



# The Meander

Newsletter of the Friends of the Kankakee

Spring 2026  
Time for New Beginnings

*Our mission is to support the preservation and restoration of the biological and cultural resources of the Kankakee River Basin. We work in partnership with individuals, communities, and organizations—public and private—to advance conservation, stewardship, and public engagement throughout the region. Our vision is to connect our natural lands with our neighbors, promoting recreation and cultural history.*

## New Goals, New Focus, New Vision, But Same Friend!

TJ Larney, Executive Director

Beginning in 2024, Friends of the Kankakee (FOK) started to look internally at itself as a non-profit and what direction the organization should go in the near and distant future. There were many updates for the FOK, including a revised mission statement. As the Board discussed growth opportunities and our role within the community, there were some needed changes. Our revised mission and vision statements discuss our interests in collaborating with



individuals, communities, and organizations within the Kankakee River Basin.

In 2025, the FOK officially updated a focus to expand into Indiana to help preserve and restore biological and cultural resources of the Kankakee River Basin. The FOK is an active non-profit operating in both Illinois and Indiana. The FOK created an account titled IN Grand Kankakee Marsh Fund, where donors can specifically allocate funds to help the FOK work on the Indiana side of the Kankakee River Basin. Our goal is to work with like-minded organizational and individual partners operating within Indiana. To clarify, the FOK does not plan to leave Illinois and/or discontinue are growth. Our future goal is to continue to work with the community by protecting portions of the Kankakee River Basin for future generations.

During the first half of 2025, the FOK created a website and new social media accounts. It is important for the FOK to provide electronic communication avenues for our partners, friends, and for the communities we belong to. We can provide quicker updates for our visitors in this capacity by posting updates. If you have not already, please check out our website at [FriendsoftheKankakee.com](http://FriendsoftheKankakee.com) and/or follow-us on Facebook at Friends of the Kankakee 501c3.



Friends of the Kankakee is a proud member of the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, a statewide association of private and public land conservation organizations.

For twenty years, PSCC has been the collective voice for land conservation in Illinois. It is the central organization for more than 40 conservation land trusts and other organizations who save, protect and steward natural areas in Illinois. PSCC holds statewide and regional conferences, professional development training, and provides support to executive directors and opportunities for professional networking. To learn more about

PSCC, visit [www.prairiestateconservation.org](http://www.prairiestateconservation.org)

Friends of the Kankakee is also a member of the Pembroke Preservation Alliance (PPA). Members of the PPA include: PSCC, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Field Museum, Community Development Center of PHP, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission, Openlands, The Nature Conservancy, IL Environment Council, The Conservation Fund, and additional great community partners.

## Land Swap and Trades

*TJ Larney, Executive Director*

The FOK successfully completed a land trade in November 2025 with one of our neighbors in Willow Estates. The FOK has been looking at ways to better serve the community while completing restoration work within the area. Many of our neighbors hold parcels that may be landlocked and/or just border on multiple sides of the FOK. Many individual parcels are approximately a quarter of an acre. In the past, FOK has reached out to different neighbors to possibly purchase and/or receive the property in donation. An alternative idea, given the current climate and appetite of many individuals and organizations, was to offer land trades. Essentially, FOK has reached out to several of our neighbors about offering a land trades where we would acquire certain parcels of



land within Willow Estates in exchange for one or more of our parcels.

Our November land trade occurred with a neighbor who was bordered by FOK on multiple sides causing the neighbor to be landlocked by FOK. In exchange, we offered parcels that may be more appealing to our neighbor where utility easements,

and building rights are more easily obtained. In return, the neighbor received property that better positioned our neighbor for future endeavors. At the same time, FOK received property in the land trade where we can more effectively and efficiently manage the properties held by FOK as we look to preserve and restore the cultural and biological resources of the area.

If you know anyone and/or if you are interested in a land trade with FOK, please contact us. We understand that individuals may not want to donate and/or sell their assets. A land trade is an alternative that we are open to discuss. In addition, if you or someone you know is interested in donating or selling property to FOK, please contact us, and we can start a conversation.

Contact Information at [FriendsOfTheKankakee.com](http://FriendsOfTheKankakee.com) or follow us on Facebook at Friends of the Kankakee 501c3. Or reach out directly to TJ Larney at 708-707-8545 and/or [info@friendsofthekankakee.com](mailto:info@friendsofthekankakee.com).

**Friends of the Kankakee**  
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## 2026 Giving & Membership Support

Friends of the Kankakee is raising funds to support the work that matters most—our operations, stewardship efforts, and land acquisitions—so we can better serve the communities we belong to across Indiana and Illinois.

As we look ahead to 2026, we invite you to make a membership contribution, and if you're able, we encourage you to help strengthen and grow our impact.

You can also choose to make your gift in honor of or in memory of someone special, an easy and meaningful way to celebrate a loved one while supporting conservation and connection to the Kankakee landscape.

### Ways to Give

#### *Donate online:*

[FriendsOfTheKankakee.com](http://FriendsOfTheKankakee.com) (via the link for Zeffy)

#### *Mail a contribution check to:*

Friends of the Kankakee  
PO Box 13  
Watseka, IL 60970

Friends of the Kankakee is a 501(c)(3). Any donations are tax deductible.

