



Friends of Potato Creek State Park

FALL 2026 NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Friends of Potato Creek State Park Autumn Newsletter!

In this issue...

- Board meetings & members
- Salute to our volunteers
- Summer concert recap
- Danger! Poison Hemlock!
- Check out the General Store's new *Friends* display
- Trumpeter Swans on Worster Lake
- *You can become a Friends' sponsor or donor*



The Friends of Potato Creek State Park meet the 3rd Tuesday of each month, January through October, at 6 PM in the Park Nature Center.

ALL ARE WELCOME !!!

NO meeting in November or December.
Remaining 2026 FOPC board meetings are:

- September 15, 2026
- October 20, 2026

Please come join us !!!

BOARD MEMBERS

President, Chere McKinley

Vice President, Vicki Rydzynski

Treasurer, Delores Stiffler

Secretary, Jean Deary

At Large, Jackie Nicodemus

At Large, Linda Laney

At Large, Marlene Brown

The Volunteers of Potato Creek State Park

By Chere McKinley

Potato Creek State Park depends on many dedicated volunteers and community partnerships to help keep the park operating, maintained and welcoming to its visitors. According to Alex deGroot, Assistant Property Manager and DNR volunteer coordinator, volunteers contribute an estimated **800 to 1,000 hours each month during the summer**. Their efforts have become an essential part of the park's operation, particularly in an era of tight state budgets.

A Unique Partnership

One of Potato Creek's longest-running partnerships is with the **South Bend Community Reentry Center (SBCRC)**, a program of the Indiana Department of Correction. For approximately 19 years, men nearing the end of their sentences have worked at Potato Creek as part of their transition back into the community. They are paid a stipend for their work and are not technically volunteers.

Typically, four to eight men work at the park five days a week, year-round, performing tasks such as mowing, trail trimming and other maintenance. When I met them, they were preparing tables and tents for Darcy Days.

The SBCRC houses approximately 200 men who work at local businesses and organizations, including Potato Creek State Park, Potawatomi Zoo, Four Winds Field and Reins of Life. The program provides opportunities to develop job skills, earn money and learn to work with others while preparing for release. Educational opportunities include GED classes, drug education and personal-development programs.

One of the men working at the park told me that his job gives him a sense of accomplishment and an opportunity to give something back to society. He plans to pursue a career in regenerative agriculture after his release.

"It's a win-win program," deGroot said. One of the most rewarding things for him is seeing former participants return to the park with their families and share their successes.

Volunteers Throughout the Park

Volunteers fill many other important roles. Trail volunteers monitor and maintain the park's trails, mow and trim vegetation, remove invasive plants and report major problems—such as fallen trees—to the DNR. The Indiana Trail Riders Association inspects and monitors the horse trails one to three times a year, while the Northern Indiana Mountain Bike Association (NIMBA) has volunteered at Potato Creek for 19 years. NIMBA originally built the park's seven miles of mountain-bike trails and continues to maintain them.

Alex also works with the courts to provide community-service opportunities for people completing court-ordered sentences. Local corporations, universities, schools and other organizations regularly volunteer for team-building or community-service projects, helping with tasks ranging from trash and debris removal to housekeeping and other park projects.

The Friends of Potato Creek

The **Friends of Potato Creek State Park (FOPC)** is a nonprofit volunteer organization established in 2006 to support the DNR and provide additional programming for park visitors and the surrounding community.



Volunteers (Cont'd.)

FOPC sponsors annual events such as an Easter Egg Hunt, fall family activities and a summer concert series. The organization has also purchased replacement trees, repaired the sidewalk near the park office, provided kayak launchers and helped establish a native-plant garden near the Nature Center.

The Friends group supports the Nature Center and DNR naturalist programs with equipment and supplies and sponsors educational programs and guest speakers. Recent programs have included presentations about bees and other pollinators and a program from the Potawatomi Zoo.

FOPC receives **no taxpayer funding from the state or DNR**. Its work is supported entirely by donations, memberships, businesses, memorials and occasional grants.

Campground Hosts: The “Extra” That Makes a Difference

Perhaps the most visible volunteers are the **10 campground-host couples** who serve in the Family and Horse campgrounds. Hosts work approximately 25 hours per week in exchange for their campsites.

1 Their responsibilities are extensive: cleaning restrooms and fire rings, mowing and trimming, maintaining campsites and playgrounds, assisting at the entrance gates, performing light landscaping and weed control, painting signs and electrical pedestals, watering newly planted trees and even inspecting and repairing park bicycles.

