



The Meander

Newsletter of the Friends of the Kankakee

Summer 2026

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.

2026 Annual Meeting TJ Larney, Executive Director

Friends of the Kankakee's (FOK) annual meeting was held on Saturday, April 18th in Momence, IL. We had a nice mix of both new and familiar faces. We still consider ourselves a young organization, being approximately 25 years old, but we own and manage properties that are full of history. At this year's annual meeting, we were able to discuss our 2025 accomplishments in 2025 and highlight what will be occurring in 2026. One of our goals is to support our partners, neighbors, and other organizations in the community. Part of this vision will include creating a trail system within our properties in Iroquois County, specifically in Beaverville Township in Iroquois County, Illinois. Once our trails are in place, we believe that our collaboration with conservation minded neighbors in Iroquois, Kankakee, and Newton Counties will create the bridge for a multi-state trail system.

Our special guest speaker this year was Jason Bleich of the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). Jason shared the value of what land management and restoration efforts can bring to the communities around us. His presentation provided examples of how USFWS can work with individual landowners and partners in the preservation and/or restoration of their private lands. Examples Jason presented include the creation of wetlands on the portion of a former farmer field. A newly established wetland will provide important ecological impacts for landowners and environment. It was an honor that Jason spoke at our annual meeting, and we look forward to continuing working with the USFWS in the future.

In both 2025 and 2026, we've had many new volunteers and familiar faces coming out to support our efforts in our land restoration. We can't thank our volunteers enough for their continued help. There are many ways that members and volunteers have reached out to assist in our efforts. These efforts include physically assisting with stewardship, board member responsibilities, and the general discussion of FOK with those you encounter. It may not always seem like much, but just mentioning FOK in casual conversation has gone a long way.

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We Need Your Assistance

Friends of the Kankakee invites you to support the conservation, stewardship, and community programs that help keep the Kankakee watershed healthy and vibrant. Your membership or contribution helps strengthen our impact across Indiana and Illinois. If you're able, we encourage you to consider an additional gift to help sustain and expand the work ahead. Every contribution, no matter the size, helps us protect natural spaces, engage our communities, and create lasting conservation outcomes.

Ways to Give

Donate online:

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

Annual Meeting, continued

Many new individuals and organizations are reaching out to find ways to engage with us and the natural world.

Our Board of Directors has changed. We welcomed two new board members, Cy Ryan and Nathan Ulrich to the Board of Directors. Three board members were re-elected to two-year terms. We'd also like to take this opportunity to thank a retiring board member, Amy Ciaccio-Jarvis for all her support through the years. All our board members come from different walks of life. If you have an interest in board service work, please reach out to us. We all have different ways of interacting with the world around us.

This year's annual meeting was held at Jensen's Drugstore Museum in Momence, IL, and the history of the building I find to be intriguing. This building is a registered historic landmark and is full of antiques, collectibles, and gifts held and shared by people over their lives. The building has been a focal or feature in various cinematic productions, including recently the TV Series, *Monster The Ed Gein Story*. This building is full of history, and in ways, much like history, FOK looks to preserve with our land management.

What Happens Next?

TJ Larney, Executive Director

Have you noticed over the last few years that the costs of commodities including undeveloped land have risen across the country? You're not alone, and we have noticed and felt the impact too. Some of you reading this newsletter may own too many acres of land and have been feeling pressure to sell your property to developers. I want to present you with some options below about how FOK can assist you in avoiding the pressure to sell your property for development. Below are a few different options to consider:

- Land Donations: Donate all or part of your land for conservation and tax benefits.
- Conservation Easements: Protect your land permanently while keeping ownership.
- Trusts: Revocable (flexible) and irrevocable (asset protection) options.
- Soil & Water Programs: Get paid to improve your land.
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Federal programs that provide financial and technical assistance to help improve and protect your land.
- Partnerships: Flexible agreements with conservation organizations.

If you'd like to schedule a meeting or conversation with me or one of our board members, please let us know. There is no obligation to ever sell, donate, or trade your property. We would just like to provide you with some assistance or items to think about. Just a real conversation about your land and your goals.