EIN: 35-1970746

Every gift helps protect our natural lands, supports stewardship, and builds a stronger future for the places and people we care about. Thank you for being part of this work.

Questions? Call/text **TJ Larney** (708-707-8545) or email [info@friendsofthekankakee.com](mailto:info@friendsofthekankakee.com)

# Conferences: Indiana Land Protection Alliance (ILPA) and Regional Prairie State Conservation Coalition (PSCC)

*TJ Larney, Executive Director*

With FOK being an organization operating within both Illinois and Indiana we find it important to work and assist partners on both sides of the border. As we've made updates to express our interest in working with various conservation and community partners, we know we need to be more proactive in our region. Engaging with individuals, communities, entities, and other conservation groups we believe will be beneficial for the natural environment and cultural history of the Kankakee River Basin.

This year marked the first time that FOK was represented at the annual ILPA conference held from September 24 to September 26, 2025. This year's annual ILPA conference was held at the Indiana Dunes State Park hosted by Indiana Department of Natural Resources and Shirley Heinze Land Trust. The gathering included different trainings, demonstrations, property tours, and the ability to grow and develop connections with organizations and people within the conservation community. Feedback from the conference was able to be shared with the FOK Board, and it was great to be able to connect with like-minded organizations operating within Indiana. As FOK officially moves to work within the borders of the State of Indiana, it is

important to develop relationships with others with conservation interests.

On Friday, September 26, 2025, the Community Development Corporation of PHP (CDC-PHP), in partnership with the PSCC, held a regional conference at the CDC-PHP, OKAN Welcome Center. FOK and many of partners with the Pembroke Preservation Alliance (PPA), community members, neighbors, and volunteers were able to attend this all-day conference. The conference was a one-day regional event, bringing our partners and the community together. FOK deems it to be important and a privilege to work with our PPA partners as we all look to provide more to you, the public, and our flora and fauna neighbors. Our PPA membership and partnership over the last several years has been a pivotal factor in FOK's mission and vision statement changes. For us to be a fair partner and member of the PPA, we find it important to state that we will work with our neighbors and nearby communities.

If you would like to learn more about either of these conferences and/or the FOK's partnerships, please reach out to: [info@friendsofthekankakee.com](mailto:info@friendsofthekankakee.com) and/or feel free to text/call TJ at (708) 707-8545.

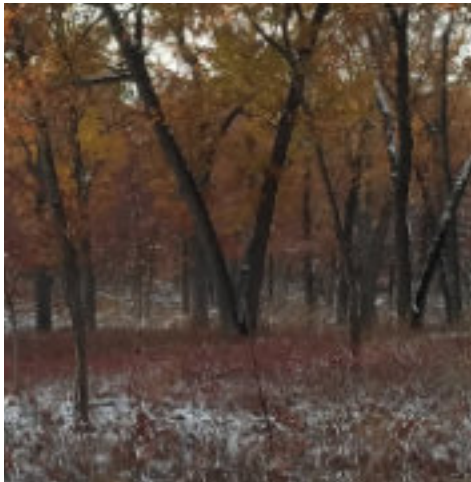


# Stewardship Purpose and Restoring Oak Savannas

*Gus Nyberg, President, Board of Directors*

In step with our new mission statement, Friends of the Kankakee is refocusing energy on the stewardship of the lands that we protect.

What is stewardship of the land? In short, it's care for the habitat that is the home of native animals and plants. Historically, in the case of our Willow



Estates land holdings, that home was an open oak savanna.

Savannas on sandy soil in the Kankakee valley were dominated by black oaks in the drier portions on dune ridges, pin oaks in

the flats where water often ponds in the spring, and white oaks in between those hydrologic bookends. Underneath the scattered oaks were a wide variety of animals and woody and herbaceous plants.

Healthy savanna habitat is much more open than a forest. Savannas have abundant light reaching the vegetation that carpets the ground with abundant flowers not only in the spring but throughout the growing season. The flowers feed pollinators which then feed birds.

Post ice age, the open structure of the savanna was maintained primarily by fire for thousands of years. Native peoples set fire to the lands for a variety of reasons, but regardless of the reason, if you were a plant and animal in this region, you adapted or you retreated from the savanna and prairie areas to less fire frequent areas.

As indigenous peoples were pushed out of the region and replaced with people from the old world, fire frequency increased briefly, but then diminished as the community needed to control the damaging aspects of fire to buildings. The mindset of fire suppression took root and held even as the ratio of homes to wilderness was flipped and the threat of fire

decreased.

Without fire, the savanna habitats have seen an increase in oaks growing beyond the grub stage and filling the canopy with trees. In addition, both native and non-native woody plants, especially honeysuckle, have established. These changes have led to a decline in the vigor of both woody and herbaceous understory plants, as well as the animals that require those plants, and have made it difficult for fire alone to restore the savanna.

To combat the degradation of the savanna habitat will require the intervention of people to return fire to the land, to reestablish savanna



structure, to combat invasive species and give extra care to rare species that need a little hand up to reestablish themselves in the landscape.