They also assist at the Nature Center when the naturalist is away conducting programs elsewhere in the park.

The hosts meet with deGroot every Tuesday to discuss the week's assignments and current needs. Some have been returning for eight to ten years or more. They have developed a close-knit community of their own and even get together for dinner on Wednesday evenings.

DeGroot knows the individual talents of his volunteers and puts those skills to good use. One host, for example, is a seamstress who has made the work vests worn by the hosts and handles sewing projects for the park.

“Managing all these volunteers is time-consuming,” deGroot says, “but well worth the effort.”

From Eagle Scouts building birdhouses and fire rings to trail riders, mountain bikers, community-service workers, campground hosts and members of the Friends group, volunteers contribute in countless ways. Their work saves the park valuable resources, but perhaps more importantly, it creates a stronger connection between Potato Creek State Park and the community it serves.

If you are interested in volunteering at Potato Creek State Park, contact **Alex deGroot at 574-850-9347 or adegroot@dnr.in.gov**.



The Friends of Potato Creek Park keep you informed across the media, including our Facebook page, website and quarterly newsletter. Find us here:

[Friends Facebook Page](#)

- **Maggie Hesters**, Facebook Administrator

[Friends Website](#)

- **Cory Dennie**, Webpage Administrator

- **Brian Sittley**, Newsletter Editor



Summer Concerts Return to Beach Area

By Linda Laney

Summer concerts at Potato Creek have grown into a family favorite over the last six years. This summer featured these outstanding local performers...

BAND	STYLE
Kennedy's Kitchen	Irish/Folk
Blue Holler Band	Bluegrass
Sentimental Journeys	1940s Big Band
Darryl Buchanan	Soul / Motown
PT & the Cruisers	Classic Rock

The Friends would not be able to bring these concerts to the community without the generosity of our sponsors listed below.



A HUGE Thank You to our sponsors!

Lippert Components, Jeff & Maggie Schwartz, 1st Source Bank, Laney Honey Co., Tieal & Travis O'Brien, Creative Hotstamping, Brian & Anna Krueger, Bashor Children's Home, A Rosie Place, Bowen Printing, Prairie Winds Nature Farm, Scholl Dairy, UA Local 172 Plumbers & Pipefitters, J.R. Fox Jewelers, Unity Gardens.

Danger! Poison Hemlock!

Submitted by Marlene Brown

Please help! What is happening to our country roads and woodlands? I used to de-stress by getting in my car and going for a drive in the country. During summer months the roadsides would be full of bright orange tiger lilies, purple cone flowers, pink phlox, Queen Ann's Lace, cat tails, black-eyed Susans and other various prairie grasses and weeds. It was beautiful, one of the Midwest treasures most people don't know about unless they've resided in one of the 'Fly Over States'.

I recently returned from a two-week vacation in early June, and was shocked at what I saw driving home. All along country roadways was a flowering white bush that wasn't there last year. It appeared on both sides of the road, and was crowding out native plants! Last couple years there were only a few of these white bushes; now they're taking over. It's the invasive poison hemlock!



Poison hemlock is the fastest growing invasive I've ever seen. The past several years have seen the rapid growth of purple loosestrife and phragmites in our wetlands/woodlands, but that is nothing compared to the speed at which hemlock is spreading. Poison hemlock commonly grows along roadsides and ditches, in pastures, and along streambanks. You can recognize it by its long hairless stems marked with purple mottling, fernlike leaves, and small white flowers that grow in umbrella shaped clusters. They bloom from May – August, starting out white, then seeding to light green, then turning brown. It is a biennial plant which means it has a two-year life cycle. The first year it develops roots and leaves and forms a low cluster near the ground called a rosette. It does not flower. The second year it can grow up to 10 feet tall, flower, produce seeds, and then die. Once they produce seeds and spread in dense patches, hemlocks quickly take over and displace native vegetation.

Poison hemlock is highly toxic to humans, livestock, and wildlife. Symptoms include trembling, salivation, pupil dilation, rapid weak pulse, eventually leading to respiratory distress, coma, or even death. A gentleman I know personally experienced this first hand, before he knew how toxic this weed was. He went into a field to retrieve something, and came out with a nosebleed and breathing difficulty. Most people have never even heard of poison hemlock, and this is something we should all learn about. Homeowners, landowners and especially farmers need to recognize this plant in early stages while it can be removed manually or by chemical control options. For more information, contact your local extension office or weed board, or government agency.