Reach out to us at info@friendsofthekankakee.com or call/text TJ Larney at 708-707-8545.



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

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.

Friends of the Kankakee Board of Directors

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Lynn Riley, Treasurer
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Tom Larson
Cy Ryan
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TJ Larney, Executive Director

In-house Restoration

Gus Nyberg, President, Board of Directors

On March 28 Friends of the Kankakee burned 13 acres of land that we own in Willow Estates. Friends of the Kankakee, conservation partner organizations and some private landowners in the Kankakee River valley use controlled burns to maintain oak savanna habitat. The oaks are adapted to the fire, but many non-native and native invasive species do not handle fire as well, allowing fire to tilt the balance of power in the habitat towards an oak dominated state. In addition, fire helps keep the canopy structure of the oak savanna in the range (15-65% or thereabouts) that allows light to reach the ground to maintain healthy savanna understory habitat.

The crew included five people participating on their first controlled burn, who later shared that they were “nervous” and had “anxiousness” going into the burn, but also their confidence that “protocols were in place” and they felt “safe due to our knowledge.”

One person summed up the role of holding well, stating that the fire “ended up being even easier

to manage than I had expected. ...once one part is burnt out it just moves on and it won't spread backwards because there isn't anything left to burn.”

To a person, the aspect of the burn which made the largest impression was the smoke, with post-burn thoughts of “I definitely wish I had worn a mask,” and the observation that the downwind side of the burn gets a lot more smoke.

Luckily for Friends of the Kankakee, the smoke “won't keep us from participating again” as “we contributed to something important.” That feeling was reinforced later when they told their granddaughter about the experience, and she declared “awesome.”

If you would like to explore a post burn landscape, please visit our 407 Pike parking area and head east across the street. If you would like to participate on a controlled burn in the future, we would appreciate the help. Friends aims to start our burn season in the fall and run through the end of March. We hope to burn a few units in the upcoming burn season.



Native Plants

Gus Nyberg, President, Board of Directors

Over Mother's Day weekend, my wife and I headed up to the Indiana Dunes region to hike after assisting with the Friends of the Sands native plant sale for sand inhabiting species. We wanted to unwind while exploring natural areas, and enjoy company with friends. On one of our hikes, we ran into a woman who was looking at some strange device on a tree that we presumed was for catching spotted lantern flies, a non-native insect that is negatively impacting hardwood species. We stopped, shared our guess as to what the contraption on the tree was, and said hello. She was from Illinois and shared that she had come over to the Dunes as life had scattered her children around the U.S. For her mental health, she needed to be doing something different than being at home alone for Mother's Day weekend. She was also a lover of wildflowers, speaking about her joy of trilliums and the impact of deer on those beloved trilliums, and proudly spoke of retiring her lawn and having a natural front yard.

People hike in natural areas for a variety of reasons, but I was pleased to have run into a knowledgeable person who is a natural areas ally. The conversation moved from plants and she shared that her daughter lived in Seattle, and she would be moving out there in a few months. To preserve her efforts and hold on to some of her Midwestern home, she would be digging up her cherished bloodroot and trilliums, placing them in containers and packing them with her on the plane to plant in Seattle, as they were "native."

I was out on a hike with my spouse and friends, not on an educational trip, but the lady in front of me

seemed to care deeply about natural areas and had an understanding that they should be cherished, and I gently suggested that I didn't think bloodroot is native to Seattle, thinking in my mind that her passion is for natural systems and I would steer her away from Midwestern plants and hopefully encourage her to set new native plant roots in Seattle.

She insisted bloodroot is native as she has seen them growing in parks on previous trips and brushed off my comment about Seattle climate being great for growing temperate plants from all around this amazing world.

To her credit, she saw the divide of how we respectively see the world of plants, recognizing that all of our goals that day were to enjoy a hike in the tail end of the spring wildflower bloom. However, she all but declared that she was firm in her chosen path to bring Midwestern plants to the Pacific Northwest when she stated that "we can agree to disagree," and with that we exchanged pleasantries, and continued on our respective hikes.

There are a few things to ponder from this short interaction and I offer these observations.

Call your mom on Mother's Day. She would love to hear from you.

