating seedlings and resprouts at Harms, Linne, and Chipilly woods in the areas they cleared of invasive shrubs last winter. It is exciting to see plenty of native plants taking advantage of sunlight finally reaching the understory, and it is satisfying to spray the invasive seedlings eager to do the same.

The transformative nature of the crew's work was on full display at Harms Woods, where what began as a gnarly buckthorn and honeysuckle thicket a year ago bloomed wildly with spring ephemerals like trout lily, trillium, and mayapple under the open canopy. The resurgence of native sedges, young nannyberry, and other flora meant the crew needed to practice great care when spraying more than 10 distinct target invasive species.

The project's engagement component included a Sketching and Seed Collecting walk in Harms Woods this fall. The crew was eager to lead, and members showed off their plant identification knowledge by introducing attendees to native plants and demonstrating seed collection. It was a great opportunity to showcase their work while lending a

helping hand to parts of the site that are lacking in species diversity.

The crew wrapped up the grant by selectively and carefully hand-wicking herbicide on invasive reed canary grass and phragmites in Chipilly Woods on the west side of the river. The North Branch crew had treated this unit the year prior and the members who recalled working there were encouraged by the significant reduction in invasive species.

Treating the dwindling populations of phragmites and reed canary grass beneath giant oaks and surrounded by early fall wildflowers was a rewarding way to end this portion of the crew's work.



The North Branch Conservation Corps Crew recently completed a major project at Harms Woods.

## Deer Grove *Continued from page 1...*

Grove and the plants and animals that call it home, advocated with elected officials, worked with the Chicago Environmental Law Clinic, and so much more.

The project will make the road safer for both people and nature by incorporating:

**two traffic lanes**, one northbound and one southbound;

**a full-width buffer center lane** between the traffic lanes for safe turns into and out of neighborhoods and Deer Grove Forest Preserve and for safe space in case of accidents, interactions with animals, or emergency vehicles;

**a safe, quick, and convenient pedestrian crossing** between Deer Grove East and West at Camp Reinberg, with a center-lane safety haven;

**a sensor-triggered traffic light** at Ruhl Road for safe exit from the neighborhood just north of Deer Grove on the east side of Quentin;

**a 10-foot-wide multi-use path** on the east side of Quentin from Lake Cook Road to Dundee Road, separated from the road the entire length, that makes a key regional and local trail connection;

**and a pedestrian crossing** with traffic light support at Quentin and Lake Cook.

After the initial designs are approved, we expect underpasses for wildlife, improved stormwater runoff mitigation, and other improvements to be added to the design.

The initial design meets and exceeds the purpose, needs, and requirements for the project, while having a significantly smaller impact on forest preserve land and wetlands than what a much wider five-lane road would have. The full center lane provides safety space between the traffic lanes and along the entire corridor, which will allow for safe turns into and out of the neighborhoods and Deer Grove, while also helping to prevent crashes and accidents with large animals.

We couldn't be more proud of the Friends community for staying the course all of these years and ensuring that Deer Grove got the protection it deserves.

While it is impossible to thank everyone who has helped with this advocacy effort over the years, a few people deserve a special recognition including volunteers and advocates Pete Jackson, Mark Krivchenia, Juergen Reinhold, and Ron Varguson, and our partners at Openlands and the Chicago Environmental Law Clinic and so many more.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to make a call, send a letter, make a public comment, and take action to protect Deer Grove.

**It worked. Congratulations!**

## BEST

### ^ Friends of the Forest Preserves: Meet Karen

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

Monthly gifts are a sustaining and reliable source of support that enable Friends 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.

Friends is happy to introduce one of our best friends, Karen!

#### Tell us about you!

I'm an ecologist and have worked and volunteered in Chicagoland forest preserves and parks since moving to the area in 2001.

#### Which Forest Preserves do you visit?

I've visited so many through work projects and I'd say I have the closest connection to Harms Woods in Glenview. I took my kids to explore Harms as toddlers and now, it's become a bit of a family tradition to take a walk there as a family in celebration of Mother's Day. Since 2015, I've been a steward for Harms East.

#### What do you love about the forest preserves?

I love that they are spread throughout the county. Everyone is within a short walk, drive, or bike ride to real wild nature. Our forest preserves are actual ecosystems that we can walk through and experience. It's unique and special to have these ecosystems within a relatively easy commute to such a large urban area. You can't find that outside of Chicagoland.

Thousands of people volunteer to care for the forest preserves. That's not normal. It's special to Chicago and

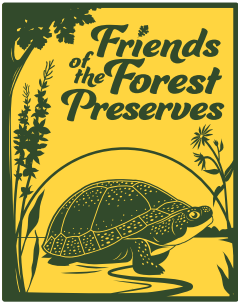
I'm proud to call Chicago home as a result.

The forest preserves are living wild nature and, honestly, imperfect. We Midwesterners just quickly get over the occasional airplane noise and know that the forest preserves are worth caring for because of their imperfections and their restorative nature.

#### Why is it important to you to support Friends?

Friends has been there since the beginning (since my involvement began). When volunteers like myself were trying to figure out how to restart volunteer stewardship programs following the moratorium on volunteering in the preserves, Friends was there at that moment. I trust Friends' commitment to the wellbeing of the forest preserves and I like the smart, collaborative relationship they have with the forest preserve district staff and board. I know Friends' staff and I can see the results of their work. Supporting Friends feels good.





**Friends of the Forest Preserves**


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You can ensure the future of the Friends of the Forest Preserves community through your financial support. The Friends community drives our advocacy, on-the-ground ecological restoration, and community engagement work that ensure the forest preserves are here and healthy for us and future generations. Please consider making a donation today by visiting [fotfp.org](http://fotfp.org), scanning the QR code, or mailing a check to the address above. Thank you!



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*“Meep Meep,” at Wolf Road Prairie in Westchester by Matt Zuro*