In 2026, Friends of the Kankakee will be hosting monthly workdays in Willow Estates focused on revitalizing the oak savannas from 8-11 AM on the second Saturday of each month. In addition to the workdays we aspire to return fire to the land through controlled burns, have plans to use a forestry mower in the late fall to jumpstart the structural recovery, and are open to working with people on independent projects that are consistent with our goals.

Let's work together to restore the oak savanna habitat in Willow Estates and make a healthy natural connection between the significant natural areas to the east and west of Friends' lands.

## Important Upcoming Dates and Events

Please visit us at [FriendsoftheKankakee.com](http://FriendsoftheKankakee.com) and on Facebook for updates to our calendar.

### ANNUAL MEETING

**Saturday, April 18, 2026, 10am to noon**  
*Jensen's Drugstore, 113 E. Washington St.*  
*Momence, IL*

*RSVP by April 18, lunch provided*

#### **Saturday work days on FOK property**

*Bring your own tools, and dress for the weather.*

Meet at 407 Pike Rd, Beaverville, IL 60912.

- Saturday, March 14, 2026 – 8am to 11am CST
- Saturday, April 11, 2026 – 8am to 11am CST
- Saturday, May 9, 2026 – 8am to 11am CST
- Saturday, June 13, 2026 – 8am to 11am CST

RSVP by email to Gus Nyberg at [nyberggus@gmail.com](mailto:nyberggus@gmail.com)  
or text/call 765-427-4345

Currently, our Fish and Wildlife partner is hosting a first Sunday of the month volunteer workday series at the refuge property, South 17000E Road & East 8000S Road, Pembroke Township, IL 60958. **These dates are subject to change so please check the FOK website calendar and/or RSVP with Anne Hughes-Wagner.**

- Sunday, April 5, 2026 – 11am to 2pm CST
- Sunday, May 3, 2026 – 11am to 2pm CST
- Sunday, June 7, 2026 – 11am to 2pm CST

RSVP by email to Anne Hughes-Wagner at [anne\\_hughes-wagner@fws.gov](mailto:anne_hughes-wagner@fws.gov) or call/text 773-405-7129.

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### Book Review

A New Book on the Draining of the Grand  
Kankakee Marsh and Beaver Lake  
*Jim Sweeney*

President Gus Nyberg asked me to critique a new book by Friends of the Kankakee member and volunteer Michael Dobberstein, a retired English professor from Purdue University Northwest.

*Changing Landscapes of Northwest Indiana: Draining Beaver Lake and the Kankakee Marsh*, was released December 15, 2025 by Purdue University Press. It usually takes me forever to read a book, but I read this one in less than three weeks. I learned a lot even though the outcome is still depressing.

The Grand Kankakee Marsh once covered nearly 500,000 acres in northwest Indiana and a small part of northeast Illinois. Beaver Lake, about 35 square miles in size, was located entirely within Newton County, directly south of Lake County. The Kankakee River wildly meandered 250 miles through 2,000 bends in the Grand Marsh in Indiana. As the crow flies, the river was about 90 miles from South Bend to Momence, Illinois.

The book goes into detail on the numerous public and private attempts to drain the lake and the marshlands of the Kankakee basin. Dobberstein also includes the shenanigans and corruption of those

efforts, most of which were ignored by both the state and federal government.

The drainage work of Beaver Lake, the Grand Marsh, and channelizing the river were all controversial and complicated. Illinois manages their part of the river for multiple benefits, including recreation and conservation, and they fought these projects for decades.

Dobberstein first learned the history of the area when he volunteered at the Kankakee Sands Nature Preserve in Newton County. Kankakee Sands is 8,000 acres and is owned by The Nature Conservancy, an international non-profit.

It is obvious he spent many, many hours researching 150-years' worth of old newspaper and magazine articles and working with local historians and historical societies. Dobberstein told me that a big part of the reason he wrote this book was to show the public that there are significant negative consequences to destructive projects like draining the Kankakee marshlands, referring to the chronic and expensive flooding and erosion problems found along the river in both Indiana and Illinois.

This is a great read for anyone interested in the history of the Kankakee River basin. Two big thumbs up!

*Changing Landscapes of Northwest Indiana* is now available at Amazon.com and may be found at local bookstores.



PO Box 13  
Watseka, IL 60970

Friends of the Kankakee continues to grow because of the incredible support from our volunteers, donors, members, and neighbors who believe in protecting and celebrating the natural and cultural landscapes of the Kankakee River region. Whether you give your time on a workday, contribute financially, share your mission with others, or simply stay engaged as part of the community, you are helping preserve these lands for future generations. Your commitment to stewardship, recreation, and local history is what keeps our vision forward looking, and we are deeply grateful for the role each of you play in strengthening our shared community.

*Donate online*  
**Friends of the Kankakee.com**  
(Via the link for Zeffy)

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Friends of the Kankakee is a 501(c)(3)  
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**Membership Application**

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City \_\_\_\_\_  
State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Email \_\_\_\_\_  
Dues \_\_\_\_\_ \$25.00/year

**Please make checks payable to:**  
Friends of the Kankakee  
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