Unfortunately, poison hemlock continues to spread rapidly, with no federal, state, county, or local agency taking responsibility for stopping the spread. They seem to think that volunteers can take care of invasives. Perhaps that was true in the past, but now it is certainly not fair or reasonable for volunteers to take care of this toxic mess. Our natural resources need protection, and as responsible citizens of planet earth, it is up to each of us to contact our respective elected officials about the urgency of protecting the land. This is a problem that can no longer be ignored. Is this a case of 'willful negligence'? Do we have to wait for livestock to start dropping dead for no apparent reason? And then look to find poison hemlock in their fields? Personally, I would like for my nieces and nephews and their children to be able to enjoy the beauty that the natural world has to offer!

Support Your 'Friends' at the Potato Creek General Store

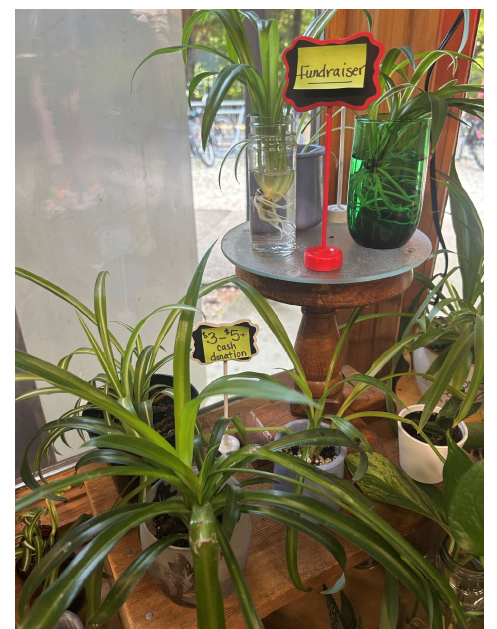
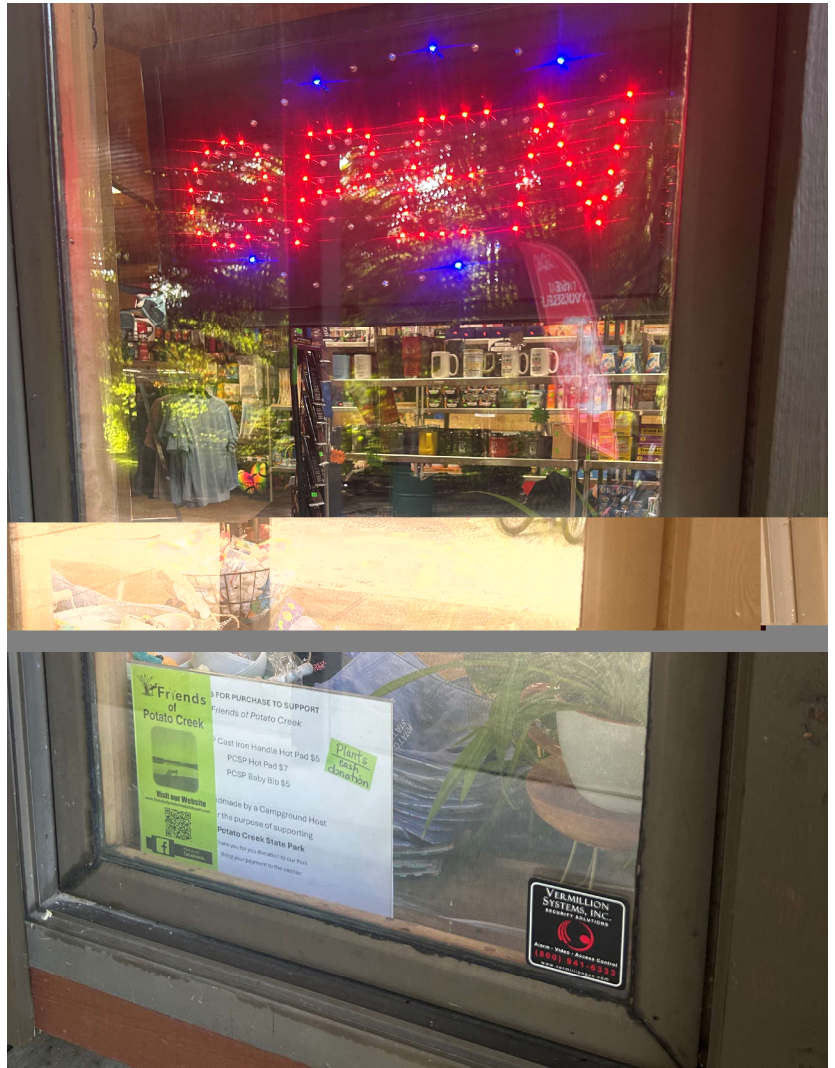
Submitted by Jean Deary

The display window at the Potato Creek Park General Store has been set up as a designated area to promote the *Friends of Potato Creek* and to help store patrons to learn about our group. What's more, it provides an opportunity for all park visitors to donate monies that will *stay in the park*.

