

IDNR salutes Volunteers of the Year at Illinois State Fair

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SPRINGFIELD, IL – The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) will honor eight individuals and two groups for exceptional volunteer service to the department and the people of the State of Illinois at the Illinois State Fair on Saturday, Aug. 20. The IDNR “Outstanding Volunteer of the Year” awards are presented each year during a ceremony in Conservation World at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield.

“From helping researchers at the Illinois State Museum learn more about the natural and cultural history of the state, to clearing trails and hosting youth hunts at our state parks, volunteers provide tens of thousands of hours of their time to help our staff and those who visit our IDNR sites,” said IDNR Director Wayne Rosenthal. “The annual volunteer awards program is one of the ways we thank these dedicated individuals and organizations, and spotlight the important contributions volunteers make every day.”

This year’s volunteer recognition awards ceremony begins at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Aug. 20 at the Illinois Green Industry Association Amphitheater in Conservation World at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield. The volunteer program will also include introduction of the 2016 class of the Illinois Outdoors Hall of Fame.

This year’s Outstanding Volunteer of the Year honorees are:

Susie Johnson, Morris

Caroline (Susie) Johnson has served as a volunteer member of the Goose Lake Prairie Partners since 1998, helping promote, protect and preserve the natural and cultural heritage of Illinois at Goose Lake Prairie State Natural Area near Morris. Susie reestablished the Tallgrass Journal newsletter, and created the Goose Lake Prairie Partners website. She helped develop the Prairie Partners’ Nature Photo Contest and Exhibit, and has been active in every project and committee of the organization, becoming president of the Prairie Partners in June 2016. A nominator wrote: “Susie is an inspiration to all...her love and dedication to the preservation of the park and education of our visitors has benefitted thousands of park visitors.”

Steve Kapple, Rochester

Steve Kapple has served as a volunteer at the Illinois State Museum Research and Collections Center in Springfield in the Anthropology Section since 2007, assisting in all facets of anthropology and archaeology projects and surveys. Steve is a member of the group affectionately known as the “A-Team” for their work on anthropology projects. Steve has worked on organizing unsorted collections, labelling artifacts, assisting curators in research, processing samples, upgrading storage, cleaning items arriving from archaeological sites for curation, and rehabilitating older collections. A nominator wrote: “Steve has not only improved every project, but has enabled the curation staff to accomplish tasks that would be impossible without his help and knowledge.”

Russell McClellan, Springfield

Russ McClellan is a repeat winner of the Outstanding Volunteer of the Year award – and for good reason. His work at the Illinois State Museum Research and Collections Center in Springfield included entering more than 16,000 records into the Anthropology database, connecting photographic images from archaeological excavations and surveys conducted in the 1920s and 1930s. During the last four years, Russ entered information from the Anthropology Section’s catalog file, resulting in a searchable database of more than 20,000 records. Museum curators say the value of Russ McClellan’s volunteer work cannot be overstated, allowing researchers to have access to important records with the touch of a keyboard. Russ has also volunteered in the Museum’s Zoology section, helping inventory mammal collections to improve accessibility of the material.

Robert Musgrave, Decatur

Robert Musgrave has worked at Clinton Lake State Recreation Area in DeWitt Co. as a conservation worker and campground host, and has volunteered countless hours for a wide variety of projects at the site. His nominator wrote that Robert “...has been a great help during our fall hunting programs and events. Robert is always eager to assist, whether it’s helping a camper, picking up litter, or assisting park staff with a less-than-desirable task.”

Janet Sundberg, Carbondale

Jan Sundberg has dedicated thousands of volunteer hours to assisting staff and visitors at Giant City State Park in southern Illinois. Jan has worked as a volunteer docent, helping lead interpretive hikes and assisting in educational programs at the park. Jan is also an accomplished photographer and has provided hundreds of beautiful images of the park, many of which are on display at the Giant City visitor center, and in a wildflower and plant identification book. The photos and research on the park provide a handy reference for visitors and staff. Her nominator wrote that “Jan always has a smile on her face when volunteering...her enthusiasm for the park is contagious and Giant City is so very lucky to have her as a volunteer.”

Barb Wlaskolich, Randy Wlaskolich, and Dean Mathias, Milan

Thanks to the volunteer efforts and hard work of Barb Wlaskolich, Dean Mathias, and Randy Wlaskolich, bicyclists, joggers and hikers can enjoy a 1.5-mile section at the western end of the Hennepin Canal State Parkway in the Quad Cities region. Over time, that section of the historic canal towpath trail had become overgrown with brush and vines. Armed with hand tools, the volunteers attacked the problem areas to help clear the 10-foot-wide path for recreationists to again use and enjoy. They also arranged for 300 tons of gravel to be used to improve a trail-access parking lot.

Friends of Des Plaines State Fish and Wildlife Area

The Friends of Des Plaines SFWA was formed just four years ago, but their impact has been significant. Working closely with Site Supt. Jeff Wepprecht, the group identified areas of greatest need, raised funds, and completed several projects to improve facilities and natural habitat at the site. The projects included a new roof, gutters, vents and painting for four block privies; and, improvements to the trap range, including pouring a concrete shooting pad, installing new benches and gun racks, and placing new gravel in the parking lot. The Friends also donated an air conditioner, and provided funding for weed removal and habitat restoration. They are planning other improvement projects to enhance accessibility for visitors with disabilities. The Friends of Des Plaines SFWA also partner with local Scouts on cleanup projects, and host youth clinics.

Fulton County Hunter Safety Education Team

The Fulton County Hunter Safety Education team includes 25 instructors, some of whom are relatively new to the IDNR Safety Education program, and some of whom have five decades of experience in hunter safety instruction. Since 1976, instructors on the Fulton County Hunter Safety Education Team have taught more than 90 traditional hunter safety classes, 36 field day classes, and certified 4,245 students. The Fulton County team is always looking for ways to improve the overall class experience, from instructor presentation to student hands-on activities. In the past six years, they have developed a teaching team that specializes in delivery of the field day course to complement the online study course for Hunter Safety Education. The Fulton County team's nominator wrote: "The dedication to providing classes and keeping the sport of hunting safe is evident in their ongoing efforts to offer new and interesting classes to young and experienced hunters."

Sangchris Lake Waterfowl Association

The Sangchris Lake Waterfowl Association, led by its president, Randy Cooke of Chatham, coordinates numerous habitat enhancement and hunter assistance efforts at Sangchris Lake State Park in central Illinois. The group conducts hunter drawings each day during the waterfowl season, and improved the building used to conduct the drawings. Association members also build and place nesting structures at Sangchris Lake, and plan and coordinate the site's annual youth waterfowl hunt.