



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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IDNR recognizes 2025 outstanding volunteers of the year

SPRINGFIELD – Eleven individuals and organizations have been recognized as 2025 outstanding volunteers of the year for their contributions to conservation on behalf of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).

“IDNR is thankful to have so many wonderfully dedicated volunteers and support groups that help maintain and promote state parks, historic sites, the Illinois State Museum, outdoor safety, and conservation projects,” **IDNR Director Natalie Phelps Finnie said**. “I’m pleased to recognize their extraordinary work and the sacrifices they make for the benefit of the people of Illinois.”

The 2025 IDNR outstanding volunteers of the year are:

Harl Jones, Highland – Harl Jones has been a dedicated volunteer at Lincoln’s New Salem State Historic Site in Menard County since 2012. He is most often found in the church and schoolhouse, where he brings 1830s church services and education to life for visitors. He also plays a pivotal role in the site’s annual fall Candlelight Walk, ensuring every building remains lit throughout the event. During the winter months he also volunteers at the Vandalia State House State Historic Site.

Joan Wientjes, Metropolis – Joan Wientjes has been a valued and enthusiastic volunteer at Fort Massac State Park in Massac County for more than 20 years. As treasurer of the Friends of Fort Massac organization, she’s been instrumental in supporting and organizing many of the park’s most beloved events. At the annual Fort Massac Encampment, which takes place every October, she takes the lead on all of the event’s kid-friendly activities.

Jim and Melissa Blood, Springfield – Jim and Melissa Blood have been volunteering in the science collections at the Illinois State Museum in Sangamon County for more than a decade. They’ve worked on several significant projects in the geology and zoology collections, inventorying and mapping the locations of thousands of specimens of fossil types for the museum’s collections.

Art Schuetz, Highland – Art Schuetz has been a hunter education instructor for more than 50 years. He’s instructed classes in Madison County and throughout Illinois but calls the Highland Pistol and Rifle Club home. He and a friend started the hunter safety course at the club, and he continues to host about 100 students for classes each year around Easter and Thanksgiving. He’s also helped teach IDNR boater education courses as well.

Michael Toohey, Ottawa – Michael Toohey has volunteered at the Starved Rock Foundation in LaSalle County since 2023. He primarily serves in the Le Rocher bookstore in the visitor center. He also joined the park’s foundation board and serves as its community outreach representative. He participated in the Ottawa Volunteer Fair and attended the Illinois Valley Area Chamber of Commerce on behalf of the foundation.

Warbler Ridge Champions, Coles County – The Grand Prairie Friends Land Trust purchased a 130-acre property in 2013 along the Embarras River in Coles County. They were joined by local residents armed with loppers, gloves and trash bags. Together, they built a volunteer group that wanted to protect a cemetery on the ridge. This group became the Warbler Ridge Champions, and they serve as community advocates, recruiters and promoters of this developing conservation area. The group has grown to hundreds of members and the property to 1300-acres.

Franklin Creek Conservation Association, Franklin Grove– The Franklin Creek Conservation Association (FCCA) was formed in 1981 to help care for the Franklin Creek State Natural Area in Lee County. The FCCA was the first volunteer association in the state to improve idle state-owned land for park and natural area purposes. In the 1990s, volunteers helped raise money for a functioning 1847 reconstructed grist mill, which the FCCA operates on behalf of IDNR. The FCCA has taken on multiple large-scale restoration and maintenance projects at the site.

Rock River Trail and Horseman Association, Dixon – The Rock River Trail and Horseman Association has been instrumental in developing key amenities at the Franklin Creek State Natural Area in Lee County, including an equestrian arena, announcer's stand, trail system and campground. Members work with IDNR site staff to maintain and restore these facilities. They clear trails, remove storm debris, help with trail restoration and more.

Susan Lutton, Carbondale – Susan Lutton is treasurer of the Friends of Giant City State Park organization in Jackson County. Treasurer is a time-consuming and often underappreciated role in volunteer groups, but since taking on this role, she has brought organization, diligence, and attention to detail to the board, resulting in an increase in financial support.

Dave Glacinski, Lexington– Dave Glacinski has volunteered at Starved Rock State Park in LaSalle for the past three years in various capacities, including trail maintenance, graffiti removal and visitor services. He greets guests, offers trail suggestions and provides park information to new and returning guests. His presence is always marked by kindness, enthusiasm and a genuine desire to help others experience the best that Starved Rock has to offer.

Traci Brandenburg and the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, Dundee – Traci Brandenburg of Kane County and the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation host field-day safety education events, fulfilling an essential requirement for online students. The foundation has served as the annual host site for Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow program, training more than 2,000 professionals, and its volunteers help with habitat restoration, wildlife surveys, and data collection. All these efforts and more directly support and influence wildlife policy and pilot programs.

Photos of volunteers are available upon request by emailing dnr.pio@illinois.gov.

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About IDNR

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources is celebrating 100 years of conservation and service to the people of Illinois throughout 2025. The department was established July 1, 1925, as the Illinois Department of Conservation, bringing under one umbrella oversight of fish and game, forestry, public works, and lakes.

Today, IDNR's work encompasses management of about 400 sites across Illinois, including state parks and historic sites; wildlife, fisheries, forestry, and natural heritage; Lake Michigan water allocation and coastal management; conservation police; mines and minerals; oil and gas; issuance of licenses, permits, and numerous grants; the World Shooting and Recreational Complex in Sparta; and the Illinois State Museum. Visit <https://dnr.illinois.gov> for more information.