According to Friends' Board Secretary **Jean Deary**, plants and embroidered items have been donated by a member and by a campground host for this purpose. As of late July, the window had raised over \$800.00 in addition to the 'donation bucket' placed at the General Store register.

For the benefit of park visitors, the general store is open daily from 8:30AM to 9:00PM during peak season. The store offers ice, snacks, firewood and camping gear items.

Next time you stop by the general store, ask about how *you* can support the Friends' valuable efforts in supporting our wonderful park!



Trumpeter Swans on Worster Lake

Submitted by Marlene Brown

In 2027, the Potato Creek Nature Center will be getting a new addition -- a trumpeter swan!

Trumpeter swans are the largest native waterfowl in North America, and one of the heaviest flying birds. A deceased swan was brought into the Nature Center in 2022, was promptly stored in a freezer, and is now in the hands of a local taxidermist who will have it ready in a flying position sometime next year. It's a lengthy process and we will be the only nature center in the state to have this rare bird!



The trumpeter swan is one of two native swan species in North America; the other is the tundra swan. The invasive mute swan is also present in our state, and the adults are easily identifiable by their bright orange bill. Trumpeter and tundra swans have a mostly black or all-black bill.

Trumpeter swans often mate for life, and they nest for the first time at age 4-7 years. The nest site is surrounded by water, as on a small island or a beaver or muskrat house.

Mute swans are an invasive, aggressive bird that can kill the adult trumpeter swans and their young. They find the nesting sites and drive the trumpeters out, as well as out-compete them for

vegetation. Mute swans significantly uproot more vegetation than they eat, and they disturb large areas of wetland vegetation. This impacts water quality and aquatic habitat for other fish and wildlife. They also act aggressively toward people, pets and other wildlife, including the sandhill crane. If you've ever gotten too close to one, then you've seen their aggression and heard their hissing sounds!

Managing the mute swan has been shown to be the most effective method for increasing trumpeter swans, as other states have learned.

Trumpeter swans are endangered in the state of Indiana. Early in the 20th century, hunting nearly wiped out the population, and they have successfully been reintroduced in neighboring midwestern states and in Canada. Currently, PCSP has one pair residing and two young ones that were hatched last year. The preferred habitats of trumpeter swans are large, open bodies of shallow water with abundant aquatic plants – making Worster Lake perfect for them! There is potential to see the numbers continue to increase, but recovery is not guaranteed. Loss of habitat is the #1 reason for species decline across the globe, and the presence of invasive species is the second largest reason.

Soon, Potato Creek will be the only nature center in Indiana to have an actual taxidermist's display of a trumpeter swan. Not to mention the live ones on Worster Lake!

Consider Becoming a Friends Sponsor!

*Your sponsorship helps support our exciting annual concert series,
and makes possible much needed improvements to the park!*

Ranger Sponsor - \$1000

This level includes 2 free current year park passes, one choice of a free park rental of either a one-day shelter, 4 one-day boat or bike rentals (to be taken on one day) AND a PCSP personalized item.

Osprey Sponsor - \$500

This level includes 1 free current year park pass, one choice of a free park rental of either a one-day shelter, 2 one-day boat or bike rentals (to be taken in one day) AND a PCSP personalized item.

Host Sponsor - \$250

This level includes a personalized PCSP item

Friend Sponsor - \$100

This level includes a personalized PCSP item

 Other Amount or In-Kind Donation _____

**** All sponsors will be recognized on multiple media platforms and at park events throughout the year ****

Company/Organization Name: _____

Contact Name: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Address: _____

Contact: Jean Deary: jdeary@dnr.in.gov

Friends of PCSP is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization

Thank you for supporting our community

Friends of Potato Creek State Park

Newsletter Disclaimer and Opt-Out Notice

This newsletter is published by the Friends of Potato Creek State Park and is not affiliated with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Editor, Brian Sittley

friendsofpotatocreek@gmail.com | P.O. Box 471, North Liberty, IN 46554