We have work to do in our efforts to bring attention and information about native plants forward, even with friends of natural areas. Friends of the Kankakee encourages people to use local sources of information, such as people that are engaged in conservation work in our region (they can be found on hikes and stewardship workdays) to inform your native landscaping and naturalized habitat creation, and whenever possible, use native locally sourced native plants.



Partnership with Lake County Parks

Gus Nyberg, President, Board of Directors

For a long time, as a Newton County resident, I have been fascinated by Lake County Parks and Rec's property in Newton County and wondered if it was a beachhead to an invasion by Lake County? And if so, should the good people of Newton County rise up to stop it?

Investigating the property, I learned in the 1990s, Andrew Singleton reached out to The Nature Conservancy about donating family land they owned on both sides of the Kankakee. The land was assessed, accepted and used as a match in NAWCA (North American Wetland Conservation Act) grant by Lake County Parks, as Lake County Parks owned and managed the nearby Grand Kankakee Marsh in 1997.

Mystery of ownership solved, and glad to hear that Lake County Parks is not going to annex Newton County.

The quirk of ownership generated my interest in visiting the land and led to many a stop over the years. The old channel river bank is lined with mallows, but this rises up into an area dominated by silver maple. Then above the 7.5' flood stage enters into a white oak and pin oak woodland. The bank along the current river is an unnatural spoil pile created during dredging of the river, which has been colonized with a lot of honeysuckle. My appreciation for the beautiful large oaks in the floodplain percolated in Friends of the Kankakee's desire to be engaged in protecting land in Indiana. This



eventually led to a conversation with Lake County Parks as to their goals for the land and if Friends could assist in anyway.

Those conversations have led to Friends of the Kankakee entering into a partnership to manage the 49 southern acres of Lake County Parks with the goal of managing the land to perpetuate the oak community and discourage non-native species as well.

The property is only accessible by boat, and for the workdays on July 18th, August 15th and September 19th, we will meet at the Shelby Public Access Site at 8 AM, boat over to the property, and work to create better conditions for the native plants on site. Participants are welcome to bring their own boat. Workday participants who boat over with us will be returned to the parking lot by noon. If river conditions are deemed unsafe, workdays will be called off.

Oaks are an important tree of floodplain communities and are seeing depressed recruitment as native and non-native species out compete the oaks in the low light environments on the ground, creating conditions not conducive to strong oak canopy in 100 years. The work of a manually tweaking the structure to get more light to the ground and a return to occasional burning in the floodplain will perpetuate the oak community. This work will serve as an example of what the Kankakee floodplain can be today, and the acorns produced will feed a lot of wood ducks, turkeys, and red headed woodpeckers in the future.

Important Upcoming Dates and Events

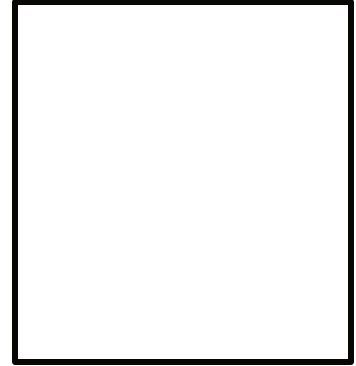
FOK Stewardship Workdays – Second Saturdays, July through October dates from 8am to 11am. We will meet at 407 Pike Rd. Beaverville, IL parking area. RSVP by email to Gus Nyberg at nyberggus@gmail.com or text/call 765-427-4345

FOK Stewardship Days with Lake County Parks & Rec. Third Saturdays, July through September 8am to noon. Meeting at the Shelby Route 55 Boat Ramp parking area in Shelby, IN. RSP by email to Gus Nyberg at nyberggus@gmail.com or text/call 765-427-4345

Refuge workdays. Second Wednesdays from 8am to noon. Meet at South 17000E Road & East 8000S Road, S 17000E Rd & E 8000S Rd, Pembroke Township, IL 60958, USARSPV by email to Anne Hughes-Wagner at anne_hugheswagner@fws.gov or call/text 773-405-712



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)

Mail a Contribution Check to
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Friends of the Kankakee is a 501(c)(3)
Donations are tax deductible

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