

Do you have a few hours a week to serve as a greeter at a visitor's center? Or perhaps you enjoy tending a native landscaping bed or monitoring bluebird boxes? Maybe you have a few days a year to help remove invasive plant species or pick up trash along your favorite trail. Love sharing your knowledge? Ever thought of volunteering to lead a nature program, re-enact a historical event or organize a special event?



For more than 100 years, some of Illinois' most precious natural resources have been set aside as state parks, preserving their scenic, floral, faunal and geologic resources for future generations.

The Department of Natural Resources is charged to care for these resources, and that is a duty we carry out with professional and heartfelt dedication. In today's economic climate, fully caring for those resources means everyone is doing more with less, and that includes how we at DNR manage our parks. Caring for Illinois is a responsibility we all share, and in these challenging economic times, there are occasions when we are forced to make difficult management choices at DNR. Not every park maintenance project can be funded. Repairs to facilities must wait. Potholes in park access roads go unfilled, trail maintenance delayed and interpretive programs cut.

Limited staff, whose workloads have increased due to reductions in DNR positions statewide, simply cannot keep up with all of the tasks required to adequately manage our state's public parks and recreation areas.

There is a bright spot: Many nature-loving citizens have stepped forward to make a selfless personal contribution by joining other like-minded supporters of nature. Throughout Illinois, 24 state parks have organized friends groups helping with site needs and providing avenues for communicating suggestions and concerns

to the park's site superintendent. Organized groups also provide a means for directly contributing funds or property to a park.

Some examples include:

- The purpose of the Volo Bog friends group, established in 1983, is to promote citizen awareness of the natural heritage of Volo Bog State Natural Area. Members aid in the delivery of educational programs and organization of annual events, such as Bog Days, International Migratory Bird Day and Winter Fest.

- Only recently formed, the Friends of Pyramid State Park already are aggressively planning strategies for volunteers to enhance services at the nearly 20,000-acre Perry County facility.

Where do friends groups exist?

Region I

Argyle Lake
Franklin Creek
Hennepin Canal
Johnson-Sauk
Jubilee College
Lake Le-Aqua-Na
Morrison Rockwood
Rock Island Trail
Shabbona Lake
Starved Rock
Wildlife Prairie

Region II

Goose Lake Prairie
Illinois Beach
Moraine Hills
Volo Bog

Region III

Fox Ridge
Weldon Springs

Region IV

Pere Marquette
Sanganois
World Shooting and Recreational Complex

Region V

Cache River/Tunnel Hill/Ferne Clyffe
Giant City
Fort Massac
Pyramid

- Friends of Fort Massac, incorporated in 2003, are actively involved with demonstrations and events relating the history of the replica 1802 American fort. The group recently was awarded a federal grant to acquire and rehab a 20-acre parcel adjacent to the park.

- The Friends of Giant City State Park was established in 2003 to support and enhance educational and recreational opportunities at the park. Members serve as greeters at the visitor's center, monitor bluebird boxes, remove invasive plant species and lead nature programs and hikes. The group also sells nature books and gifts through the park's visitor's center, the proceeds of which benefit park functions and programs.

- For more than 25 years, the Fox Ridge Foundation has been dedicated to the continued improvement and promotion of Fox Ridge State Park. In recent years, donations from contributors have provided interpretive assistance, playground equipment and an interpretive pond outside of the visitor's center.

More hands make a lighter load and by joining a friends group, even if you can offer only a few hours a year, you can help make a difference that will reap enormous rewards—for yourself, your community and Illinois' natural resources—for years to come.

No friends group in your area? Start a ground swell of interest in your community and get one started. Experience has proven 24 times that development of a long-term relationship with your local state park will help ensure that today—and tomorrow—Illinoisans have the opportunity to explore Illinois' wildest and most scenic places.

Marc Miller, Director

To learn more about existing friends groups and the process for establishing a new group, visit www.dnr.state.il.us/volunteer/friends.htm.